

You'll Never Find Me

by: Killed Jackalope

Venkata yawned and grumbled under his breath, pawing at his heavy eyelids. It was far beyond late. He was awake for some reason. He felt the chill of the night air and discovered he'd kicked his covers off. His tail hurt from sleeping on it wrong. The young fox blinked at the cloudy illumination on his clock and could at least make out single digits for the hour. He huffed and went to grab his comforter, readjusted his twisted nightshirt. The pronounced sound of dragging claws made his heart thump.

He looked up at the underside of his brother's top bunk and whispered up at it, "Karthik? Was that you?" Another long scritch followed by two short ones made him bolt upright. Sleep flooded away from him leaving his ears wide and his eyes dilated. He turned and saw his brother sitting on the floor facing away from him with his ears flattened and his head looking to the side at an odd angle. He had his right arm tucked into his nightshirt. With his left arm, Karthik reached out and gently lit upon the carpet, digging his claws in sharply and slowly dragging them across the fabric.

SCRITCH! Scritch-scratch-scratch!

Venkata absently held his tail and leaned over the side of his lower bunk. "Karthik?" he hissed. "What are you doing? You're gonna wake mom and dad!"

Scritch. Scritch. Scritch.

"Karthik? Are you asleep? What's wrong?"

His brother's head turned and looked at him sideways, a slow grin spread across his teeth. "I can't sleep. Not yet." Karthik's voice was soft, but not in the hushed whisper of Venkata's. He turned back away from Venkata and stared at the open closet opposite the bed. "I'm gonna sleep in there tonight," he said with a giggle that made Venkata shiver at first. Venkata huffed and rolled his eyes. "Karthik! Get back into bed before you get us in trouble!"

Scritch-scratch-scratch.

Venkata threw off his covers and grumbled. "Karthik, it's late! What's wrong with..." He trailed off, unsure what to make of what his brother was doing. Karthik flopped over on his side and dug at the carpet, dragging himself forward using only the claws of his left paw. His legs trailed along the floor behind him, limp.

Scritch. Scritch. Scritch.

With each scratch of his paw, Karthik inched further away from Venkata and closer to the open closet. Venkata folded his ears. "Karthik?" He must be asleep, Venkata told himself. He swallowed hard. He must be asleep or playing some stupid game, he reminded himself again. But the fox sat anchored to the bed, unable to move to take his eyes off the way his brother's legs dragged along the floor. Even his tail seemed lifeless.

Splayed out, like he was reaching for the closet with his outstretched left paw, Karthik flashed his eyes back towards Venkata. "Hee! Let's play, brother. Let's play the game where I hide from you." Venkata swallowed and stared at his brother with saucer-like eyes. He took a step out of bed and Karthik lurched, tugging his listless form with his left paw again.

Scratch-scratch-scratch!

Venkata paused again. Karthik's grin widened. "I'm gonna hide from you, brother. I'm gonna hide where you'll never find me." There was something in Karthik's voice that made Venkata's tail bushy. But it was late. He was grumpy. And he was tired of this game. He stepped forward with a mix of trepidation and ire.

SCRITCH! SCRITCH! SCRITCH!

Venkata's whisper gradually faded to a whine. "Karthik! Stop it! I mean it! I'm gonna tell!" Venkata padded forward, faster. Karthik giggled and pawed at the floor.

Scratch-scratch-scratch!

"Karthik! Stop! Why are you doing this?" Venkata was all but running now. Karthik was halfway inside the closet, still pulling himself with only his left paw. "KARTHIK!" Just as Venkata was within reach the closet door slammed shut, nearly smashing into his muzzle.

"...Karthik?"

Venkata perked up his ear and flushed it to the door. "You'll never find me," came in a faint whisper from the other side, then the sound of claws again.

Scratch. ... scri-itch. ... scri-i-i-i-i-tch...

Silence. Venkata opened his mouth and gasped for his mom. His head swam with the pounding from his heart. Karthik's game wasn't funny. The quivering kit turned to sprint from the room. Eager to find his mom's arms, he no longer cared if he got in trouble for waking his parents.

He took one step and stopped dead. His lip curled back in a terrified sneer. His ears cowered against his skull. His irises blackened out his eyes. His gaze fell upon the form of his brother

hanging lifelessly from the corner of the top bunk. Karthik's nightshirt was tangled and wrapped around his neck, pinning his right paw and stretched across the corner of the bedpost. His legs were caught up in the sheets. His left paw was stuck out free at an odd angle. The drywall was shredded with clawmarks in a desperate plea to find some purchase. Venkata could feel Karthik's empty eyes, hardened in fear, staring right through him.

Venkata's maw sprung open with futile attempts to scream. But there were no sounds except the rushing of his breath, and the creak of a closet door.