

The First Felumans

by Harrison Bae Wein (4800 Words)

This story shows what can happen when one species, namely us, is literally mixed with another species, namely the common house cat. And I think we can all guess which species became the dominant one...SW

The idea that would change the course of his life, and many others, came to Dr. Randolph Marks from a single flippant remark he made while lying on the couch watching football with their gray cat Flouncy on his belly. His wife Helen, having little interest in football, was staring listlessly out the window at their modest suburban lawn, cradling a mug of chamomile tea in her hands. "Our grass looks scruffy," she remarked.

Randolph looked down at Flouncy, who he thought of blaming for keeping him from his chore. Finding the cat's gaze fixed on him like a statue, he said, "If only you could do something useful, Flouncy, like mow the lawn."

Although spoken as a quip, Randolph quickly recognized the scientific value of his idea. A molecular biologist at the state's flagship university, Marks was at the stage that many ambitious scientists reach in their fifth decade of life, forced to accept that their dreams of changing the world through their brilliance were fading. With his main cancer research project in danger of stalling, he had been at a loss as to where to direct his laboratory's work.

Marks was still a well-respected scientist. Now balding, with his remaining hair speckled gray, he was too conceited to think of hiding either. He ate judiciously, exercised daily, and kept his mustache and beard fastidiously trimmed. He wore the same button-down shirts he had worn as he rose

through the academic ranks, although had of late traded his slacks for comfortable khakis and his polished leather loafers for suede slip-ons with rubber soles. If he struggled to keep current with the latest research, he told himself it was only because he was growing tired of the field. He had continued to win enough grants to keep his modest-sized research lab humming, and his student reviews, although noting his arrogance, lauded his command of the material. Marks barely noticed the football game that afternoon as his mind shaped what was to become his most successful grant application. Its stated goal was "to engineer a more intelligent cat, perhaps one that could even talk." Such a creature, it argued, would yield unprecedented insight into the mysterious feline mind. It did not mention Randolph's hope of creating a cat with the ability to be useful and mow the lawn.

Only the members of the grant review committee know whether it was cat lovers in the group that led to the award or the sheer audacity of the proposal. The U.S. Biomedical Research Council was being criticized for excessive caution in its project funding, so Marks surmised they might be open to his radical research proposal. Whatever the reason, he received the highest

award of any grant he'd ever submitted. He promptly altered the direction of his lab and set about "using CRISPR-Cas9 technology and somatic cell nuclear transfer to genetically engineer chimeric humanized felines."

The most difficult aspects of this project were adding the components needed for human communication. These included the linguistic brain centers and certain tongue and palette characteristics. Given the myriad challenges, the graduate students and postdocs working on the project hardly questioned their professor's insistence on a human skeletal structure, including the lack of a tail. When asked about it, Marks would assert that a more humanoid form would bring psychological benefits.

Most of the research team never seriously considered how they might carry these chimeric creatures to gestation. While seeing the project as a novel and invigorating intellectual challenge, few believed they would see it carried to fruition. But some years later, when several promising embryos were growing in the laboratory, Marks recognized that they were fast approaching what might prove to be an insurmountable obstacle.

That changed after he made a controversial presentation outlining their work at a human development conference in Germany. After his talk, he endured harsh criticism for conducting what many considered to be unethical research. But that evening, he was approached by a scientist from the U.K. who had herself been denounced for her work growing early human embryos in the laboratory. She saw Marks's research as an exciting opportunity to use a nonhuman to test her lab's latest approaches.

And so was born a landmark international research collaboration. Two advanced feline development centers were created. Together, their innovation was rapid. Soon, top developmental scientists from all over the world were clamoring to participate. Within ten years, nascent humanized felines were growing in both laboratories. Not long afterward, embryos were gestating in advanced artificial wombs toward what the researchers expected would be full term.

Critically, the ethics committees of neither university considered these organisms to be human. This classification allowed the research to continue without burdensome oversight. In light of the anticipated social and intellectual development needs of the creatures, the committees also took the unusual step of granting the scientists permission to bring them into closely monitored home environments. This decision gained great attention in the press. Many speculated that the ethics committees might be bending their rules to spur innovation in light of reports that Chinese chimeric technology—in this case, canine-human combinations—was rapidly advancing.

Randolf himself was to personally oversee the first of the chimeric infants. As his research had flourished, he had penned a lucrative deal with Biovisionary, a rising biotechnology company. This had allowed him and Helen to buy a larger house with a more expansive lawn. This estate could easily host a safe environment for the new infant, with all the required monitoring equipment. Several of the scientists involved in the project would help around the clock during infancy. Once the creature was past this delicate stage, the researchers would care for it during the day, and the Markses would otherwise treat it as part of the family.

The scientifically preferred term for the chimeric creatures was “feluman,” derived from feline-human. However, most of the press came to call them “furrs.” The first one to successfully grow to term was named Paul Purrg, after Paul Berg, the scientist who first spliced the DNA from two different species together. Biovisionary ensured that Paul’s birth was a media spectacle. The first chimeric creature created by modern science was met largely with wonder and marvel, although it did stoke the anger of those who opposed the research on ethical grounds. Some believed it to be an elaborate hoax. They noted that the sterile, controlled emergence of the infant feluman hardly compared to the vivid, detailed scenes of alien births in movies and TV shows. These sentiments, born in online memes, were taken up by opportunistic politicians, effectively blunting efforts to manage the technology through government action.

Helen had always wanted children. She had been a technician in another laboratory when she first met Rudolf. At the time, she had been aware of his haughty reputation but was overwhelmed by the esteemed older researcher’s attention. Over their years together, she had reluctantly come to accept that her husband’s career goals precluded them from building a normal family. As consolation, she had helped to raise her sister’s children. From the moment Randolph first mentioned his idea to her at dinner on the evening of his inspiration, Helen had been skeptical. While she still shared much of the public’s apprehension about her husband’s project, she found herself excited about meeting Paul and helping to raise the first feluman. Helen, along with all who rotated through Paul’s quarters, instantly fell in love with the furry infant. He had the splotchy brown and reddish patches of a tortoiseshell tabby—rare for a male cat, but a simple feat of genetic engineering compared to the research team’s other challenges. Paul’s mostly brown face was split by a slim, straight patch of nectarine fur descending in a line from his forehead to the left of his black nose. He had wide eyes and awkwardly large paw-hands, which looked like a person’s but with a full coat of fur, stubby fingers, and retractable claws.

Although his body and brain weren’t fully human, many of the developmental programs that Paul had been given were. His environmental influences were also fully human. The researchers even kept Flouncy away so that Paul wouldn’t be influenced by her. He thus grew and developed in his first months much like a human infant, babbling in an unusually thin, high voice and hitting milestones such as crawling, standing, and walking at times that were similar to those seen in people. His growth and progress were remarkably smooth, despite persistent digestive issues. (It took constant tweaking of his formulae and considerable manipulation of his gut microbiome before the gastroenterology team was able to calm the inflammation in his gut and optimize the nutrient absorption of his digestive tract.)

Paul Purrg’s existence helped to spur a scientific revolution. Biovisionary was flooded with requests for animal-human hybrids. The competing Chinese teams had thus far failed to successfully create canine-human hybrids. Thus, Marks’ company was the undisputed global leader in the field. They launched efforts to create equine-human hybrids (ostensibly to study skeletal and muscular structure and function), reptilian-human hybrids (to study metabolism), and elephantine-human hybrids (to study cancer resistance).

Meanwhile, the core scientific team refined its procedures for feluman creation. While the process for obtaining one remained exhaustive, felumans came to be raised not only by laboratories, but by civilians with the money and means. One such family was Doug and Wendy Johnson, an older couple whose children had already grown and left home. The Johnsons were successful real estate agents with a large, well-maintained property. But their primary advantage was that they lived next door to the Marks. Mrs. Johnson, ready for an early retirement, made an impassioned plea to Randolph, who saw an opportunity for his team to closely observe the development of another feluman. It would also, he realized, provide Paul with a companion and even a potential mate.

Paul was two years old by the time the beautiful silver Persian feluman arrived. As with human infants and kittens, the felumans' personalities were unique. Paul was an inquisitive, seemingly tireless infant requiring constant energy and attention. Mindy, in contrast, was laid back and easy to tend to. She was content with watching others rather than constantly touching and doing things herself.

Because of their significant value, Paul and Mindy were highly sheltered. They rarely saw anything beyond their two homes. Forced together, they quickly formed a bond. From infancy, Mindy was fascinated by Paul's high jinks. Paul was fond and protective of her. As they grew older, the two became inseparable. Because attending regular school was out of the question, Dr. Marks had always intended for Paul to be home-schooled. He was happy for Mindy to participate once she was old enough. This way, their learning and intellectual development could be observed together.

As they grew older, the felumans appeared to be within the normal human range of intellect. Although both poor at math and logic, they excelled in other areas. Mindy became interested in history at a young age. She was fascinated by books, movies, and television shows about times when felumans didn't exist. Paul, in contrast, was captivated by fanciful stories. He continued to be inquisitive, sneaking off and spying on neighbors, beguiled by their odd behaviors.

As successful as the feluman project appeared, Randolph felt a growing sense of disappointment. While many on his team reveled in their groundbreaking creations, he realized that creating chimeras with such a large human element had limited the insight they could gain into feline nature. Paul and Mindy didn't afford them the unique view into the inscrutable quirks of the feline mind that he was hoping for. For example, they often groomed their fur, but it was difficult to know whether this was instinctual behavior or simply practical for anyone with a body covered in fur. As they grew older, they would often stare into the distance for long periods of time. However, they could offer no insights into why. When asked, they would simply shrug their shoulders or say, "I don't know." Likewise, they showed an unusual pleasure in knocking things over and climbing into enclosed spaces. But when questioned, they gave unsatisfying answers such as, "Because it was there." Their most notable difference from humans was that neither showed any interest in music, but they offered no insight into why.

The felumans grew more rapidly than humans beyond the age of two. By the time Paul was eight years old, he appeared to have reached what would be his full height, five foot six. It was at this point that Randolph implemented what he privately saw as the ultimate phase of his project: teaching Paul to mow the lawn. Given no choice in the matter, Paul grudgingly

accepted this chore and learned how to operate the Marks' riding mower fairly quickly. He was not very good at the task, mowing in irregular, wavy lines to leave random patches of uncut grass. But Randolph was nevertheless pleased with his accomplishment. He loved to stare out the window at Paul guiding the foul red machine back and forth and revel in the fact that, whatever the scientific merits of his project, he had attained the improbable goal of creating a cat that could do something useful.

One day when Helen came near while he was at the window in such reverie, Randolph remarked semi-jokingly, "You see, Helen, dreams can come true!" Fed up with her husband's smugness, she rolled her eyes and turned the other way.

Around this time, Paul and Mindy began to express disgruntlement with their cloistered lives. Most of their caretakers saw Paul as the instigator, but both felumans came to speak often about escape. They casually mentioned it as if it were a natural thing to want to break free and roam the world uninhibited. Their educators believed that the controlled environment they had created would naturally lead to content, efficient learners. They were thus befuddled by the comments, taking them as a sign that Paul and Mindy's feline selves might be asserting themselves.

Paul also showed signs of hormonal changes. He developed an interest in Mindy that extended beyond their previous kinship. He sought to monopolize her time and became possessive about her attention. Cameras caught him urinating around the edges of the property on more than one occasion. When asked why, he answered, "Because I felt like it."

Helen, who had always indulged Paul as if he were her own child, raised the issue with Randolph. "Our son is entering puberty," she said. "He might become hard to handle."

"First of all, he's not our son. And there's no need to worry," he reassured her. "We've got a whole team to deal with whatever problems might come up."

But Helen's warnings proved to be prescient. Paul began to openly court Mindy, asking her to "lie down with him." As she had not yet reached puberty, she was confused and disquieted by Paul's suggestions. When his requests became increasingly bold, she became repelled. Tension grew between them, and Paul turned moody and dejected. He refused to participate in class, sitting by the window and staring out at the squirrels. He urinated more often around the properties, and began to deposit dead birds and squirrels on the doorsteps of both houses. The Johnsons fretted that Paul might turn more violent and animalistic. Randolph assured them that, while Paul was exhibiting some concerning behavior, his team was closely monitoring the situation. Privately, he mused with disappointment that they had created a creature far too human to confound them with the kind of wild behavior the Johnsons feared.

One day the following spring, having finished mowing the lawn, Paul heard a yowling from nearby when he shut off the engine. He cautiously followed the sound to discover Mindy sprawled on the back porch of her house meowing at him. He didn't need to ask what was

happening; his response was instinctual. Knowing that Mindy was finally ready for him, he joined her on the concrete surface. After some awkwardness trying to figure out the mechanics of the act, they copulated right before the camera at the back of the Johnsons' house. No one was to notice this historical record of the first intercourse between two felumans. However, when the youngsters repeated the act the next morning, they were not so fortunate. Wendy Johnson noticed them as she reached to open the sliding door to water her small vegetable garden. She immediately retreated to phone Randolph, who hurried over to find the two adolescents still engaged in the act.

"Paul!" he barked from the edge of the porch. The sound caused only a brief pause in the rhythm of the youths' movement before they resumed, staring intently into each other's faces. "Stop that at once, you two!"

When they failed to respond, Randolph was at first flustered. But keenly aware that Wendy was watching him, he collected himself and commanded, "Stop this right now, or I'm going to drag you away by force."

Once more, the two continued without acknowledging him. When they smiled at each other, it caused Randolph's anger to boil. He marched forward, grabbed Paul by the scruff, and pulled him off of Mindy. They hissed at him, but surprised as they were in the act, were unable to counter his assault. Paul flailed impotently, humiliated, as Randolph pulled him away and led him by the scruff across the lawn between the two houses.

Wendy rushed to console Mindy with kindness, treating her as the victim of Paul's aggression. Mindy, confused at first, quickly adopted her expected role. She realized that she and Paul would face a period of separation no matter what she did. Acquiescing to her caretaker's saccharine sympathies was surely her best course of action.

Randolph, enraged by the audacity of his own creation to defy him, took Paul inside and beat him down to the kitchen floor. Randolph had been raised in a strict family that believed in the merits of corporal punishment, and he had never questioned it as the best way to shape a young mind. He thus showed no qualms about striking the young feluman to whom he had given life. Paul, although no longer a child, was still smaller than Randolph, and his paws, as desperately as they clutched at the slippery kitchen tiles in the midst of Randolph's blows, could not gain enough traction to enable him to escape. Once Randolph began kicking him, Paul called for his mother in desperation. But Helen had left to do errands, and so there was no one to stop Randolph from having his way.

After his fury was spent, Randolph dragged the limp, battered adolescent downstairs and locked him in a small, windowless room in the basement to which only he had the key. He had designed the space before Paul was born, as a last resort in case one of his experiments went terribly wrong and they needed to enclose the creature in a quiet, out-of-the-way place.

Randolph told no one what had happened or where Paul was. Even after one of the researchers heard Paul's wails from behind the door, Randolph allowed no one to visit him lest they undermine the harsh lesson he was teaching. He provided Paul with meager nourishment for both mind and body, lecturing him about moral behavior twice daily when he delivered his tray

of dry kibble and water. He kept Paul in this state for a full week, over the growing objections of the scientific staff.

Helen, learning from Wendy Johnson what had happened, strongly disapproved of the way her husband was treating the eccentric adolescent she had come to love as her own. She pleaded with him to allow the staff to tend to Paul, but he was unyielding. Helen became increasingly frustrated with her husband. She had long known that he could be smug and abrasive. But in the years since he had undertaken this project, his arrogance and obstinacy had grown from niggling quirks to deeply troubling flaws. His cruel confinement of their son was the final straw. However, it was not her who would change the circumstance.

Even though Paul's mind was of a unique hybrid construction, his response to his confinement was predictable. He did not become contrite, as Randolph intended. Rather, the solitude, isolation, and meager sustenance served to harden his young mind and strengthen his resolve to escape. As his body healed from the humiliating beating, his mind calloused and scarred. After being locked in the basement for a week, he decided to take action, whatever the consequences.

One morning, he jumped for the door as Randolph pushed it closed behind him, stopping it before it clicked shut. Randolph dropped the tray with an angry shout, grabbed Paul's fur in his fists, and threw him to the floor. But rather than accept the coming blows this time, Paul sprang back up and leaped on Randolph with claws extended.

Although the aging scientist was bigger than Paul, he was not stronger than him, and was considerably slower. When he brought his arm up to deliver a damaging blow, Paul took the opportunity to slash at his unguarded neck. Randolph clutched at his split flesh, which allowed Paul to slip out the door and escape.

As Paul bounded up the stairs and out the back door, he realized that he had probably dealt a fatal blow to his oppressor. Despite all the education team's lessons in morals and ethics, he felt no remorse about killing the man who had essentially created him. On the contrary, emerging into the crisp fall air and taking a deep breath into his stale lungs, he felt nothing but relief. He licked the blood from his paws and rushed next door to climb the wooden trellis beneath Mindy's window, an act he had undertaken countless times when he was younger. Mindy was lying in bed staring out the window, dejected at the loss of her companion. She was overjoyed to see Paul appear at her window. Without a word, they set about completing the act that had been so violently interrupted in what now seemed a lifetime ago. Afterward, they groomed each other tenderly until dozing off in blissful peace.

The approaching sirens were what woke them from their sound sleep. "I wonder what they could be for," Mindy mumbled sleepily.

"For Dr. Marks."

"How come?"

"I think I killed him."

"What? What happened?"

"He beat me and locked me up like a dog. I didn't think I would ever get out."

"So you attacked him?"

"What else could I do?"

Mindy wasn't so much surprised as upset about the possible consequences. "What are you going to do now?"

Paul got out of bed and shrugged his shoulders. "Let's run away together."

"This is my home."

"We always talked about doing this, ever since we were little."

"That was only talk, Paul."

"Not for me. Why did you say it if you didn't mean it?"

"It was something we said to each other—a dream we had, not something we were going to really do."

"I meant what I said," he said petulantly and moved to the window. "I've always wanted to be free."

"Don't talk like that, Paul."

"How else should I talk? If they catch me, I'll never get out of the cage they're going to put me in."

Mindy suddenly felt tears welling up, a rare occurrence. The researchers had noted when they were infants that when the felumans wanted something, they reached out and vocalized, but seldom cried. Neither of them had ever been observed to cry beyond six months of age. Paul, seeing Mindy's eyes moisten, softened and said as he slipped out, "I'll try to visit once it's safe again. Keep an eye out for me."

Mindy came to the window to watch Paul sprint across the back lawn and disappear into the forest. The connecting woodland throughout the suburbs was to become his home for the next months.

Helen Marks had arrived home around lunchtime to find her husband's dead body halfway down the stairs to the basement, his browned blood soaked into the beige carpet behind him like a cascade of dried wine. Randolph's phone was upstairs, so he hadn't been able to call for help after Paul slashed his throat. As horrified as Helen was at the discovery, she was not surprised. Her husband's death was to free her from the confines of her dissatisfying marriage. She moved in with her sister's family that very evening, and emptied and sold their home within months.

Paul, meanwhile, traveled only at night and found safe, remote perches deep in the woods and high in the trees to shelter in during the daytime. He found that he enjoyed his freedom, although he often felt lonely for Mindy's company. At first, he kept far from the old neighborhood, but once some weeks had passed, he decided it would be safe to return on occasion. He would work his way back to find a safe spot with a clear view of Mindy's window. There, he could watch her beautiful silver face staring sadly out the window. He hoped she

would spot him, but she gazed wistfully afar, too hopeless and dejected to think of scrutinizing the treetops for the sun-bleached, brown-patched fur of her love.

When she retired from her nightly vigil, Mindy would leave the window ajar in case Paul ever came back. She was heartbroken at her loss, in constant fear that he had fallen victim to a hunter, a coyote, or a pack of wolves. But even in those darkest hours, she had one bright hope for the future: in her belly was the growing fruit of her coition with Paul.

No feluman having before brought a baby to term, the scientific staff could not give the Johnsons a confident estimate of when Mindy's child would be born. The team's funding had begun to dry up with the Congressional hearings and media storm that followed Dr. Marks' death. They thus could not even commit to helping to raise the world's first naturally-born feluman infant. But the Johnsons had enough wealth, and their predicament drew enough support from sympathetic donors, that they were able to help Mindy obtain all the necessary tests to maintain a healthy pregnancy.

The Johnsons were now free to treat Mindy in the looser, more loving manner they saw fit. Despite her sorrow, she thrived under their care. When her boy was born, she named him Leo, for lion, and poured all her affection into the adorable, energetic infant with the short, peach-colored fur.

The crisp, clear night that Paul spotted Mindy at the window with Leo in her arms, he knew that he must be the father and resolved to reveal himself to her. After waiting until the Johnsons went to bed, he descended from his perch and strode across the lawn. He was halfway to the house before Mindy, her eyes fixed on the stars, noticed the movement below and looked down. Overjoyed, she let out a peep of delight. Leo, asleep in his crib, didn't stir at the sound, but it caused Paul to break into a sprint to the wooden trellis and up into Mindy's waiting arms. Under Randolph's direction, Paul and Mindy had been given traditional upbringings, with no mobile phones and little internet access. Neither had established the massive social media followings that later felumans built. As a consequence, they never achieved the personal fame and fortune that became standard for their kind. Inevitably, public attention turned to the latest marvels of interspecies genetic engineering. Biovisionary received new life from the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, which employed the company to endow people with superior athletic abilities. The first creation under this venture was a baby with fast-twitch muscles from a cheetah. Scornfully referred to as a "cheatman" by much of the media, this created nearly as much controversy as Paul's birth.

But Paul and Mindy had a different kind of satisfaction that all the chimeras in the spotlight did not have: that of full and happy lives. When Mindy became pregnant with her second child, the Johnsons understood the implication. Seeing how happy their adopted daughter was, they left the couple largely to themselves and didn't say a word about it to anyone. Paul was careful not to be seen outside in the daylight. Other than that, their lives became entirely their own, and they lived it as they saw fit.

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