

IX.

The Search

The campus police arrived within minutes of me calling them. One of them looked around the apartment, another couple woke the neighbors to ask if they had seen anything. A few more still had gathered around the outside of the building, and the rest of the patrols had been told to keep an eye out for the striped hyena as they walked their normal routes. I was sitting on the couch in the living room, chewing on my fingers. Against my better judgement, I told the cops about the nightmare that freaked me out, to explain why I had beat down Salvador's door. They seemed to believe me, at least enough to keep up the search.

After an hour, they left the apartment. An hour after that, they left the neighbors alone. Soon, just a couple of them patrolled outside the apartment complex. The night had began to fade into the wee hours of the morning, and I couldn't image what had happened to my fragile roommate. I paced across the carpet floors, and when that didn't settle my head, I grabbed a jacket and went out into the breaking dawn.

Streams of orange light were breaking over the horizon. The dark sky began to warm, as though the sun was setting it ablaze with its orange light. It would be warm soon, hot even, but having my jacket pulled around my body made me feel safe more than anything. The campus was still closed, and asleep, not yet ready to wake to a Monday at 5:30 in the morning. I walked past building after building, slipping between their looming shadows and the strips of light that streamed between them.

As I walked, I realized that I was heading towards the dining hall. Breakfast would be served soon, and maybe that would help me relax enough to focus. I wasn't sure what I would be able to do even if I was calm, but there was little I could do while worked up. The building was only minutes from opening when I arrived, and I was the first one in the door when they unlocked.

I hurried inside and piled my plate with warm, carb-heavy things. Comfort foods, you know? Pancakes and waffles drenched in butter and syrup, with a side of juicy sausages and fluffy scrambled eggs. It was college, I wasn't watching my figure. I was a little chubby at worst.

I finished the breakfast without enjoying it much, but I was feeling more collected with my insides packed full. I stifled a belch as I pushed through the doors and back outside. The sun had crested the distant mountains, and orange light was illuminating the campus, making the white and grey buildings glow and their windows shine. The sun was at my back, and my shadow stretched out ahead of me, as did the shadows of the buildings I passed. About halfway to the apartment, I noticed someone curled up on a bench in one of the shadows of the structures. My chest tightened, and I walked over.

I recognized the jacket as I got closer, and my pace quickened. I grabbed at it as I reached the bench and tugged, flipping it over. The hood fell away, and I was met with Salvador's sleeping face.

I slapped him right across the cheek.

"What the hell are you doing out here?" I screamed. He jumped awake with a sharp inhale, holding his cheek.

"Ow! What was that for? Jerk!"

"Campus police have been looking for you all night, and you're out here asleep on a bench?" I pulled him into a sitting position, and he looked around.

"What... Wait, I'm outside? Why am I out here? Did you drag me out here Basil?" His hand slid from his cheek to his temple.

"You weren't in your room last night. Nobody knew where you were. I thought something terrible had happened to you..." I trailed off and scowled at him. "And you're just sleeping on a bench like a vagabond!"

"I didn't mean to! I fell asleep in my bed, I swear! How did you even know I wasn't in my room?"

"I had another bad nightmare about you. Really bad. I went to check on you but you wouldn't open the door, so I... I broke it down. Which was probably overreacting, but then you weren't in your bed, and I really panicked." I was starting to feel dumb as I remembered how all of this was the result of a bad dream. Salvador's face flashed from angry to sympathetic.

"Normally I wouldn't appreciate you breaking into my room to check on me because of a nightmare, but considering everything that's been happening... thanks. I guess it's good that you did though." He stood up and gave me a hug, which after a moment I returned. He slid an arm around my waist and turned us toward the apartment, and began to walk with me in tow.

"So, how the hell did you get out here? Or why?" I asked as I put an arm around his shoulder.

"Er, it's embarrassing," he said, trying to avoid the question.

"I did call campus police to come look for you. So you're going to have to tell them, may as well let me know first," I suggested.

"That's right, you did mention that. Well, you see. When I was really little, I used to sleepwalk. It was a big problem, but as I got older I did it less and less until it stopped entirely. I guess it hasn't actually stopped entirely, though." He sounded ashamed and frustrated with himself. I squeezed his shoulder and pulled him close.

"Hey, it's not like you can help that. And it's not that crazy. Hopefully that's the last time you do it though. I dunno if I can deal with a disappearing hyena, though it would make for a good magic trick!" I was trying to play things cool so that he wouldn't feel bad. He was already tired all the time, and I didn't want to make him feel even worse about his sleepwalking problem.

He seemed to appreciate my joke, and he chuckled, then yawned and leaned his weight on me. "Thanks for understanding Basil. You're the best." He turned his head to the side, and before I could say a word he planted a brief kiss on my cheek. I blushed and my tail stiffened for a moment. My heart and feet both skipped a beat, and I nearly tripped.

"Uh, yeah! Sure! Thanks! I mean, you're welcome." I was flustered and was terrible at hiding it. "Let's just get back home okay? We have a lot of explaining to do."