

IV.

The Funeral

Due in part to my roommate situation, and in part to the awful nightmare we shared, it took me longer than I would have liked to get settled in for the new school year. Thankfully, by the end of the first month, I was on top of my classes and in good spirits. Salvador was looking more chipper as well, and more energetic than usual, though for him that wasn't saying much. This particular day was a lazy Sunday, and I was playing a game at my computer while waiting for Allie to come visit. As if on cue, my phone's text alert went off just as I finished my game. I picked my phone up off the desk to check the message. It read, "Honey I'm home!" I rolled my eyes and got up from my chair to open the door.

Allie was standing in the doorway, shaded by the leaves of the trees overhead. She was a spotted hyena, which I found to be an amusing contrast to my striped roommate. There was nothing particularly remarkable about her appearance. She had a nice fur coat, all a lovely tan with spots that were a sun-faded black. Her muzzle was dark as well, up to just under her eyes. She was about my height, and still had the same fit body she had when she ran track in high school.

"Really? 'Honey I'm home?' You don't live here," I said with a roll of my eyes as I stepped aside to let her in.

"Hey, if I didn't have so many classes I'd be over here every day!" she said with a smirk as she slipped off her shoes. I shut the door behind her. "Thanks for holding onto my tablet by the way. I need that for all my ebooks." She paused to look around, but continued before I could say anything. "Where's Stripes?" she asked, after deducing that he wasn't in the living room or the kitchen.

"You mean Salvador? He's in his room, probably still asleep," I said as we walked to my room, with her in the lead.

"It's like, noon," Allie noted. She flopped onto her back on my bed like she owned it.

"Which means we probably won't see him for another hour at least." I sat at my desk chair and swiveled it around to face my bed.

"Sheeeesh, doesn't he have morning classes?" Allie asked as she stared up at the popcorn ceiling.

"Nah, he doesn't start until late in the afternoon. He's up late and sleeps through most of the day," I informed.

"Pfttt. Lazy."

I shot her a scowl and threw my wallet at her, making her yelp. "Be nice!" I scolded. "You know what he's dealing with."

"Sorry sorry, I forgot." She fished my wallet out of the sheets and tossed it back to me. "That was a bad joke."

"Yeah, it was. But, ugh... Just don't say shit like that to his face, okay?"

"I'll be more careful." An uncomfortable silence followed, until Allie broke it. "Soooo, are you excited to see the new superhero movie with me today?"

I grinned, my mood already lifted again. "Are you kidding me? Do you know how long I've been waiting to see the Winter Warrior fight Experiment 2662 on the big screen? Literally my entire life." My inner nerd was showing, but it's nothing Allie hadn't already seen.

"I figured that's what you were going to say, I mean, I read some of the fanfiction you did in high school," she said with a snicker as she sat up, making my old bed springs creak.

I felt myself blush, though thankfully it's hard to see it under fur. "Hey! That was like, freshman year!" I protested.

"Fandoms may be temporary but Fanfiction dot net is forever!" she shouted at me with a teasing grin.

"Noooo, my shame!" I howled as I pretended to melt out of my seat. Allie had a hand over her mouth to try and keep from laughing.

"Good morning." We both stopped and looked to the door, where a shirtless Salvador was passing by with a sleepy wave and a croaked greeting on his way to the kitchen.

"Good morning Stripes!" Allie called after him.

"Hello Spots," Salvador yawned in response.

I rolled my eyes and clicked my tongue. "You two must think you're so clever with that."

"Hilarious actually." Allie hopped out of my bed and went to join Salvador in the kitchen, and I followed after her.

Salvador was wandering about the little kitchen, practically sleepwalking as he assembled a sandwich. I swear his eyes were closed, but Allie insisted that they were only *mostly* closed. Lunchmeat, pre-sliced cheese, mustard, mayo, and two slices of wheat bread. Not bad.

"Still up for the movie today Sal?" I took a seat adjacent to him, and Allie sat across from me, effectively flanking him. He nodded from behind closed eyes and a mouthful of sandwich.

"Good enough for me!" Allie shouted. Salvador's eyes snapped open as she startled him.

"I'm awake!" Salvador instinctively yelled as he looked around the room. "Oh. Still at home. Good." He hunched over the table, and his eyes closed halfway again, followed by another yawn.

"Just eat your sandwich, we're not leaving for a while." I pushed away from the table and moved to the counter to get a cup of coffee brewing for him. "Allie, want any coffee?"

"I'll pass," she said, waving me off. "Thanks though."

The smell of coffee soon filled the small apartment. I poured the entire pot into an insulated travel cup for Salvador, and he perked up after just a couple sips.

"Thanks Basil!" Salvador got up and bumped his hip against mine as he squeezed past me. "I'm gonna get dressed, don't want us to be late!" He hurried to his room, coffee in tow, and shut the door behind him.

We weren't going to be late by any measure, unless Salvador had passed out while getting dressed. Luckily, he hadn't had a fainting spell in the apartment since we'd met, though I was told that he fell out of his desk during Art History once. He was fine, though.

The three of us were crossing campus to the little theater they had where we were going to be watching the movie for half the price of a regular ticket. It was a hot day out, and the blinding sun shone down from the sky and up from the bleached-gray sidewalk. Allie and I were in shorts and t-shirts, but Salvador was in long pants, and was huddled up under his infamous

hoodie. Only the tip of his muzzle was exposed to the light; his hands were buried deep in his coat pockets.

"Stripes, how can you wear that? It's like eighty-five degrees out," Allie asked.

"You know that tired heat-stoke-y feeling you get when you're in bright sunlight for too long? Well take that and multiply it by a hundred and that's what it's like for me," Salvador huffed, his voice simmering with irritation.

"Sorry! Geeze, just asking," Allie apologized.

Salvador sighed and shook his head. "It's okay. Just. The sooner we get out of the sun, the better the chance I'll make it through the day."

"It's faster if we go past the chapel instead of around the dining hall," I ventured as we neared a crossroads.

"Oohh, the chapel though? There's a funeral going on there today," Allie pointed out.

"They're not gonna clog the walkway, we can slip past. It's a college campus, they have to be prepared for foot traffic, funeral or no," I told her as I made the decisive turn towards the building with the little gothic spires. "How do you know that anyways?"

"My math teacher this semester, he sent out an email about it to all his students, to explain the long absence he's going to be taking. Apparently his son died." She paused for a moment, walking in silence. "They're holding like, a little memorial in the chapel, is all. We probably won't be a bother."

"Ugh, funerals..." Salvador muttered behind us. We ignored him, the sun made him irritable.

"That's... Really shitty. How did he die?" I was already prying too much, and I had only asked one question.

"No one really knows, I guess. He just got sick one day. Lost all his strength. Nothing the doctors could do. The last couple of days he couldn't even get out of bed and then he just expired..." Allie trailed off, and I saw her shudder. "That's what the email said anyways."

"That's so... Man, I don't have words for that. How old was his son?"

"He was our age," Allie wasn't looking at me anymore.

I couldn't help but think of the email I received from Mrs. Astor at the beginning of the year. It was eerie how similar the two deaths sounded. I hoped some crazy new flu virus wasn't starting to circulate. I didn't have much more time to dwell on it, as the funeral procession was just filing into the chapel as we passed; a row of people clad all in black, like disembodied shadows creeping in the uncaring sunlight. They filed one-by-one into the building in absolute silence. Our footsteps sounded loud. The priest seemed to glide right past us without a flicker of recognition to our presence.

"Funerals are so dumb." Salvador spoke up loud enough that we feared the procession had heard him. Allie and I both turned around to shush him.

"They're gonna hear you, shut up!" I hissed to him.

"Yeah, show some respect!" Allie chimed in as we picked up our pace.

"Why? All these people showing up to honor some dead kid... He's dead. He doesn't care." Salvador growled from under his hood.

"That's not the point, what the hell has gotten into you?" I was feeling frustrated with my roommate for the first time.

“Me? What’s wrong with you? These people ‘celebrating’ death? It’s pathetic! It’s trying to make death a good thing and it’s not! They’re afraid to die, just like you two!” He was shouting now, so I grabbed his arm and started to drag him away. “Ow! Let me go!” He squirmed in my grasp, but tired himself out within moments. He was calm once we were out of sight of the chapel, and exhausted to boot.

“What was that? Have you lost it?” I asked as I pushed him around, making him face me. I grabbed his hood and threw it off, and he whined at me as sunlight flooded his eyes. He scrambled to put it back on, but Allie grabbed his free wrist. “Look, I really don’t want to call the nurse, but you totally freaked out back there. Talk.”

“I just, I don’t like funerals okay! And we’ve been walking a while, and it’s so bright out, and I’m irritated at the sun, and I just... I didn’t mean what I said, I was just, ugh...” We let him go and he pulled his hood back up, hiding his eyes with it. “Can we just – oh...” He stopped mid-sentence and wobbled to one side. In one quick step I closed the gap between us and slid my arm under his shoulder to support him. His legs trembled for another few seconds, but he seemed to regain his strength after that.

“Damnit Sal, I can’t believe you let Allie and I drag you into this movie with us.”

“It’s fine,” he muttered. “I wanted to see it too.”

“You got him?” Allie asked me as I shifted Salvador’s arm around my shoulders.

“Yeah, I got him, he weighs hardly anything.”

“I’m right here,” Salvador huffed.

“It’s a compliment!” I insisted as I started walking. Salvador dragged his feet along with my footsteps. Allie followed close behind. The theater wasn’t far now.

The theater was cool and dim, and Salvador’s mood quickly improved once he was out of the sun. We each bought our own tickets, and Allie treated the snacks, making a point to get a large popcorn and drink just for me. I snorted at the gesture and its implications, but she and I both knew I’d polish off the whole thing.

We got pretty good seats near the middle of the theater. It wasn’t packed; there were still a few empty seats by the time the previews ended. I sat between Allie and Salvador, since I was the figurative bridge between them. It was good, I really enjoyed it.

About halfway through the film, Salvador lifted the armrest diving our seats and scooted close to me. Hip-to-hip and shoulder-to-shoulder, he leaned his head against mine. I put a hand on the back of his head and ran my fingers through his soft hair.