

Disappearance

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“This is going to sting.”

I nod.

“No, this is going to sting a lot.”

That warrants a dry swallow and a second nod, more nervous this time.

The first thing they’d done at the mod parlor was shave my fur. A smooth line back from my muzzle toward my ears. They’d gotten all of both of my cheeks, down to the jawline and up toward my ears, though not quite all the way.

It’s not a good look for a weasel, this awful grooming.

I’ll have to live. I suppose it’ll take a few months to go from stubbly to bristly and back toward soft, and then another few after that until I’m back to normal.

Well, not normal. New. Different.

“Alright, first bit,” the rat begins, tugging over the lower part of a milk jug that’s been cut in half. “Gonna get the bars super cold. You sure you want the straight lines?”

“Yes.” I don’t sound sure, even to myself.

The rat does that thing where he just sits still and silent, waiting on me. His ears have been tattooed black up along the backs, and the fluorescent lights shining through them cast blurred shadows, crenelated ideas of shapes.

I sit up straight in my chair and give a firm nod. “Yes. Straight lines. Three on each cheek, spreading out toward the back of my head.”

The rat waits a little longer, then cracks a goofy grin. “Good. Good choice. I’m gonna start the middle one a little further back. And I’ll use tapered ones rather than rectangular. It’ll make you look speedy.”

We laugh at that, and I use the it to hide the terror. Not at the pain, mind, but at the sheer enormity of what I’m about to do.

“Alright, lady.” The rat stands, pads across the room with claws clicking on linoleum. There’s a hissing, gurgling sound, a sound of something more complex than water being poured, and then a soft curse. A single curse is more a matter of form, though, and the lack of follow-up keeps me from panicking outright.

The rat hurries back toward me, the half-jug in oven-mitt-clad paws billowing a sinking fog in his wake. This gets quickly set down on the steel table so he can shake the mitts off. The nitrogen fog continues its cascade, flowing over the table and onto the floor. From then, everything happens in quick succession.

I’m laid out on my side.

A thick petroleum jelly is smeared into the fur around my eyes, and a piece of aluminum foil massaged into that to create at least an attempt at a seal.

Footsteps.

A paw holds the foil in place. Another holds my muzzle down against a pillow in a sanitized paper pillowcase. A third, more spindly than the others, presses down on the side of my neck. Someone presses a rolled-up towel into my paws.

Murmuring.

A rush, a clatter, and then pain as something presses against my cheek. I grit my teeth, clench the terrycloth in my paws, and let out a sort of gurgled moan. Someone’s counting down.

The pain leads with cold, then turns searing, and then is lost in a labyrinthine landscape. Sere, white, a sun too bright to look at, and the smell of snow.

The countdown reaches zero, and the pressure against my face relaxes. That ‘something’ that was pressed against my cheek is lifted away, and someone murmurs dryly, “One down, five to go.”

I spend the next half hour alternating between gasping for breath between each countdown and exploring that landscape: a tangled mess of chalk-white rocks, angular, thorny bushes with no leaves, lingering snow-scent, and a flute playing

whistle-tones above it all.

I'd never known how intricate pain could be.

After the last countdown is finished and I am allowed to sit up once more, I finally allow myself a simple, "Fuck."

There's laughter as the foil is pried away from my gummed-up fur and I blink my eyes back into focus. There's the rat along with his accomplice, a weasel far taller than I, sitting on a stool with a kerchief keeping unkempt headfur out of his eyes. On the table by him, a short copper bar clamped into a stainless steel handle is still oozing tendrils of too-heavy fog.

"*Fuck,*" I say again.

"Stings, huh?" The weasel grins, and I recognize his voice from the countdown.

"Uh... I guess." I try to smile, feeling cold-burnt skin pull at my cheeks, and the smile turns into a wince. "Bit of an understatement. What does it look like?"

The rat reaches to snag a mirror and hold it up to my face. Shaved cheeks—that much I'd seen—cutting fine brown fur almost down to the skin, and three bars on each cheek, radiating away from my whiskers toward the back of my head. The bars show up as patches of matted, crispy, burnt fur.

"It'll turn white soon enough," the weasel says. He stretches out his arm and bunches up his sleeve, revealing simple coiling patterns of white fur amidst the brown of his fur. I'd seen it before in pictures (that being the reason I'd chosen this parlor), but seeing it in person made me all the more eager for the fur on my cheeks to grow back.

"Now you just need some piercings." The rat laughs as I shake my head.

I pay in cash. They accept cards, but I had more than enough on hand.

§

From the mod parlor, I head home to take care of the apartment. All the stuff I need is already in the car, packed into a backpack and a suitcase. Nothing from inside, of course. This all has to stay. Still, it's good to make sure.

Everything's neat. Not too neat, of course, as I can't keep up with Jarred's standards, and he can't keep up with the rate I make things messy. Stuff's on shelves,

dust free. Clothes are put away, but the hamper's overflowing. The kitchen's wiped clean, but there's a stack of plates and glasses in the dirty half of the sink.

Poor Jarred. Ah well.

Once my account of the house is done, I begin to dismantle the life I'd built up for myself. I unwind it in slow, circular passes of the apartment, starting from the ground up. I carefully destroy what I was.

I slowly untick a checklist, item by item, of the things that got me where I am, made me who I am.

Drawers are tugged open and clothing strewn haphazardly about the floor. The bed sheets are pulled free of the mattress and shredded with my claws to look as though it was all done in haste.

It's not. It's all careful. I have to be quiet for the neighbors, and I have to be deliberate for myself, even if it does feel like watching someone else work.

The mattress is thrown askew as though someone had been digging for cash beneath it. The bathroom is mostly left alone, but pill bottles are dumped in the sink, looking like someone was hunting for something more interesting than aspirin. The top shelf of the closet is ransacked, with shoes tossed on the floor and the contents of my jewelry box tucked away in a backpack, along with Jarred's nice watch. I didn't care for the stuff, but I knew a burglar would.

The living room is more difficult. We have a TV, which a burglar would latch onto immediately. I'd planned for this, though, and the TV is set neatly by my door while I see to the rest of the room.

I tip over the speakers on their poles and scratch carefully crazed claw marks around their bases, a show of trying to detach them. They stay on the floor.

The bookshelf is dismembered as quietly as I can manage. Books are pulled off in armloads and scattered around on the floor. One from every armful is bent and torn, my heart aching to do so. A yearbook tweaks memories and is discarded. Paintings are removed from their hooks and tossed on top of the books.

The couch is shredded and exposed just as the bed had been. Nothing there, beneath those torn cushions.

The kitchen is next. I step quietly over the pile of books and head on in. There's a cursory pass of the fridge and cabinets: pushing glasses and food to the sides to

expose the backs of them. My concession to looking hasty is to put a glass in a plastic bag and crush it under my foot, then scatter the shards over the counter and onto the floor. A very careful “whoops.”

The garage had been my space, and is the last to get torn down. We’d rented half a duplex and paid extra for the side with the attached garage, which I’d claimed for all of my painting stuff, but which was under constant threat of being slowly consumed by junk.

I eviscerate my old camping gear. I trusted Jarred to never pull himself away from his computer long enough to even consider camping. So much time at the keyboard, so little to spend elsewhere; so much time spent on him, so little on anyone else.

My easel is easy to deal with: I just tip it over. The rickety thing clatters to pieces just shy of the front bumper of the car. A sketch of a painting, burgundy on black, tumbles askew. Boxes containing old clothes are turned out. A clock is broken most carefully.

Jarred and I, we’d never hidden anything together, but I have to look thorough.

On my own, though, I’d hidden cash. Just shy of twenty grand in a locking cash box disguised as a two-quart thermos tucked firmly into my old backpacking gear in the mess of our garage.

Or it had been. Now it was tucked into the car, just behind the driver’s seat.

My life isn’t completely unwound. Not yet. But I’m getting there.

I reach in the car and grab a bag of odds-and-ends fur sweepings. Little bits snagged here and there from shedding coworkers. Some from a grooming place. Even a bit from the mod shop’s bin before I was shaved. I make a quick circle around the apartment, scattering fur on the most torn up bits

I grab the TV on the way back to the garage—a flat screen thing that we only ever used for movies—and lay it down its back by the car. I give it a kick until it’s squarely behind one of the front wheels.

Here we go.

I climb in the car and hit the button to open the garage.

When I reverse over the TV, there’s a delightful crunch. I can’t smile without my newly branded cheeks burning, so I breathe satisfaction out on a sigh.

§

My paws ache all the way to Oregon. I had thought it would be pretty easy to slash up the inside of my car before I abandoned it, but they were tougher than I had imagined. I'd managed to come out of the experience without breaking any claws, at least.

Once the seats had been shredded, I carefully cut my finger along the side and smeared blood along the clawmarks. The car was trashed as I rolled it into a ditch. There was a tiny forest there, with crumpled cans and paper wrappers mixed in with the fallen leaves. After thinking for a moment, I squeezed out a few more drops of blood onto that garbage.

The bus driver had greeted me with the tired acknowledgement of a fox who had seen much worse than a sloppily dressed weasel with newly branded cheeks.

I'd never been on a long-distance bus trip. Jarred and I had never been wealthy, never higher than lower-middle class, and this wasn't helped by me having pretended to make fifteen-hundred less than I actually did a month at work, all that extra cash making its way into my thermos. A cross-country bus trip is unthinkable when you can fly, when you have a car.

But you can buy bus tickets with cash.

The seat is cramped. About what I'd expected, to be honest, but I wasn't prepared for this quite as much as I thought. No one sits next to me, but I still felt hemmed in on every side. I tell myself to just enjoy myself, enjoy this new life. This non-life. This life without history.

Hard to do when you are bumping down the road at sixty-five and no faster.

I use the toilet as little as possible.

§

I have made a huge mistake.

If I were a smarter lady, I would've spent more energy figuring out what to do once I got here than what I spent on that hour of unwinding my previous life.

I can stay here, of course. There's a long-stay hotel that doesn't side-eye my cash too much, and there's a little kitchenette in the room with a two-burner stove

that's plenty for cooking for myself. Getting groceries with cash is as easy as expected.

But I can't get a job.

If I were a smarter lady, I'd've changed my name before leaving, keeping it a secret from Jarred as best as possible...but even that isn't smart. That would've tipped off investigators immediately. "Weasel changes name, weasels out of debt." I can only imagine the headlines once I was caught.

But I can't get a job.

I'm educated and all. I was a fantastic accountant, and it felt awesome to be one of the few who actually uses her college degree for what she does for a living and *enjoys it*. I worked for a few CPA offices and was on the short track to moving up at the last one. I'm fantastic with numbers, which is why I thought I had this all set.

But I just *can't get a job*.

No one is going to hire an accountant with no name. With no history, no verified skills, no bank account, no credit, no social security number. No one is going to hire even the smartest weasel to run numbers if that weasel doesn't legally exist—or is at least trying not to.

Fuck.

I can't get a job, I can't rent a place, I can't open another bank account. I can't even change my name, since that would mean engaging with my old identity, the one I'd tried to kill.

Fuck.

I can live here for a while. I ran the math on my recently-purchased calculator (cell phone was back in the car, of course—no more net for me, much as I can help it), and I can live here for maybe a year and a half. Longer, if I find a cheaper long-stay. At least I have time to try and fix this.

§

The proprietor, Adam, and I have been getting on surprisingly well.

He's a good guy, which I hadn't picked up on at first. I'd taken his silence while handing over my key as standoffishness. There was certainly an element of caution to it, but he's also just a quiet guy.

We exchanged nods daily for the first two weeks I lived here, then simple pleasantries for the next two. He came off as soft-spoken and content with where he was in life, and as far as I could tell, he was.

A week or so into my second month staying in that little studio, and he's invited me over to the patio behind the office (which I suppose is also his home) to discuss arrangements for the future.

"Discussing arrangements," however, has turned into sharing half a bottle of rum while sitting in deck chairs. The rum's fantastic, but comes out of a vodka bottle. The glasses are half-pint canning jars.

I can't decide if it's hipster or hippie, but the more I drink, the less it seems to matter.

"So." A pause to toss another cube of ice in his jar along with another inch of rum. "Why you out here?"

I hesitate and swirl my own glass around, letting the melting ice water down the rum. It's definitely overproof, and almost certainly homemade. "Needed out of where I was, I guess."

He does that thing—the thing that rat at the mod shop had done—where he simply waits in silence. There's no shared glances, and the silence is comfortable, but also expectant. Maybe that's a thing that people who are happy can do.

"I needed out of that life. I packed my stuff and left without a word."

"You seem like you ain't hurting for cash," he says.

"Well, no. I brought along enough to live out here for a while."

"Mm." He looks at me over the rim of his glass as he sips at his rum. Otter expressions, I'm discovering, are close to weasel ones, but use the whiskers more. The look isn't exactly crafty, but getting close, as he continues, "Problem with cash is no collateral. S'why I charge you up front."

I nod. It tallies.

"But you seem straight."

"Straight?" A smile tugs at the healing brands on my cheeks. They're starting to come in white.

He laughs, "I ain't making a pass at you, don't worry. Sex ain't a thing 'round here. Not for me, at least. Hell, maybe you like girls too. Not my business." He

copies my swirl and we both enjoy the pleasant clinking of ice against glass. “No, I mean straight. You’re a good lady. You’re out here to get away, you say, and I trust that’s all you’re doing. No thieving, no running, you ain’t in trouble.”

I settle back into the deck chair and attempt to use that ‘silence’ technique I keep running into. He just grins.

“So what I’m asking is this. That number I said before?” He gestures behind himself, as though that’s where the past is. “I’ll cut it in half if you can do some work ’round here.”

“Work?” I tilt my head, turning over ideas of what that’d entail.

“Sure. Work. What can you do to cut down your rent?”

“Uh, I can. . . I mean, I was an accountant. I can run your books, file taxes, that stuff.”

The minute I say “taxes,” Adam perks up and his whiskers bristle outward with his grin. “Deal. Sight unseen. I’m good at what I do, but that ain’t taxes.”

I laugh, I can’t help it. “Half rent? For taxes?”

“Sure,” he says, sounding content. “Run the books and handle taxes, and I’ll halve your rent. You can take the desk some days if you want a bit more off.”

I rub my paw over the short, bristly fur of my cheeks, a habit I picked up as it grew back in. The crisped, branded patches had largely been replaced by normal, soft fur, now growing in white. All the shaved spots were taking a while to grow in.

“A secretary, hmm?”

“Well, sure. It ain’t grand. Accountant like you ain’t gonna find anything grand without being legit.”

At that I fall silent.

He continues, “Jobs these days, you need to be legit. You couldn’t offer me anything but cash, not even an ID to hold. You needed out of life so bad, you left behind your legitimacy.”

My silence becomes darker, seems to close in around me. Ears pinned back, eyes burning, muscles tensed, I try not to visibly panic in front of Adam.

“It’s okay, though.” He settles back into the Adirondack chair with a sigh. “You can get by without that. You’re just gonna have to let go of the idea that you’ll ever be a part of that world again. You might, but it’s best to expect you won’t.”

From then on, it's silence. I cry as quietly as I can. Adam pours me another inch of rum and leans across the table between us to tip another ice cube into my jar.

§

Adam is *set*.

He owns his property outright, and is up-to-date on all his licenses. Business is good. "Half rent," for me, covers twice the cost of maintaining my studio—utilities, that share of property tax, everything.

And he's happy.

§

With my stay here nearly doubled, I've started exploring further into town.

We're a ways out from Portland: I could take the regional bus there in about an hour and a half, but I never do. Instead, I stick to this little town I wound up in, a town picked because I got too anxious about Portland and got off the bus at the stop before. Probably my best idea yet.

I'd just gone to the dinky supermarket before, but now I started taking walks. Originally, it had just been a "stretch the legs before shopping" exercise, but now I was even heading into town just to wander. There's a neat little caf with huge single-pane windows and a rocket stove that I've taken a liking to. Something about the impracticality of the windows combined with that adobe stove behind the bar tickles me. And as long as I stick to drip coffee, it's not too much out of my budget.

I even ventured to the lone grooming stop in town to get my cheeks checked up on. I had been worried that they'd be weirded out by them, but I was greeted by a punky opossum with a bright pink streak of fur from the tip of her snout down to the nape of her neck. She said my cheeks were looking good, then talked me into buying a tube of dye. She suggested pink, but I went for the blue instead.

I don't know why I did that. Being an accountant wasn't just an occupation for me. It was a whole identity. I bought into the smart pantsuits and that sensible jewelry, the latter of which was still in my suitcase, to mark my position hard-core. The tight grooming and the calm speed of numbers, that's *who I was*.

Now, I don't know. I have three pairs of jeans, a frowsy canvas skirt, and a bunch of long- and short-sleeved button up shirts and tees—only some of which fit well—I grabbed from a thrift store before this whole excursion began.

Maybe I just figured I'd own it. I got the cheek brands, after all; might as well get the dye, too.

Tonight, I'm dyeing a diamond shape into the white down my front. It'll sit just above my breasts, with a tendril curling down beneath them, and another tendril curling up over my front to my neck. I can hide it with a scarf if I need, but otherwise, it'll peek up from above my shirt. Just a little tease. One that could go "sexy" when I want, or just "artsy" otherwise.

The thought's actually quite embarrassing, but it's been a long time since sex. Jarred and I were pretty into it at first, but then it became routine, and then scarce. We hadn't fucked for a month before I took off, and since then I'd been too busy hiding to worry about it.

With this new arrangement with Adam, though, I don't know.

Maybe being a little sexy will be okay.

§

Holy shit, I may actually be able to pull this off. It'll be crazy, but maybe I can do it.

I guess Adam did some talking after I'd asked about more possibilities, and now I've got the owner of Starry Night, the town's little caf, as a "client" of sorts. He's having me do the taxes and help run the books. He even offered to let me run the till if things get busy. They haven't yet, but he's promised me it's still the off-season. Not cold enough to be winter, but not yet warm enough for holidays. He's not paying me anything close to livable, but with the deal I'm getting on rent, I might just be able to do this.

It's such a small town. It looks bigger than it is, since so many of these kitschy stores and homes have so much space around them. The market has a parking lot twice the size it needs.

There are folks living around the town in seclusion, I guess, but those who live in the town itself, who *are* the town, probably number in the low hundreds. Other

than that, it's just a waypoint. Folks heading up to the mountains stop through and keep all the businesses going, but they never stay long. They're always on their way to more romantic locations or heading back through on their way back to the coast. The town itself holds together through the need to provide for all those who would only pass through. All those people on any one day, and it's still a small town.

I've started painting again, too. Starry Night has a drop ceiling and each tile is painted a different color. After I mentioned having been a painter in my "past life," Stefan, the owner, perked up and sent me home with a blank tile, along with a few crusty tubes of acrylic and a brush that hadn't been used in a while.

"Go nuts," he said, and so I did. Background of green and a symmetrical tree in black, limbs splitting into branches that became whisker-thin toward the edges of the tile. The leaves were vague suggestions of white that broke the symmetry. An idea of a tree. Just the type of stuff I painted up until four months ago.

Stefan loved it, and here I am working on my second tile.

This—working jobs all but off the grid, body mods, looking like a hippie—isn't what I'd pictured when I unwound my previous life. Now, when I look back on it, on all my planning and scheming, I don't think I had pictured anything.

§

I've taken to working mornings at Starry Night and heading back to Adam's after lunch to run the desk there. If it's needed, I can even head back to Starry Night after to help out a bit more. We're well into the busy season, so both the long-stay and the caf are happy for whatever help they can get. An accountant running the till is a weird fit, but at least I'm fast at it.

It's interesting to watch the ebb and flow of traffic through the town.

Starting about six in the morning, folks start trickling into town, but within an hour, it becomes busy, then frenetic. From there, it climbs steadily until about nine-thirty, dips for an hour, then picks up for lunch.

I head out by one thirty or two to dash back to Adam's and start getting folks checked in and out while Adam does property stuff. Usually, he's out repairing the drive to the units (and the little one-room cabins in back, one of which I now inhabit). He's intensely focused on that drive; he's talked with me about the upkeep

and maintenance of a dirt road for an hour or more on multiple occasions. I don't drive anymore, so I just have to trust him.

Things clear up by five, and sometimes I head back to Starry Night. At that point, it's mostly a social thing. If I'm not chilling out back of the office with Adam, I'm here at the caf. If not either, I'm painting. I've gotten about a third of the ceiling tiles done.

The movement of people is fascinating up close, following the ways in which people move and change throughout the day. The before-coffees and the nine-AM-bounces and the post-lunch-siesta. The perking of ears and the bristling of whiskers. The droop of tails and stifled yawns.

When you zoom out, though, it's grains of sand just below high tide. The tide rolls in, and there's a chaotic dance of spiraling movement. Each wave brings cars cycling around parking lots, small collisions of bodies, crimped tails, tantrums weighing down parents.

And then tide rolls out, and the town settles back down into its ground state. Grains of sand compact nicely when left to dry, a comfortable stasis until the next high tide.

In the midst of it all, the regulars provide a sense of weight, anchoring high and low tide to provide a sense of continuity. There's Adam, of course, and Stefan. I suppose I'm slipping into that role too. We are the wave-polished stones.

And then there's Aurora.

We've only talked once or twice in earnest, her voice familiar and quiet, but I watch her every day. She has a table all but reserved in the corner of Starry Night, farthest from the door but right in the elbow of two of those ridiculous single-pane windows. To her left, one window looks out over the parking lot and, across the street, the parking lot of the market. In front of her, three trees that have been planted too close to each other, forming a tiny grove between Starry Night and the back fence.

She wafts in around six thirty and orders a latte, a soda water, and a pot of hot water for her and one of the teabags riding shotgun in her jacket pocket. If her table isn't free, she'll sip her latte at the bar until it is, and then set up camp.

She drinks the latte first, then the soda water, then the tea.

Once she's finished the soda water, she pulls out a pen and either a book or a stack of printouts and a clipboard. I've never figured out what she does for work, but she's always either taking notes or marking up printouts. A teacher, perhaps? An author? Editor?

At noon, she orders another soda water and another pot of hot water for the second teabag. Some days she'll pull out a sack lunch, some days she'll order something from me—we serve a few simple sandwiches—in her comfortable contralto.

She eats the lunch first, then drinks the soda water, then the tea.

Once she's finished the soda water, she settles back into the chair and stares out the windows. Mostly, she just looks at the trees, but sometimes she'll rest a cheek on her fist and look out toward the market, her long canine ears canted cozily back. Something about the sight always has me watching her in turn. Something familiar, cozy.

Then the coyote gets back to work, and, before long, I duck out to help Adam. On the few occasions I've stayed, Aurora will close out the shop with us, saying little but saying it kindly. Her silences, I expect, are a matter of course. They are absolute, and absolutely part of her. A stillness I can only dream of.

I've never seen her out of the shop, but I think about her every time I walk or bus back home. I'll have inevitably forgotten by the time I get inside, though, as she's context-shifted around a corner of my mind.

§

I'd imagined I'd done such a good job of cleansing my life of who I used to be when I left, that each time I'm confronted by something I'd accidentally brought along, it's jarring, or even frightening.

Undergarments had been the first such instance. I hadn't thought to grab any new panties before leaving town. This was probably fine, I reasoned, because anything missing would have been noticed. Unfortunately, this left me with only one pair—the ones I left in—and I'd had to visit the "essentials" aisle of the supermarket early on to grab a pack of bland panties. They fit so poorly, I'd largely stopped wearing any.

What had me jittery, though, was seeing that old pair every time I did laundry. One last reminder that I'm no longer who I was.

I threw them out soon after.

Each time I come across some remnant, it reminds me of what I've done, in a very tangible way, even if not necessarily why. The "why" had already begun to blur on the bus ride, and I've never been able to make it gel again.

It's not always negative, this process, but it's never positive. Other than a few useful items—the jewelry, for instance, kept for something pawnable in an emergency—I throw everything I find away almost as soon as I find it, stopping only to destroy it for the catharsis. It's all too much risk to keep around.

Thus me, crouched on my haunches behind Starry Night, hyperventilating as I try to destroy my old driver's license.

How this had escaped me before was something of a mystery. An actual legal document bearing my actual legal name, tucked within my old wallet in the back of my suitcase, was not something I should have missed.

This caromed straight into fear. Into terror. Into that agonizing sickness that settles into one's gut and closes off one's throat. I'd stopped crying as much, recently, and started smiling more, but I'm on the verge of panicked tears now.

I can't say what made me tuck the wallet into a pocket at the start of the day. It was an interesting artifact, perhaps, nothing big or important, that I decided to keep on some whim. The credit cards that had once filled it lay scattered by my abandoned car back home, after all, so I figured it must be safe.

The license won't tear. That was my first instinct, but my pads had slip off the slick plastic too easily, and my claw tips only scrabble ineffectually at its surface.

I can bend it, at least, and I crease it this way and that in an attempt to fatigue the plastic enough that maybe I can snap it. ID cards are, apparently, designed to last, and despite repeated folds, I can't get enough of a grip to tear the card, much less snap it, though the ink along the crease fades and warps into whiteness. I don't have the leverage necessary to crease along my name, however.

This isn't working.

I stuff my wallet back into my pocket and dash over to the dumpster, flipping up the lid. I had intended to tear up the license and toss it in with the coffee grounds

and banana peels, but the thought of it slipping out of the dumpster or falling out of the trash truck feels inescapable. With all the people going through the caf during the day, though, there has to be. . .

I tear through two of the shop's thin garbage bags before I find what I'm looking for: a cheap plastic lighter, yellow and scuffed.

The rasp of the wheel against the flint sends my whole paw to buzzing, the snap of the spark too loud for my frazzled nerves.

I flick at the lighter a few more times. It's almost certainly dead, thrown away for a reason, so I just have to hope there's enough fluid in there.

The flame finally catches, only barely peeking above the rim of the lighter.

It'll have to do.

Holding my breath and struggling to still my shaking paws, I carefully bring my driver's license above the tiny flame, letting the diffuse glow settle beneath the photo of my face, the weasel there looking startled, backlit by flame. The plastic browns, sags, then starts to char and bubble. By the time the smoke, reeking of burning plastic, starts to make me cough, the image of my face and much the identifying details have melted away, the ink burnt off by the low flame of the lighter.

Motion in the shadows cast against the dumpster catches my eye and I whirl around, Aurora startling back a half-step at my sudden movement. We stare, uncomprehending, at each other for a moment.

"I—" I croak. "Hey."

"Hey, uh. . . you okay back here?"

I look around, down to my mangled license and the shitty yellow lighter in my paw, back to the coyote, struggling to come up with an explanation. A half-truth is the best I can manage. "Needed to, uh. . . expired credit card and all. Melting it, I mean."

The quotidian mundanity of such an activity seems to click things into place for the coyote. She perks up and smiles, "I'd never thought of melting them before, I always just cut them into little pieces."

The lighter is finally starting to cool down in my paw after it's extended use, which is good, given how much I keep fiddling with it. "Couldn't find my scissors once I got out here, figured this would work."

She nods, squints toward my paws, then back up to me. “You from Idaho?”

I gape, crumpling the license as best I can within my hand.

“Just looked like my old card, I mean.”

I do my best to keep my ears from flattening and tail bristling, only to catch myself panting. So much for acting cool. “I... yeah,” I gasp. “Moved a while back.”

“Hey, no stress. I won’t pry,” Aurora laughs, holding up her paws disarmingly.

I manage a smile, hoping it’s convincingly embarrassed. “Sorry,” I say, stuffing the lighter and warped card back into the garbage bag, before hauling the whole thing back into the dumpster. “I guess it’s just a weird thing to get caught doing.”

Head tilted, Aurora grins at me a moment longer, then shrugs. “I guess, yeah. See you inside?”

I nod, struggling to calm my breathing as I watch her round the corner to the front of the shop with a flick of her tail.

When I make it back inside to prep her usual latte, Aurora smiles at me. I beam back to her.

Something about the encounter by the dumpster has left me feeling giddy. Perhaps it was the thrill of nearly being caught, or maybe the relief of being rid of the thing. It’s one fewer identifying thing about me that I need to worry about, after all; and beyond that, it got Aurora laughing.

Why that makes me so happy in turn is beyond me.

§

My brush-strokes are confident, each one is a smooth arc describing edges and boundaries, or perhaps reinforcing color.

The tile had been given to me burgundy, and I’d chosen to leave it that way, painting within that dark red surface rather than covering it up. I painted in black, and I painted only shadows, not details, as though the scene were blown out towards white and the contrast turned to a hundred percent.

It had started as an abstract gesture of a face, angular and canine, but had slowly headed toward something more concrete. Not realistic, but perhaps something from a comic. Hard-edged lines, but true to form with no liberties taken.

Aurora at her table as seen from the espresso machine, cheek on fist, staring out of frame. The shape of her muzzle, the tilt of her ears, both familiar and new.

My brush-strokes are confident. Black and red, no need for another color.

“Season’s winding down.”

“Mmm.”

Adam laughs and shakes his head, plopping down, then melting further into the deck chair.

“S’ good to see you painting, you know.”

“Mmm.” I perk up as my mind parses meaning out of those sounds, and then flatten my ears. “Sorry. I got kinda into it. What’d you say before?”

“Said season’s winding down.”

“Yeah, seems like,” I offer as I carefully shift the painting off the table to lay it flat on the ground next to me, replacing the bucket of ice in its spot. My poor-weasel’s easel of the table between us returns to its former state as drinking space. I pour us both a drink.

The otter has moved on from rum and is now trying his paw at whiskey. We’ve been cycling through batches over the last few weeks. The taste is far sweeter than I would’ve expected, but Adam says he doesn’t have the cuts quite right yet.

In my mouth, ice machine ice and homemade whiskey jockey for space with words. “Wha’s li’ in off ’easong?”

“Eh?”

I crunch down on the ice and brave the brain freeze to say more clearly, “What’s it like in the off season?”

“Same but slower,” Adam says, chuckling down to his glass. “Way slower, some days. You got here before season started, but weren’t really here in the middle of off-season. I’ll probably beg your help deep-cleaning some of the units.”

“Sure thing, boss.” I laugh as that gets me an ice-cube to the face. “Fine. Sure thing, master.”

Adam makes as though he’ll throw the whole bucket of ice at me, before we both settle back into our chairs with jars of whiskey and ice, grinning. In the silence, I paint my claws idly with the black acrylic left on the brush from my work on the

ceiling tile. The condensation off the glass thins the paint and it starts to seep into my fur. My paws are covered with the stuff anyway.

The silence goes from comfortable to expectant, and when I look up, Adam's adopted a vaguely confused look with whiskers smoothed back, which he's directed toward his all-important drive. Just as I'm about to brush it off, he asks, "How'd you leave?"

Anxiety brushes up against me, breaking through the veneer of calmness. It takes me a bit to respond, and I try to fill that space by nervously stirring the ice into my white whiskey. "If I just say 'very carefully', will that be enough?"

The otter's expression softens and he shrugs against the back of his chair. "I s'pose. Doesn't mean I don't still want to know."

"I just. . . I don't know. I spent a lot of time thinking about all the different parts there were of my life and thinking about what I'd be without them." I brush my paws over my cheeks, heedless of the paint. My fur has almost grown back completely, and the freeze-brand has indeed come in white. Still, it's become a habit. "And then I just set a date and went around to all those parts one by one, turning them off or throwing them away."

"No going back, then?"

"Not if I want to stay out of jail." I don't think this is true, but it sounds good.

"So you turned off or trashed all these parts of who you were," Adam mumbles, pouring himself another inch of whiskey. "What's left?"

I don't answer.

I don't *have* an answer.

When I think about it, there's just nothing there. It's like trying to see the inside of my eyelids. Just nothing there. I tore down what I was without any thought of what would be left. Even my license, that last proof of me-that-was, had long since burned. There was nothing after that. It was more a form of suicide than I'd wanted to admit.

Finally, I shrug. "Just me, I guess."

Adam laughs at this and stretches his legs out, splaying webbed toes. "Fair enough. You do a good job around here, though. It feels like you belong now. I don't know what you were like before, but you were scared out of your whiskers

when you got here. Now you're just you."

"A punky weasel living off the grid in a hippie town?"

"That too, yeah. Took you a while to grow into the punky bit, but you're getting there."

My turn to laugh. "Just missing the get-up, I guess. Second-hand shirts and jeans miss the mark a little."

"Mmhm. And you ought to get a piercing." Adam slides out of the chair and stands, using his thick tail to give the leg of the table a thwack. "And it's good to see you painting."

§

For the first few months I was here, I'd get a little twitch in my paw when someone mentioned something off the Internet. A twitch in my paw and a little shift inside me at a sudden-yet-averted context-shift. *I could look that up*, I'd think. *I could answer their question, or laugh at their picture.*

For a while, I'd countered it with lies. An "Oh yeah, ha ha" here and a "Yeah, I saw that" there. The anxiety that I'd mess up and be called out got to be too much for me, though, and I switched from that to nervous silence.

I replaced that twitch early on with the gesture of brushing back over my cheeks. At first, it was obvious why: when I got to town, my face was still freshly shaved, and for the first few weeks, the freezer-burnt marks of the brand were plain. Soon, though, it became more of a habit than a coping mechanism. I'd brush my pads over the fur and feel the edges of the shaving, and once they became imperceptible, I'd trace my claws through fur, trying to sense where the brown fur ended and the white, branded fur started.

Anything—*anything*—to keep from touching the Internet. It would be too easy for me to just log back on. The temptation to peer into a life that no longer existed was too great. My very existence here in this town depends on that life no longer existing. I'd destroyed it, and destroyed all that tied me to its remains.

And yet here I am, panicking in the bathroom at Starry Night.

There's a soft tap at the door, and I rush to straighten my skirt and apron, peeking in the mirror to make sure I haven't visibly cried.

Aurora's there when I open the door, standing a scant few inches taller than I.

"Sorry, I'm..." I shake my head. "I'm all done."

The coyote tilts her head quizzically, a movement that brushes against old memories. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I am." I stand up straighter and smile apologetically to her. "I will be."

We slide past each other and I make my way behind the bar again, busying myself with wiping down the already-clean espresso machine, just to give my paws something to do. Not many people ordering coffee at six at night. This late in the season, the sun sets early too.

Stefan hikes himself up onto the bar, the wolf's tail flagging off to the side. "You alright there, kiddo?"

"Yeah." I nod eagerly, then decide eagerness isn't what I should be going for, and turn it into a shrug. "Just stomach stuff. Nerves, maybe." I laugh, and it sounds too loud.

"You bolted right off, yep. Anything bring it on?"

I look around, checking on the occupants. We're down to me and Stefan, a young fox couple, and Aurora of course. "Just... just something a customer... something that bear said. Or saw. I don't know."

Stefan's brow furrows, and I watch as the his tailtip tap arrhythmically against the wall where it joins the bar. "Saw? How do you mean?"

"He had a tablet, and I guess I caught a glimpse. He was talking about it to someone. Someone on the phone."

"Mm, yeah, I remember. What'd you see?"

"I saw my—" My words catch in my throat. *I saw my husband. I saw my name. I saw the picture from my ID.* "I saw my hometown."

The wolf grins and leans back on his paws. "Home, eh? You don't seem like the girl who's eager to go back."

At this, I laugh in earnest. "No. Not at all."

"What about it piqued your interest, then?"

I hide my racing thoughts with a shrug, and come up with a half-truth: "The headline had the word 'police' in it."

Nodding, Stefan slips down from his perch on the bar. “Fair enough. Weird day in here, anyway. I’mma close down after this—” he gestures vaguely toward the customers, “So feel free to head out whenever you want.”

I think of the bus back to Adam’s and being alone with my thoughts. I could walk, but that’d just mean more time turning that glimpse of an article—something about “police” and my old name, something about how long it had been—over and over in my head. “I’ll stick around, help clean up and stuff.”

Stefan shrugs, “Sure thing. Maybe I’ll take off early, then. You okay closing up?”

“Mmhm,” I nod, tamping down anxiety with a jokey grin. “Wipe everything down, put all the food away, put the chairs up, steal all the money from the drawer. . .”

The wolf laughs. “No more than ten percent, please. And girlie,” he reaches out and pinches my ear between his claws. “Get your ears pierced with all sorts of crap or something so you can turn into a real punk. You’re too wholesome-looking to be thieving.”

“Adam suggested the same thing. This town must be in sore need of a punk.”

“Yeah, all we’ve got is Aurora.”

The coyote flips him off without even looking away from her book. He laughs.

§

Stefan’s really good at disappearing when he’s not needed at work anymore. If he doesn’t have to be there for closing, he’ll be nowhere to be found.

Oh well, that’s fine. I don’t imagine I’ll be here much longer anyhow.

I start by cleaning down the bar and arranging all those bottles of flavored syrup for the drinks. Next comes flipping over the “open” sign and wiping down the empty tables, stacking chairs upside-down atop them.

The fox couple picks up on the hint quickly and we settle their tab.

I make a quick pass of the bathroom, but it’s clean enough as is, so I mostly just wipe down the sink.

Back out in the caf, I turn off the soft indie pop on the house speakers, and then something clicks within me.

I clutch at the edge of the bar as all of those emotions, eight or nine months of them, crash into me. All those months of living in at least some state of fear, all those days of holding back on feeling anything else, they all add up to time past-me only borrowed. All those past-due feelings make themselves felt *now*.

My grip on the bar tightens as I gasp out a stifled cry, and then I'm crumpling to the floor, wedged between the milk fridge and the end of the bar where Stefan had been sitting only a half hour ago. Anxiety crescendos into panic, and then far, far beyond that. My muscles are tensing, and my perception of the world, my entire awareness, is shrinking to something the size of a coin, chalk-white pain smelling of snow.

I come to on my side, gasping for air and choking on sobs. I'd been sobbing the whole time, apparently, as my cheeks and the sleeve of my shirt are soaked. Drooling too, from the looks of it.

My body hasn't figured out how to move, yet, but I can see a dark, angular shape above me. I try to push away, but all I can manage is to tense up further.

"Hey, hey, chill. It's okay." Aurora. It has to be.

"Mmnglh."

"Let's get you upright, at least a little. See if you can stand." She helps lever me up until I'm leaning back against the bar. "Come on, legs out. You uh... you fell over. Let's at least get your legs in front of you."

I can't figure out how to work my voice, so I just continue to moan and sob as the coyote helps get my skirt untangled and my limbs out from under me. She slips her paws up under my arms and starts to lift.

"N-nnn," I manage and clutch at her arms—far too tightly, if her wince is anything to go by. Too filled with terror, too struck by a sense of impending death to control myself.

She relents and settles back down, then gives into my tugging and slips her arms around my shoulders instead. There's a little uneven rocking motion as she slides her legs out from under her, and then she's drawing me in against her.

I don't really know how long I stay like that. The only thing describing the passage of time is my sobbing. Aurora is a warm bulk against me, something to wrap my arms around, some bit of stability. She doesn't coo or shush, just rests her head

against mine in silence. A kind, patient silence. A silence with no expectations.

Eventually, I run out of sobs, and settle into a gentle, almost calm sort of crying. Aurora gives me a bit more time before carefully leaning back. Letting our arms slip from the embrace at least enough so that she can look at me. Her smile's kind, rather than pitying. "Come on, let's get you up, okay?"

My joints are loose hinges, too well oiled. Finding a way to be upright without wobbling onto the floor again proves difficult. It takes a few tries, but I wind up with my butt parked against the edge of the bar, tail crimped behind me. I leave my shoulders leaning forward to maintain my grip on Aurora. I'm loath to let go of her, so it takes another fumbling second for me to find a way to do so.

"Sorry," I croak.

She shakes her head and rests her paws on my shoulders. Once she's sure I'm steady, she steps away and grabs a plastic to-go cup from beneath the bar and fills it at the sink. She takes one of my paws in hers and guides my fingers around the cup, making sure I'm holding on before she lets go. "Drink. You cried yourself empty."

I nod and sip at the water. It feels too full in my mouth. Too thick. It slides around like oil. When I swallow, I realize how thirsty I truly am, and finish the rest of the cup in one go.

Aurora, meanwhile, finishes closing up; all that was left was her table, so there's just two chairs to put up.

I refill my cup from the tap and straighten up, trying to dispel the wobbliness in my hips and knees, to shake off the dark sense of panic. "Thanks Aurora, you didn't have to—"

"But you're in no shape to," the coyote cuts me off, laughing. She tucks her book and papers back in her bag and slips back behind the bar again. Shrugging her bag's strap up further, she snakes an arm around my back. "Let's get you home, though, okay? You good to walk?"

"Mhm. I can take the bus, though. Don't need to walk."

"I meant to my car. I'll get you home."

If I open my mouth, I'll start crying, so I just nod.

Aurora's car is very... *her*.

I don't really know how to put it otherwise. It's sensible, as she is; it's filled with books and stacks of paper, as her bag is; it's not messy, but it's got a lot going on beneath its simple exterior, like her.

Still sniffing, I wait as she moves a sheaf of papers held together with a binder clip from the passenger seat to the back. Then I swipe my tail and skirt out of the way and slouch into the seat, clumsily clicking the seatbelt in place with one paw, the other still holding the half-full cup of water.

The car smells of her too. My nose is doing about as well as anyone's would after so much crying, but I can tell that much. It smells like when she held me. It smells familiar, like something from years ago. Years and years. I have to swallow down a rising wave of guilt and terror.

The coyote settles into the driver's seat and gets all buckled in before giving my thigh a squeeze in her paw. "Adam's, right?" she asks, smiling. "One of the cabins?"

I nod. "Thanks again for driving me."

Aurora waits until she's reversed out of her spot and turned onto the road before answering. "No way I'm letting you walk, and goodness knows I know how awful crying alone on a bus is."

"Yeah, probably not a good look," I say. I can't quite laugh yet, but I do manage a sort of "heh."

"You are a bit of a mess."

I look down over my shirt and skirt. They're both rumpled. My shirt's still damp from my tears, and my skirt has picked up a stain from the floor behind the bar—probably old coffee. I can only imagine how my face looks. I grin. "Fair."

I let Aurora drive as I focus on rehydrating. I want to just gulp down the water, but I've made enough of a mess of myself tonight. No sense risking a spill. Probably better for me that way, anyway.

It's about a forty-five minute walk from Adam's to Starry Night, and about twenty-five on the bus. I never realized how long the bus took, though, as it takes us less than ten minutes to get back to the long-stay. I laugh at the thought.

“What’s up?” Aurora says, pulling into the dirt-road drive, heading around the back of the suites toward the cabins.

“Just thinking. First time I’ve been in a car here. Only ever ridden the bus or walked.”

Aurora grins and pulls into a space in front of the cabin I point out. “Bit faster, yeah. Still, it’s a pretty enough walk.”

The car turning off leaves us in relative silence, my ears buzzing in my stuffed-up head from the lack of noise. My thoughts seem to be surrounding a blank space. Circling and swirling around it, around nothing. A black pit containing all the things I could think about my old life, of being discovered, of having to go back.

“Hey.” Aurora. She’s smiling. That’s a good thing to think about instead, that smile. “Let’s get you inside.”

I fumble for my buckle and start to protest, but stop before I say anything. The coyote, the scent of her, it’s all so comforting; might as well let her help. A few more moments together, at least.

Aurora levers herself out of her seat and strides quickly around the front of the car. I’ve got the door open by then, but there she is, ready to help me out of the bucket seat. I grin, feeling bashful, and take her offered paw.

She’s got a bit of a wag going on, too, but I try not to read too much into that.

I lean on her as we walk the handful of steps to the door of the cabin. Once there, I fish in my apron pocket for my keys—I’d taken to wearing my work apron with the skirt for the utility of pockets—and let myself in.

Let *us* in. No discussion about whether she’s coming in, too. She just is.

I flip on the lights and cringe, both at the sudden brightness against the dusk outside and the mess. I’ve been using my suitcase as my clean clothes drawer since I moved in. It’s just got a day’s worth of clothes in it, though. Next to it on one side is a pile of dirty clothes, and on the other, a folding drying rack holding a pair of jeans, a shirt, and two pairs of panties hanging off the corners.

Fuck.

I turn to apologize to the coyote, but she hasn’t noticed the laundry at all. Doesn’t even seem to notice me.

I follow her gaze, then cringe in earnest.

Fuck.

“Holy shit. Those paintings are yours?”

“Yes,” I say, trying not to sound *too* humiliated.

“The coyote?”

I can’t come up with a reply. We stand in expectant silence: Aurora’s eyes locked on the paints and ceiling tile, burgundy, with her silhouette in black; and me, with my eyes locked on the floor and my tail tucked in against my leg.

She turns, mouth open to ask again, when I grab at her paw and rush to cut her off.

“Yes, I mean. Yes. You’re just... you’re just always there.” My eyes well up with tears—I’m surprised I have any left—as words keep coming, and I keep holding onto her paw. “You’re just always there and so familiar and I don’t know— They let me paint the ceiling, and I don’t know— I should’ve asked, I’m sorry— I don’t know, you’re just one of the only constants in my stupid fucking life and I didn’t even talk to you until I—”

“Whoa, hey!” she says, raising her voice to cut off my stream of babbling. She looks startled, but not angry. “It’s totally okay but—hey...”

I’ve started crying in earnest again. *Looking a fool, standing there holding a girl’s paw, tears pouring down your cheeks.* I manage a strangled laugh, though it’s caught up in a sob. *Looking fucking crazy.*

Perhaps as an echo from the caf, Aurora takes charge. She guides me over to my bed and sits me down on it before settling in next to me and just holding me, arms around my shoulders.

It doesn’t last long, and doesn’t get a tenth as bad as the crush of panic at Starry Night, but it still takes me a few minutes to get to the point where I can speak again. “Sorry, Aurora.” I pace myself, so I don’t just start babbling again. “Didn’t mean to do that. Just such a mess today. My life’s a mess, and it all hit at once.”

“Tell me a bit about your life, then,” she asks, low voice kind. “I want to hear.”

I feel my face tighten in an ugly rictus, teeth bared and whiskers bristled. It’s been months, but the freeze-brand scars over my cheeks give a twinge of protest. “There’s nothing.” As the sobs pick up again, dry now, I have to eke out words between. “There’s nothing there. I’m just... paper. Paper thin with no substance.

No substance at all.” I trail off and take a few gulping breaths to calm myself, forcing my expression into mere hopelessness, rather than that grimace of self-loathing.

Aurora watches me, and, after I’ve gotten my crying under control, opens her mouth as though to say something, then seems to think better of it and leans in to kiss me instead.

I jolt and tense up. I hold my breath. My mind goes blank. That sensation of being about to cry fills my chest, never mind the fact that I’d already crying.

Then I just lean into the kiss. Return it. No discussion about it; it feels familiar, fulfilling. I’m calm. Still at last.

Aurora seems comfortable taking the lead, using her paws and subtle shifts of her weight to guide me to lay back on the bed. Once I’m there, she leans up from the kiss and grins down to me with just a hint of silliness. “You feel substantive to me.”

I’m wrong-footed by this and it takes a moment to parse. Once it clicks, though, I giggle. “Thanks.” I feel stupid just leaving it at that, though, and add, “That was nice.”

“Mmhm.” Still grinning, she leans into give me another quick kiss, then moves to kneel on the edge of the bed, tugging me by the paw. “Come on. Scoot.”

I laugh and swipe at my face with the sleeve of my shirt—I must look a mess after all of this. Still, I scoot further up onto the bed at the coyote’s bidding. “Alright, alright. How come?”

Aurora shrugs, her grin softening into a kind smile. “I got you thinking less about whatever’s up with your life, right? I hope so, at least.” I nod, and she continues, “The least I could do is also let you be comfortable on your bed instead of half hanging off of it.”

“Good point,” I laugh and haul myself up onto the bed, flopping back against the pile of pillows. I’d bought more once it was clear I was staying here a while, and I’m thankful for it now.

Aurora moves too; as I make room, she moves up onto the bed to kneel next to me. “Doing better?”

“Yeah, thank you.” After a moment’s thought, I ask, “Why’d you do that?”

The coyote frowns down to me, ears splayed in embarrassment. “I wanted to. It felt like it would work, and like it would be okay. I should have asked, though. I’m sorry.”

“No!” I realize how loud that was and smile sheepishly up to her. “No, it was nice. Real nice.”

That slightly silly grin comes back, tugging on buried memories. Memories of a latrans smile. “Good,” she says, leaning in to press another kiss to my muzzle. I return this one more readily than the last, sliding my arms up around her shoulders.

This goes over quite well. Aurora seems to have taken it as a sign, and leans down over me more assertively, paws planted to either side of my shoulders. After a moment’s hesitation, she leans up a little further onto her knees and shifts one up over me until she’s straddling my waist. She’s bigger than me, weighs more than I do. Maybe it’s the way she carries herself, but her weight is more comforting than heavy.

“Wait,” I murmur, twisting my head slightly to pull away from the kiss.

Aurora immediately tenses up, ears canting back. “Uh, sorry, I don’t—”

“No, no. You’re fine,” I mumble, searching for words. “Don’t know why. . . why this is. . . doing what it is. Working. Stopping me from crying and all. Taking my mind off stuff.”

She stays silent above me. An expectant silence she waits for me to fill.

I hunt for words as best I can. “Maybe I just. . . I don’t know. I haven’t touched—or been touched by—anyone since I made it out here. Before that, even. It feels dumb to say, I guess.”

Aurora gives a short bark of a laugh at that, then lays her ears back again apologetically. “Sorry. You mean not at all?”

“Well, sure, I mean. I shook paws with Adam and Stefan, whatever. I’ve *touched*, yeah, but just nothing like this.”

At that her expression softens and she nods. “Been a while, huh?”

I nod.

“And this is okay?”

I nod again and lean up to give her a quick kiss. “Yeah, very.”

She nods, muzzle dipping to turn that motion into something of a nuzzle, and I can feel her nose tracing along one of those white bands of fur on my cheek, then under my chin, dipping down to tease at the coil of blue fur—faded now to a pale aqua—peeking up above the scoop-neck of my shirt. Her soft, low voice is muffled by my fur. “This is okay, too?”

Without tucking my muzzle uncomfortably low, all I can really see are her ears, so I lean forward to place a kiss between them, fur and familiar scent tickling at my nose. “Mmhm.” I’ve given up saying more.

Aurora responds with a kiss of her own against my sternum. It’s a ticklish sort of feeling, and my squirming gets a giggle, muffled as before against my chest. She settles down from her crouch above me, bringing her paws from by my shoulders to brush along my sides as she rests more fully against my front. I slip my own arms from around her until it’s just my paws on her shoulders.

The sheer exhilaration of physical contact seems to be filling my mind—or at least that empty void within that I’ve only been able to tiptoe around—with something new. Something *else*. Something other than low-level anxiety. I can close my eyes and not wind up in some horrible hopelessness. I don’t have to think, I can just be here. Goodness knows why, but I can just be here.

I jolt to awareness from my wandering thoughts and tense up, and Aurora’s paws pause halfway up my sides. Her fingers and claws are buried in my fur with t-shirt cloth bunched around her wrists. We both hold still in that silence, a few long seconds of just our breaths. For once I don’t rush to fill it with words, and simply settle back down, relaxing into her grasp.

The coyote hesitates a moment longer before edging her paws upward further, inching shirt up over fur. Keeping my paws on her shoulders as best as possible, I arch my back enough to let her slide my shirt up.

The exploration continues in fits and starts from there. Kisses along the blue diamond and down over my chest. Aurora shifting her weight. Me tugging my shirt off to keep it out of the way. Soft coyote nose tracing spirals in my fur. One lasting sensation, a singular point of focus.

The skirt, though, requires coordination. Aurora and I have to exchange a few glances, one or two half-words, and some soft giggles before the garment winds up

bunched around my waist, spilling in pools of cotton to either side of me. And then there we are: me, with shirt off but for one arm still stuck through a sleeve, skirt bunched around her waist; and Aurora, looking nervous but excited, wagging as she looks up at me along my front over a pile of rumpled skirt.

“So uh. . .” I begin.

“Mm?”

“Mm.”

Soft noises. Gestures of paws. The warmth of a tongue, slender and attentive. Finely-tapered coyote muzzle. Lithe, arched weasel back. Quiet moans and subtle shifts to express what works and what doesn't. Paws finding places to rest, to touch, to brush and stroke.

And then something new, something different clicks within me. A rising swell of pleasure, and a sudden, uneven tumble of memories. A shuddering gasp and an attachment of name to place to time. A contraction, then relaxation of muscles and a line drawn between two points. A connection.

Panting to catch my breath, and glimpses of high school, of nervous first times. Memories of a muzzle and an attentive tongue. That same muzzle, that same tongue

A warm glow, and a name surfacing to memory.

I collapse back onto the bed, slack, and stare down over my front. Aurora stares back just as intently shifting her weight forward once more, retracing her route of kisses in double time.

“Wait, you're—”

“Aurora. I'm Aurora.”

I start to speak, but she cuts me off.

“I'm Aurora. You're you.”

I swallow compulsively, feel fear caving in my insides, terror at having been recognized, caught. “But you were. . . we—”

“I know who you *were*, and you know who I *was*, but I'm Aurora. You're you.”

I fall silent, paws clutching at the duvet in search of something solid. Aurora leans up for the final kiss, more tender than heated, more earnest than fumbling. I smell her, and taste myself.

“We all have reasons to disappear,” Aurora murmurs.

We’ve settled back onto that stack of pillows I’ve collected. My skirt’s still bunched up between us, but I’ve managed to toss my shirt to the side. She’s gotten her arms around me once more and her cool nosetip is teasing along those brands again from where she lays beside me.

“I suppose,” I begin, then shake my head as if to throw away a bit of the non-speech. “So you came out west and transitioned out here.”

A faint nod, nose exploring a line perpendicular to the stripes of my brands. “I tried back home, a bit after high school and, uh. . . us. My heart was half out here by then anyway, though, and no one wants a mopey, trans coyote, least of all my parents.”

I nod. There’s still that hint of a name—I can think it, but would have a hard time saying it—and that memory of a tapered muzzle between my thighs.

Memories from nigh on twenty years ago.

A high school fling. Two dates, a night together, and drifting apart. She had seemed so uncomfortable with herself. We’d. . . Well, tonight had more than made up for that.

“And you?”

“Mm?”

“Why’d you disappear?”

“I don’t know.”

Aurora lifts her head a little, a hint of a grin turning the corner of her mouth. “You don’t know?”

“I don’t.” I tilt my head to press my nose to hers. “I think that’s what got me today. I saw that thing on the news. About Jarred, about myself. About home.”

She nods, nose against nose and stifling a yawn.

“And I just don’t know why,” I murmur. “I unwound all of that life and came here, and I think, when I saw it, I realized I don’t know why I did it.”

“Were you happy, back home?”

“No.”

Aurora tucks her muzzle up under my jaw and hugs her arm around me a little tighter. “Neither was I.”

I brush my fingers across her arm, plowing a furrow in gray-tan fur, then smoothing it back down. I push down memories of that gawky and shy coyote, and revel instead in the comfort of Aurora.

So many months of panic following so many years of discontent. So much time alone. And now, comfort and peace.

Muzzle tucked over hers, I ask, “What about me did you remember?”

“Your paintings.”

“Have I changed that much?”

“I mean, you looked like someone who could’ve been, uh, who you were. But it was your paintings.” She yawns in earnest. “The lines. The shapes.”

The burgundy-and-black ceiling tile is behind me. I think of looking, of disentangling myself from the coyote’s arms, but there’s something much better here in front of me.

“And you?” Aurora sounds sleepy. “What tipped you off about me?”

I think of all the things I could say—the warmth of her breath, the trail of kisses, the way her nose drew lines through my fur. The way she rested her cheek on her paw, staring out the window. The softness of her form. Her very scent.

We lay together in silence. A comfortable silence. The first in a long time.