

Carol's New Clothes

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Carol was a normal small town woman. She had a normal job and a normal life. That all is upended when her life is spun into a new world she had no knowledge of or interest in finding. Even her body can't seem to feel normal anymore. Worse her family is oddly cagey about the whole ordeal. So it is up to her to unravel the strange happenings in her town and her life.

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Part One: A New Beginning

Carol was home recovering from a funeral. Her grandmother on her mother's side finally passed away. She had next to no contact with her father's side. She didn't know him too well either, having died in the Gulf War. On top of that her family was acting really strange around her. Her mother was distant but before she left Carol was given a box of a few things from her grandmother.

As a 26 year old woman that lived by herself she had lost contact with her family too easily. Trying to support herself ate up most of her time. It wasn't like she wanted to avoid them, rather she kept forgetting to take the time to visit. Now that her grandmother had passed she was heavily regretting not just taken the time. Everyone she hadn't seen in a long time seemed to be trying to get her to take time off. She had to admit some family time would be good.

She brushed her long red hair out of her face and rinsed out a wine glass from her cupboard. She looked at her reflection in the window. She needed time off pretty bad, her blue eyes were lined with dark semi-circles from lack of good sleep.

She was trying to calm herself down from the event after getting home. She poured herself a glass of wine and set the box on the living room coffee table. As she drank her mother's words echoed in her mind.

"Your grandmother would have wanted you to have these. You don't have to look at it today. I love you."

Carol after a few glasses slumped down into her chair and finally smiled. "I wish there was something valuable in that box. Probably just old photographs."

Still her curiosity was growing and the amount of alcohol she consumed was not hurting either. Getting up she opened the box and instead of old family trinkets and pictures she found, "Wha? Heels, stockings, and... cat fur brushes? Plus the collar and bell...."

Laying the various items out she stared in confusion. A few minutes went by as she felt the stockings, and examined their patterns. "These are very nice. It's like a coat of fine fur but for my legs," she said. As she looked an attractive pattern emerged. "Oh! It's got little paws in it!!" She said hugging the stockings and squeeing.

Then the heels, they were a while pair of dress heels with an ankle strap. She looked them over for a maker or a brand but found nothing. She got a little excited and put them on. Taking a quick walk around the room she decided they were very comfortable.

"Such a strange thing to be given from my grandmother." She remarked and cleaned up the box's contents. She tossed the brushes and the collar into a bathroom drawer for now. If she adopted a cat at some point they might be helpful.

Still wearing the heels she went to her room. she set the other things down and only then removed them. Setting the shoes on her dresser she jumped on her bed and curled up into a circle happily. "Maybe... I'll wear them tomorrow. I have a few days off work still."

The next morning Carol woke up late. She sat up and stretched her arms as she yawned. She looked at her hands and blinked in confusion. Her fingernails had grown to sharp points.

"Hmmm? I don't remember..." she said softly. Then a distraction in the form of the clothes she's been given reappeared.

She jumped up and grabbed the clothes. For some reason she was excited about trying them all on. She'd slept in yesterday's clothes and make up, first was to clean up. A hot shower was a good start, so she took one quickly.

While she bathed she was thinking about the new old clothes. Something about the way they felt in her hands was addicting. Carol dried up after getting out of the shower. She laid out the clothes with some matching items from her wardrobe. She slipped on the stockings and then the heels. Taking a few steps back and forth to feel them she blushed. "*chirp!* Ohhh they feel so soft," she said not noticing the strange noise.

Looking back at her blue dress she sighed. "I got too excited. What am I doing?" She asked herself. Then pulled off the shoes so she could put her dress on. She slipped the single piece dress over her head and buttoned the front up.

She then got her shoes back on. Strangely she felt like rushing to wear them again. As if she couldn't be parted for long. Feelings of happiness and stress release flowed through her as she just stood swaying back and forth. "Feels really nice... *chirp* oh! I should make coffee." She said.

Happily dancing out to the kitchen she was all smiles for the first time in months. She prepped the coffee pot and then sat on the counter swinging her legs as she listened to it percolate. She inched at her ears and sniffed at the air. "The coffee seems stronger today. Is that... mom?" She said and looked around.

"She hasn't been here is weeks... but I still smell her," she felt it was odd but was again distracted by the coffee finishing. She hadn't noticed the scratches her fingers left on the butcher block counter.

She poured it and just inhaled deeply. "Oh coffee. If only you tasted like you smelled," she said cheerfully.

She went to her kitchen stereo and put on some music. "A weird mood is a good time for Beck," she said as she set the playlist to shuffle.

She went to the table and relaxed as she sipped her coffee. Her coffee enjoyment was randomly interrupted by her ears itching. "What is going on... feels nice though," she mumbled and quickly forgot about it again.

She started to smell fish, specifically salmon. "Yuck I hate fish. Or maybe I do, now I'm hungry," she said and returned to sniffing hungrily.

In a good feeling trance she ventured to her front door. She was absently sniffing around trying to decide if she should go find the fish or not. She jumped in surprise when her door bell went off. She leaped back and hissed, then covered her mouth in shock.

"Just the door! It's OK. Did I? No couldn't have," she said and shook her head. She quickly collected herself and smoothed out her blouse and skirt. Taking a deep breath to focus on not acting weird to visitors she opened the door.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" She asked, "did you message me? I haven't looked at my phone yet today."

Darlene, her mother was holding a baking dish. She shook her head. "I'm sorry dear. I just wanted to bring you something special. Oh you are trying on the shoes and stockings," she said and smiled.

She stepped in with her gift and said, "let me get a look at you." She was seemingly relieved to see that she'd tried them on. Carol just assumed it was nerves about the inheritance not being wanted or liked.

"How are they? Have you worn them long?" She asked after setting the dish down on the counter. She was much more excited than Carol would have assumed. Though she had to admit the feeling was mutual.

"I... I tried them on last night and liked them. So I put them on after my shower this morning," she replied. "Do they work for me?"

Her mother was still distracted looking her over. "Oh, yes. I suggest you should keep wearing them. Especially the stockings," she said and hugged Carol.

"Oh? I could I guess. I do like them..." she replied. She felt a little embarrassed at her mother's interest in her clothes. "Why do you care?"

Her mother ignored her question and revealed her fish platter she'd brought. "You look hungry sweetie. Eat up! It will help your coat be luscious."

"Don't you mean hair?" Carol then asked, "Why'd you bring fish? You know I don't like... well it does smell really good." She was sniffing again and her mouth was watering.

Her mother smiled broadly. "Yes, yes that's good!" She said and gave Carol some scratches behind her ear.

Carol blushed and found herself leaning into it. "Wh-why do you say that... oh wow that's been so itchy today." She mumbled out.

Her whole body went a little limp. She licked her lips and took a while to come back from her odd state after her mother withdrew her hand. "Mom? Oh yes the fish. I'm sorry I've been so distracted today," she said feeling embarrassed.

Her mother got her out a plate and helped her by dishing up a sizable portion. "Oh wow. Mom I don't eat like I'm a teenager anymore," Carol said and giggled.

Darlene just nodded and smiled as Carol sat down to eat. "You are still my little girl. At least as far as I'm concerned," she said to her. "Oh no I've got to get going. And Carol, your cousin was going to ask you to go ice skating tonight. I told her you'd love to go," she said while giving a goodbye hug and kiss.

"Wait... what?" Carol blurted out with a full mouth. Her mother was already gone to do who knows what. She slammed her first into the table. "Damn it!... I can't stand.... Margaret," she said between hungry bites.

After she ate her brunch she relaxed back into her chair. "That was tasty. I swear I couldn't stand salmon. Maybe I just needed to try it again," she said. Carol cleaned up the dishes and stored the rest of the meal in her fridge.

She walked to her living room again and flopped down on the sofa. "Mmmm, I feel like taking a nap. So warm and comfortable here," she muttered to herself.

"*cough* *cough* *purrr* *cough*" a sudden coughing fit with a odd rumbling disturbed her restful mind. "Hell, what did I inhale?" She asked herself. "*purrr*" it started again and she relaxed quickly. Within seconds she was fast asleep.

It was a long nap, even for her standards. The clock read 4:00 PM by the time she was woken up. A frantic knocking was echoing from her front door and she lazily turned and stretched her arms and back. Carol yawned wide as she did so.

A low rumbling growl followed and had she been more awake she might have noticed her ears moving in response. "Marg... ugh why do bad things happen to good people," she grumbled and got up finally.

While wiping the sleep from her eyes she bumbled out to check the door. "Her perfume is overwhelming tonight," she growled as she neared the door.

As Carol swung the door open she hoped Margaret wouldn't be so annoying this time. That hope was near instantly dashed.

"Carol! I'm so happy to see you! We're going to enjoy our time together I'm sure, just another girls day out! Or evening," Margaret said and barged in to hug her.

"Hi Margaret. I see you haven't changed," she said and pulled the exuberant woman off her. She continued in her thoughts, "But do I wish you had."

"Did you just wake up? Looks like you slept in your clothes. Oh that's adorable!" She said happily, completely oblivious to Carol's blank expression.

Carol rolled her eyes as Margaret walked in past her. "Oh you got a set of those cute stockings too?" Margaret asked showing off hers.

Carol got very confused and asked, "Wait. I thought it was an inheritance thing. Did grandma give you those too in the will?"

"Hmmm?" She shrugged and said, "I got given them yesterday. To be honest I was too excited about the patterns to listen to why I was given them."

Carol had to cover her face to prevent herself from screaming. "A death in the family and all you can... ugh you know what? Never mind. Where are we going?" She said sourly.

"The ice rink on centennial, oh and we match too! Mine has more of a patchy spotted pattern but they're both kitty themed." She said happily almost yanking Carol off her feet and towards the door.

"Wait! Let me get a coat!" She yelped and shook her head in frustration. A part of her wanted to get rid of her stockings just because they had some resemblance to Margaret's. The rest of her screamed about how nice and comfortable they were. So she didn't remove them.

She locked her apartment door as Margaret continued to babble about her usual drivel. Carol as usual just nodded and said "Yeah," as a generic response. She thought about her happy place to try and distract herself. It oddly included a soft sunny nap spot. "Oh and some fish... lots of it," she thought as she was already feeling hungry again.

She suppressed that feeling and followed Margaret to her car. Carol was happy she didn't need to drive to this event. The main drawback however was not being able to leave when she wanted to. Margaret had a tendency to over stay her welcome at the best of times. "At least your car is clean, my mom always struggled with that," Carol said trying to find the positives.

Margaret giggled, she drove them to the rink. "Carol I know you're and me don't always get along great. But I want you to know I'm happy you're you," she said and smiled at her cousin. Quickly giving a shoulder pat as well.

Carol felt a little bad for her negative attitude. "Yeah... uh, thanks for the invite," she replied.

"Yeah! I'm sure we'll have a great time," she said as they neared the rink. "Maybe tonight you'll find Mr. Right?!"

Carol blushed involuntarily. "Stop! I'm not sure there is one," she yelled back playfully this time.

"I'm sure there is. And look at yourself dressed up so nice. Ohh maybe we should do some double dates!" Margaret suggested so sure of the idea.

As they parked at the rink Carol just shook her head again. "I really don't know if that's a good plan."

Margaret kept talking to her but she was finding it hard to process. As they neared the entrance the loud people and music were overwhelming her ears. Then the scent struck her, everyone all at once felt like they were assaulting her nose.

As they entered she didn't understand how Margaret could deal with it all. Her ears twitched under her hat trying to find something to focus on. Suddenly Margaret snapped her back to reality, "Are you OK? You look terrified," she said and rubbed at her arm.

"T-too much stress. I can't think," she replied. Holding her hands over her ears and beginning to tear up. "I'm sorry."

Margaret was visibly upset and her eyes darted around trying to think of something to help. She clapped her hands together in joy and pulled a set of ear plugs from her pocket. "My folks sometimes need these too. Loud venues," she said and helped Carol insert them.

Carol surprised herself by hugging her cousin. "Thank you,"

"Oh it's nothing! Let's have some fun. Come on!" She said and dragged Carol off. They had to get into their skates. Margaret was about to remove her shoes but froze up strangely. Carol found it strange to see but as she went for her own ankle straps she struggled as well.

Fear. It was a strange fear of removing them. As if they were necessary for her safety. She looked up at her cousin who was also stuck. Her solution was to inch closer and hug Margaret, who quickly hugged back. As they comforted each other a little rumbling purr echoed from each woman.

Carol coughed again as her purring ended. "It's alright. Let's have that fun right?"

Margaret nodded and smiled back. She had an idea and leaned down to remove Carol's shoes. Carol did the same for her, and they both laughed at the perceived anxiety of getting on the ice.

Finally getting their skates on Carol was surprised at how warm her stockings felt. "Marg, are these wool? They're very insulating."

Margaret shrugged as she tied her skates. "I don't know. Come on I love this song!"

Carol again was yanked onto the ice. They tested their rusty skills carefully as they held each other for support. Carol was surprised at how easy it was to balance, usually she'd fall only a minute into trying to skate. Margaret as well was equally improved.

Everything was still too loud for her, both music and people. It was the usual mix of 80s and 90s music she expected. Although it had become mundane it was a vast improvement over the terrible Christmas remix garbage most places were playing.

The time they spent was actually very enjoyable for Carol. She was surprised to actually be having fun with Margaret. A feeling she didn't imagine was possible before. "Do I actually like her now? Maybe I just needed the company after everything's happened," she thought.

They lost track of time and before they knew it was late in the night. Finally getting off the ice they changed back into their normal shoes and decided to go for a drink before going home. Margaret showed a strangely familiar joy after getting her gifted shoes back on. Carol thought it was strange again but admitted to herself she felt the same.

As they left she was itching at her ears again. They seemed longer, but that didn't make sense so she tried to ignore it. Margaret noticed it and asked her, "Are your ear's feeling itchy? Like a weird tickle?"

Carol got a little nervous hearing the same sensation from her. "Y-yeah. Started today?"

She nodded back and removed her hat, then pulled her hair back. "I've been trying to ignore it." She said as she rubbed at the strangely sharper tips.

Carol thought she saw a dashing of orange fuzz but couldn't be sure. "From her hat? No her hat is blue... argh why are they so irritated today?" She almost walked into the bar's door she was so distracted.

Margaret quickly pulled her aside narrowly avoiding the door. "Hey watch out. You can itch at it with a drink."

They grabbed two chairs right at the bar. As usual Margaret started talking up some random man who was drinking there. Carol normally would have been wanting to get away from her but tonight she was antsy. "If he tries something weird... I'll, no calm down it's OK." She thought to herself.

"What am I so nervous for? Maybe it's losing grandma. She's always like this and nothing ever happens."

As she was watching the two of them talking the bartender wandered over for their drink orders. "What's your fancy tonight, ladies?"

Carol was a little startled and had her mouth open in shock a little. "Uh, yeah I'll have a gin and tonic."

Margaret finally was distracted from the guy and asked, "I'd like a tequila sunrise!"

The bartender nodded and let them watch him preparing the drinks right in front of them. First was Carol's order, she assumed it was simpler so he was getting it out of the way. As he set a

coaster down for it he asked her, "Are you uh, wearing prosthetic fangs for fashion or something?"

She just stared confused for a moment before stammering out, "I... what?" She self consciously felt around in her mouth and accidentally cut her tongue on a canine tooth. "Ahh, damn it," she whispered trying not to embarrass herself further. They did feel longer, but that couldn't be possible. She'd never checked or thought about it before, so it was probably nothing.

Naturally, Margaret listened in and had to add her usual comments. "Oh are you going through an edgy vampire phase? That's just like me when I was 16!"

Carol pulled her drink closer to her. Deciding to bury her face between her arms. "And I hate you again," she muttered.

While she tried to hide she watched the man talking to her cousin wander off. "Got bored of you?" She asked.

Margaret shook her head. "If you must know. We had creative differences."

"Of course," Carol replied. She started looking around the place. Most people had dates or at least were in a group. There was a single man who was sitting alone with a coffee rather than any alcoholic beverage. She felt a little odd looking at him. She thought she could smell gunpowder residue on him.

"Nah I'm just imagining things. I haven't smelled that since last time I went with my uncle's farm," She said to herself quietly. Looking back at him, he was tensed up. Wearing heavy boots and what she thought might be a shoulder holster under his coat. Which was also very heavy.

She realized he was now looking back at her and she wheeled around and froze. "Damn it! Holy hell, I hope he's not weird or someone obsessive. I don't want to be followed home."

In an attempt to make herself calm down she pulled Margaret over to whisper to her, "There's a guy for you. Why don't you go bug him?"

She expected her cousin to laugh or grumble. Instead she got a "sure!"

Causing her to blink a few times in shock. "Wait, What? No!" She grabbed at her arm as she got up to leave. Failing in stopping her Carol returned to her drink and head her head. "Oh hell. Don't be a freak please!"

She was listening into the conversation and to her relief it went fine. The man was mostly unsure why Margaret was suddenly sitting at his table. She over heard his name was Vern and he was passing through the town. Not planning on staying long. About that point she tuned them out and went to fidgeting again.

Carol absently scratched at the underside of the counter. It was strangely comforting to run her fingernails across it. As she waited for Margaret to return and then to leave she was digging with both hands. Her much stronger and sharper nails were unknowingly cutting it up badly. That odd rumbling returned to her chest as she relaxed.

She didn't notice Margaret returning to her side. She jumped when her cousins hand rested on her shoulder. "Ah! *cough* w-what?"

"Hey I'm sorry but I'm suddenly not feeling well. Could we get home?" She said weakly. She was drooping a little and holding her stomach with her other hand.

Carol nearly immediately grabbed her to keep her from falling. "Marg? Oh you look terrible. Come on let's go," she told her as oddly protective feelings welled in her. "If someone roofied her I'll claw their eyes out, I mean I'll bite their throats out for hurting my pride sister," she thought helping her out to the car. "I mean... what's going on with my thoughts today?"

She tried to not focus on it or the impending headache and hangover from the gin. She hadn't noticed drinking that much but damn was it messing with her. As Margaret was incapacitated at the moment she was carrying her with an arm under the woman's shoulders. "Damn now I wish we'd moved the car closer," she growled realizing how far she'd have to carry her cousin.

Her eyes stung and she covered them with a hand. "Aaahh damn, that stings," she yelped. When she removed her hand, she could swear everything was much brighter. Carol momentarily forgot about her charge and looked around in wonderment.

When she eventually realized that Margaret was heavy and didn't want to stand forever holding her up she continued. When they were about 30 yards from the car she started heard weird heavy breathing behind her. She took a deep breath and spun around yelling, "Back off frea...."

Behind her wasn't a human, it was a towering creature that resembled a dog or wolf. Its legs or even arms were extremely long and its head was twitching madly. "Young Ccccatss, die!" It said almost screaming it out.

Carol hissed bearing her teeth. A millisecond later she picked up Margaret in her arms with strength she didn't know she had and started dead sprinting towards her car. She could hear it right behind her crashing and snapping at her coat.

As she neared the car she realized Margaret had the keys. She turned and backed into the car in a panic still holding her cousin. The monster was staring down at her, she could swear it was laughing.

Right as it was about to swing a clawed hand down a gunshot rang out. Carol wasn't sure what happened in the few seconds after that because she dropped down on top of Margaret to protect her.

When she finally opened her eyes the thing was gone. She got up slowly and helped Margaret up. She fumbled for the keys out of her pocket and as quickly as she could, her cousin was secured in the back seat.

She paused to give the woman a nuzzle. It struck her as a good thing to do for a hurt family member. She closed the door and turned directly into the man from the bar. Specifically into his chest with a thump. "Ah back off!" She yelped.

"Hey, hey! Calm down you're not in danger now. It's gone... not dead unfortunately," he said and raised his arms to show he wasn't a threat.

The gun powder smell was stronger than ever now and he had a large rifle slung across his back. "What was that? Who are you? And just what the hell?!" She yelled and wrenched open the drivers side door.

He moved to allow her space. "Listen just go home and relax. Don't worry about what it was. They very rarely attack anyone so I don't know what it wanted with you two," he said.

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At that time she didn't want to ask any questions. She jumped in and started the car. She watched him walk off as she took off herself. Later back at her apartment she checked on Margaret in the back seat.

She pet the woman's head and she woke up. "Oh Carol? What's going on? I had a nice nap," she said as she was helped out.

Carol sighed in frustration and just got her inside. She kicked the door shut with her foot and set Margaret on her couch. As Carol went to stand up her cousin pulled her down into a hug, "ah watch it marg!" She yelped.

"Thanks for sharing your evening with me. I had fun Carol," she said and gave her an odd little nuzzle against her shoulder.

Carol couldn't stay mad and uncomfortably strong urge to groom her hair was growing in her mind. "You'rrre OK, marg," she said with a new purry inflection.

As she was distracted by how nice the hug felt she accidentally licked at Margaret's hair. Her tongue was now suited to ripping meat and brushing fur so it was like a big brush. She quickly realized what was happening and recoiled. Spitting frantically and tearing away from Margaret.

Margaret giggled and asked, "awww can't you keep brushing me? It felt... nice."

Carol held her hands over her mouth. She couldn't believe that had happened and she wanted to hide. Leaving her cousin to sleep she sprinted to her bed room and closed the door. She slid down the door to the floor holding her arms in worry.

"What's happening? I'm going insane right?" she said and rubbed her head and ears.

She quickly changed from her clothes into something comfortable for bed. It felt nerve wracking to take off the nicer clothes but she couldn't decide why. She set them apart from everything else for later. "It's OK... it's just a set of stockings and shoes. I'm OK," she repeated to herself a few times before jumping into her bed. She passed out in record time from her boozy evening.

Part Two: The Dentist

Carol woke up to her alarm going off like she was going to work. She turned it off and growled a little to herself. "5:00 AM? No... No way am I getting up right now." Still the strange nagging urge to get dressed was bugging her. "The stockings? No I don't need to get dressed this early." She rolled on her belly and stretched her whole body. A chirp came from her as she playfully grabbed her spare pillow to kneed at it.

"Sharpen my claws, yeah I should keep them sharpened," she muttered happily. She was drifting off to sleep again and nuzzling her pillow. This relaxing silly moment was unfortunately interrupted by a call ringing on her phone. "Wha? Oh it's mom," she said softly and quit enjoying her pillow struggle without another thought.

"Hey, mom. It's really early, what are you calling about?" she asked as she answered the call.

"Oh good you're home safe. Uh, I was trying to make sure you got home safe because you never called last night. I just got a little worried for you and Margaret," her mother told her.

Carol set upright in bed and while rubbing the fog from her eyes replied, "Yeah... Oh I should check on her. I think she went to sleep on my couch."

"As long as she's alright. Did... Did you have anything strange happen last night? To either of you."

Carol tried to remember the night but the booze must have been harsher than she imagined because most of it was a blank. "Ah, we had drinks some where afterward. I honestly can't remember much. I only had one gin and tonic too. I wasn't ever that much of a lightweight," she admitted only to be greeted by a long pause from her mother. "Mom?"

"I told Margaret to not let you drink anything or her either. That girl!" her mother grumbled.

"Mom what? Why wouldn't we have some drinks if we wanted? You know we aren't lushes," she asked feeling confused about the instructions. "Frankly I don't think I would have listened even if she told me."

Her mother ignored her question and continued to a new topic. "You're sure you didn't see anything weird last night?" she asked in the usual knowing tone which unnerved Carol.

"Mom I said I don't remember much. If you know something that I don't just say so," she replied feeling a little uncomfortable with the strange comments.

Her mother paused for a while and then said, "Honey... I want you and your cousin to come up to your uncles farm for a few weeks. His boys and your brother can be there too and I..."

"Mom! I'm fine and besides I can't miss weeks of work. What is going on? What do all the boys need to be around my cousin and me?" she said as loud as she could without bothering Margaret.

"I've just been worried about you. Now with everything going on I just want to make sure you're safe," she replied.

This satisfied Carol enough to let it go. "I'll be OK. I'm not going to vanish mom I promise."

Her mother sighed and decided to let her go, "Alright. But wear your stockings sweetie," she said.

Carol suddenly felt anxious again. "Wh-why? What's so important about them?" she asked. A sudden nuzzling fit came upon her.

"Just wear them sweetie, Love you!" she said.

"I love *purrrr* you too! *chirp*" she replied as a lot of little sounds escaped her lips.

She couldn't have seen it but her mother was smiling after hearing her daughter chirping. "I'll shower. Yes! Get cleaned up and dressed. *purr* so nice to be warm and comfortable."

Wandering out to her bathroom she quickly discovered the door was locked and the shower running. A moment of panic hit her but then remembered her cousin. "She better not use all the hot water," she said growling a little.

After a few minutes Carol gave up on standing there. She went to the couch where her cousin made herself at home to sit. She glanced to a pillow that had been sliced up. "What! Oh come on," she said picking it up and grumbling at the stuffing leaking out.

"My stuff getting torn up and my shower delayed for who knows how long. Maybe it's better to stay single after all," was all she could think.

Eventually Margaret emerged from the bathroom and smiled at Carol who just showed her the pillow in frustration. Her cousin just angled her head while looking back and forth between the pillow and Carol.

"What happened to that?" She asked as she continued drying her hair with a second towel.

Carol threw her arms up. "You tell me? You slept on it and now it's ripped up."

"I... I don't know. Looks like cat claws did it actually. Couldn't be me. You know I wouldn't lie about doing it. I will admit I don't remember much about last night," she replied anxiously.

Carol gave up trying to ask. She tossed the pillow back where she found it took her turn in the bathroom without saying anything else to Margaret. Fortunately there was hot water left, she forgot that Margaret liked colder showers for some inhuman reason.

She preferred short hot ones so was out a lot faster. She was feeling a strange clawing unease without the comforting warmth of her clothes. At the same time all sorts of alarm bells were ringing about them. She attempted to rationally think about it but she couldn't find a good answer about any of it.

Back in her room she gave up and just got dressed again. Each time she slipped them back on they were fresh as new again. "The no water or stains from last night? That's neat," she said. After getting them back on the clawing feeling calmed and faded.

Exiting her room the smell of meat cooking came to her along side the sound of sizzling. "Oh is Margaret actually cooking? The world must be ending." She couldn't help but begin salivating.

As she entered the kitchen her cousin waved at her cheerfully. "Hi Carol! So as thanks for letting me crash here I'm making some food. The coffee is brewing too," she announced.

Carol was happy to see some sausages and ham frying but felt a little confused. "Thanks a lot actually. But uh, weren't you trying vegetarianism?"

"Yes... OK listen I've been off meat for a year now but... I can't handle the vegan diet right now. I woke up dying for some breakfast meat," she said cringing in embarrassment for once after turning to look at Carol. "Please don't tell anyone!"

Carol sat down and had to laugh at the whole thing. "I don't have one to tell that to that would get it anyway," she said. "Besides I've been feeling the same way honestly."

"I've got a dentist appointment later today so I'll be gone a while after we eat." Carol said getting up because the coffee finished. She got out a few cups and the cream.

"OK I can head back home soon too. I think I drank too much," she replied and laughed. She turned the meat one final time before declaring it finished. In a flash she dished up her portion and got her coffee. Carol followed at a leisurely pace.

In between bites her cousin asked, "Hey... does your... tongue feel... weird?"

Carol froze mid chew, Margaret was nearly licking her ham to death. Rapidly ripping bits off with her tongue. Carol moved hers around in her mouth and nodded slowly. "Y-yeah... but I'm sure it's nothing... right?"

"Yeah probably. Oh wow I don't think I can go back to vegetarian again now," Marg said and laughed.

Carol tried to lick at her ham too. Sure enough it just ripped up nicely and the flavor felt extra strong from it. "Wow mmmnn! That's really good actually," she blurted out. The oddness but pleasantness of it caused them to laugh at each other.

"I can't believe it only took one drink last night. If it was that bad why don't I feel hung over?" Carol questioned. She had finished her meal and was sipping her coffee.

Margaret shrugged as she wasn't that interested in asking questions about the night. "I say count it as a blessing and let it go," she eventually answered.

Carol sighed and let it go. It was pretty clear her cousin wasn't interested. After they got the dishes taken care of Margaret took off for her house. Leaving Carol alone to relax before her appointment.

She took some time to go make sure she looked good enough to go out. She applied her usual lipstick and nodded in approval. "Yeah I'm OK. Ears are still itching though," she muttered turning her head to look. She was disturbed to find a dusting of peach fuzz down the back of her both ears.

It continued down the back of her neck as well. As she frantically felt around her eyes were drawn to the patches now growing on the back of her hands. A very fine fuzz, only someone familiar with her hands could have even noticed its presence.

"I gotta shave! What on earth is this happening? Everything is so weird since that night!" She yelled. Her hands slammed against the wall and her nails dug into to plaster. She recoiled and stared fearfully at the claw like nails she'd developed.

"There goes my security deposit... Oh what on earth? Is that really my first thought? I need to figure out what happened last night. I'm sure it's connected!"

She looked at the time and jumped. "Aaa! I'll be late!" She grabbed a large winter hat to cover her ears and a set of light gloves for her hands. She ran out to her car making a great racket from her heels on the metal staircase.

Her hands were rushing to unlock her car as she nervously licked her lips. Once in the car she quickly was on her way. The journey went smoothly enough, other than a sudden angry hiss at a driver who cut her off. She slapped a hand over her mouth in shock at herself.

"I need to hold it together. I think it's getting worse."

She pulled into the dentist parking lot and sat staring forward for a while. "OK... just going to hold myself together. I'm OK, wear my hat and my gloves. I'm OK, and it'll be no problem," she repeated it to herself a few times.

She summoned her best face and walked in. Beyond the usual waiting period she found nothing to fret about. Within a few minutes she was called back and sat down in the office. She liked it mostly because they had a large window to look at the nearby gardens. Although the slush and snow of December was covering everything.

She did her best to engage with the customary small talk. Not that she could focus well on it or anything else. "One step at a time. Keep calm nothing weird will happen. Just get your check up done," she thought trying to relax. Then the new fuzz down her back collectively stood on end ruining any hopes of calming.

"Let's get your X-rays completed," the technician said as she prepped the over hanging machine, laid out tools, and grabbed the lead cover for Carol's body.

Carol growled quietly as she prepped the in mouth part of the X-ray process. She hated it and hated things in her mouth. As the lady brought it to her mouth she fought against everything in her to not bare fangs and throw a spitting hissing fit. It was so difficult it was causing her to panic.

She held it together and the back rows of X-rays were all normal. She was just beginning to feel better when after all the front X-rays were done the technician was staring in shock at the images. "Ma'am? Have you noticed any teeth changes?"

She flicked between today's and last years X-rays. "Your Canines have nearly doubled in length! I... I need to get the doctor,"

She took off fast and Carol tried to grab her to stop more attention being attracted to her. It was too late however, and she held her arms quivering. "Oh no. Something is really changing. I'm changing!" She said frantically.

The doctor was interested in what his technician was telling him, so he had to go see for himself. He tried to small talk Carol but quickly saw she was agitated and frightened. He removed his glasses as he looked at the images as well. "Miss, I want to see your teeth. I'm thinking it's just a strange technical error. Maybe bad X-rays today or even last time."

She nodded and allowed him to inspect her. She quickly saw his eyes open wide and he felt around with his tools and then started prodding at her tongue. "Hey, I know this isn't usual but can you take some notes?" He said to the technician.

She nodded and he began dictating, "Extreme tooth growth post eruption. Four primary canines all doubled in length and sharpness. Tongue... is barbed? I can't rule out cancer there but it's extremely localized and developed."

Poor Carol by this point was nearly a panic attack and then she saw the wolf beast staring at her through the window. Her head hurt to remember the prior night but it was clear it remembered her. As a Boney disfigured hand of its touched the glass, her body reacted to protect her. Her fingernails erupted out of her gloves like claws, and her fuzz stood upright.

The doctor yelped at the display and the technician fainted after seeing the beast at the window. Carol jumped to a crouch in the chair and leaped away and out the front door as fast as she could.

In blind panic she slammed directly into someone outside the dentist office. He buckled backwards and she landed on top of him. In the tumble she closed her eyes and yelped. Next thing she knew she was looking directly into the eyes of the odd man from the bar. "You!? What the hell is going on that I run into you again?"

"Uh, yep. If you let me up we can talk if that's what you're wanting," he replied.

She groaned in pain as she got off him. "I'm sorry I ran into you," was what she said while getting him back on his feet.

"So you're back where that is again. That's twice you're in the vicinity of a wolfenshifter," he said and brushed snow and slush off her jacket.

She looked back at the office and decided she wanted to get away from it before asking anything. "Here get in my car I'll drive us somewhere safer." She herded him to the passenger side much to his amusement.

"Probably a good idea, we need to chat," he replied.

She jumped in and took off as they heard an unnaturally loud howling sound. Again she frizzed up and nearly clawed gashes into her steering wheel. "Run go run! Where's my pride? Get to them," echoed in her head but she stamped the odd thoughts down.

"My name's Vern by the way. Hell it's on the roof of the place watching us. I have never seen one of these damn things so brazen, it's broad daylight and it's not even trying to hide," he said as he craned around to watch it. One hand going to the concealed holster in his jacket.

Carol held off on saying anything until she reached a considerable distance from the creature. She pulled into a coffee shop and asked, "Let me buy you a coffee. Then I want to talk to you," she said and got out.

Vern followed casually noting her jumpiness but assumed it was her repeated run ins with the predator. They ordered some coffee Carol got her usual fancy Americano, Vern got a black coffee no frills.

He selected an isolated table on the second floor interior balcony. He sat with his back to the wall looking out over the whole building and looked expectantly at Carol. "So, first date and you're paying?" was his opener.

"Ugh, OK what the hell were you saying that thing was?" She asked ignoring his comment.

"A wolfenshifter. Not a werewolf before you ask. Can't infect you, not that it would usually do anything other than usually avoid human interaction," he replied.

"But it's here. In the city? Not avoiding anything at this point." She sipped at her coffee, she wished it had more heavy cream.

"It's looking for something, or someone," he replied and motioned to her with a point.

"Why would it want me? I'm just an office worker!" She said louder than before.

He motioned for her to quiet down. "That's what I want to find out. There's a lot of I guess you could say special things out there. This is just one of them."

"Can we make it stop? Or someone talk with it?" She asked but knew that wasn't likely on any level.

"No, they don't talk except for very rare occasions. Just eat... and kill for sport."

She drummed the table with her long nails. "But it did talk. That night? Yeah, said something, it's all a blur."

He stopped mid sip of coffee and just stared at her. "Are you sure?" He leaned forward towards her with an arms crossed on the table. "What. Did. It. Say?"

She focused trying to remember it. "Something about you die? Or cats? It was garbled and when it caught up to us it was laughing. No joke some inane giggle," she replied shivering and looking down.

"Get out of town. Visit some family. Just don't hang around here. Oh and if that family owns large caliber rifles even better," he said getting up.

Sensing he wasn't planning on explaining why he was instructing this she said, "You're not leaving until I get more information."

"I'll be available. I'll leave my number," he tried to offer.

She stood up and blocked his path. A low growling was rumbling in her and she said, "I'm not taking no for an answer. I've been trying to get somebody to explain what's going on lately and not even my family is helping right now. So you're the man with the answers and I'll be taking them NOW!"

She was surprised at herself for the forceful approach. He scowled at her for a moment before laughing a little. She fully expected him to blow her off but instead he gave her a playful finger waggle. "I like you... hotblooded lady. Alright you want to know more? One short drive to my place and I'll tell you."

She was relieved to hear he'd tell her more. "Alright. That's all I want. To know what mess I've stepped into," she said as they turned to leave.

His place turned out to be a truck with a camper in the bed. She parked near it and they got out. He unlocked the doors three locks with three keys. In a special order she noted as well. "So what do you do Mr. Drifter?" She asked as they climbed inside.

"Hunt, things," he replied and took a seat on the flip down bed.

She carefully sat on a chair crossing her legs and fixed her skirt. "No much for flowery language? No poetry about killing monsters?"

He laughed and smiled at her, "Nope. So you want to know more about these things? Not just the wolves right? Other creatures too?"

"Yes, you said they don't infect so do they reproduce?" She asked.

"Yeah, like any other mammals. They can appear human but that's extremely rare," he answered. He pulled a book down from a shelf and thumbed through it a few pages.

"What's worse is some of these things don't even realize they're not human until some time in their adulthood."

Carol looked anxiously at her fingers and felt around her mouth with her tongue. "What does that mean exactly?"

He picked a page showing an odd human animal hybrid. "These guys. It's nearly impossible to ID a member of the species prior to that emergence. The uh picture isn't accurate, they don't have every type of animal on them. It's just an umbrella example. Usually just some type of Canine or big damn predator."

Carol shifted uncomfortably, "Soooo... like what's that emergence look like?"

He flipped a few pages, "I'm not sure what your interest in these are. They're not coming after you."

Carol felt her fuzz raise against her shirt. "Oh no, I can't believe I'm considering this. I'm not a dog thing, eugh... Please not."

He continued anyway, "They start to change slowly into their natural forms. Every group does it differently. These reptile guys for example. True to reptile parenting styles or lack there of. They abandon their young to be raised by normal humans. Imagine growing up all normal and then bam! You're a scaly bastard in a few weeks flat."

She sneezed suddenly as her nose broadened slightly. She rubbed at it as she asked, "This is like a second puberty? But from hell. As if the first wasn't bad enough."

"Pretty much. Oh that reminds me, I brought them up because our stalker's species really hates a few of these guys subtypes. I don't have a lot of experience with the hybrids. They tend to stick to themselves and I don't actively look for fights with neutral parties. So I need to do more research into them later."

She nodded and went to stand up. She was scared of him noticing something on her if she stayed too much longer. "uh, could I borrow that book? I promise I'll bring it back!"

"Leaving already?" He looked at the book and thought for a moment. "Ah sure. I've read it plenty of times anyhow."

He handed it to her and she was worried with how he was examining her hands. She quickly grabbed it and did her best to nonchalantly hide her strange features. "Yep, uh lots of things to do and all that," she said cheerfully to try and throw him off.

"OK, but keep safe. You'll see me around, I've got a hunch Mr. Bitey is sticking around you. I'm planning on finding out why. Also killing it, maybe in a different order but we'll see," he replied and stood in the door way watching her leave.

"I still have a job to go to. It won't follow me there will it?" she asked hoping for an answer she knew she wouldn't get.

He shook his head and simply asked again, "Sure you can't skip town?"

Carol just had to hang her head as she went to her car. Then she stood up straight and replied, "No. If it wants a fight, then I'll give it a fight. Somehow..." He claw-like nails extended again from her gloves in response.

It wasn't seen by her because she was getting in her car but Vern smiled at that. "Yeah," he laughed and watched her drive off. "Alright, Carol. Damn it, now I need to teach her how to shoot."

She went directly home scanning around for anything following her. She didn't see much of note but knew she wasn't sure what to look for. She rushed inside her warm house and locked her door as if the devil himself was on her heels.

She got her warm coat and hat off then stared at her gloves, "Shredded. Awwwww these were my favorites. I need to lay down or something," She mumbled to herself.

Once she reached her couch it was instant light out. About an hour later she woke up curled in a circle. She yawned large enough to show all her newly massive teeth and tongue. "Feels so warm in here," she mumbled to herself and unconsciously groomed the fuzz on the backs of her hands. The naps in the middle of the day were completely out of her character. She couldn't deny how relaxing they were though. They accidentally added to her dread of going back to work, she knew she wouldn't be able to have them there.

She shook her head and looked up at the ceiling. "Stop that, ughhh so weird. I shouldn't be licking the... Fur?" she mumble. With a glance at her phone's clock she saw it was only 1:00 PM. Resigning her self to an uncomfortable long lonely day she decided to call her mother again. Across three separate attempts she first got no answer then after that a fast repeating busy signal. Her mother's worry about getting her to her uncle's farm raised her anxiety about it.

"OK, that's it I'm driving out there. Work tomorrow be damned at this point, if it's actually hereditary then I want some answers," she said defiantly and stood up. A low rumbling growl was echoing from her chest as she collected her stuff again. She grumbled at the gloves but took them anyway.

"No way am I going to ruin a different pair now. I'll just use my torn ones," she said shaking her head. Then she collected her other warm clothing again.

After getting outside and locking her door she felt watched again. Then for the first time since that prior night she smelled something frightening. Wet dog mixed with what she somehow knew as hatred.

It made her shiver and she rushed to her car again. "It's back! No, no, no, why now?"

Jumping into her car she turned the engine on in one swift motion. A lingering smell reminded her of Margaret and as she drove off she realized. "Oh no! What if she's changing too? She was

acting different and more... Yeah she's changing," she said softly trying to get on the road from her apartment.

As she drove to the main route to her uncle's farm she took note of increased police presence around the town. The traffic was very low even for a Sunday afternoon. "Great is there some terrible thing I've missed a news report on?" she asked herself. Then while stuck at the usual traffic light disaster she always dreaded, a terrible itching feeling began on her cheeks. She rubbed at them as little fine but stiff fibers showed up. "Whiskers?! How do I hide those?" she yelled as she looked at the fledgling developments in her rear view mirror. Then smacked her steering wheel a couple of times.

The drive was cut short abruptly at the suspension bridge out of town. A few police cars were parked blocking the road and she could see work crews all over the bridge. Carol stared at the damage she could see, a surprising amount of cables were broken or cut off. One of the police officers at the site approached her car and she rolled down her window. "Listen ma'am. You're going to have to find another route to where ever you're headed. Bridge is closed to all traffic for emergency repairs." the police woman told her.

Carol nodded and thanked her. After turning around and getting back on the road she pulled into a nearby lunch spot with a good view of the bridge. She got a seat near a window and sat to watch the men working. "Wow, well there goes the best route. That leaves the awful mountain pass and I am not setup to brave that much snow."

The waiter approached her and handed her a menu. "Hello, do you want to hear about our soup of the day?" he asked.

While she looked over the menu she nodded and said, "Y-yeah, is it something with fish? Or maybe some other meat?"

He launched into a typical sale about a specially prepared broccoli soup with imported cheddar and the finest onions. She normally would have found the idea interesting but now it was much less enticing than the steak she was eyeing on the menu. She humored him and let the waiter finish, then promptly ordered the t-bone steak. He seemed a little disappointed by her choice but she didn't see why it mattered to him. At first she thought about getting an alcoholic drink but considering how badly the last one effected her she decided against it. She needed to stay sober and figure out a plan.

For a while she just watched the bridge being worked on a little more then she began looking at the mountain pass weather on her phone. As usual most of the highway camera's weren't working but what she could see was snowed up. Frustrated she began running her fingers across the table accidentally ripping up the cloth. "Could one thing in my life be easy? Hard enough living normally but now I need to hide my own face from prying eyes." she grumbled.

She remembered her cousin while waiting for her order. "Damn, I need to call Margaret," she said and pulled her phone back out. It took a few rings and she was quickly worried that something might have happened to her, fortunately Margaret answered unlike her mother.

"Marg! Hey are you OK?" she asked expecting some horrible thing to have happened.

Her cousin yawned and replied, "Oh yeah. I've been sleeping this whole time actually."

In some way Carol was wishing Margaret wasn't so lucky to avoid awful things like her dentist trip. The whole event caused her to feel mortified but she pushed past it for more important things. "Listen we need to talk. Can you meet me at my place again or I can swing by yours?"

"Sure, we have to make more time together like this. It's a really fun way to pass the time," was the reply from Margaret.

"Please no," were Carol's thoughts on that idea. She stayed focused in her reply, "OK, Marg. I don't want to say too much but I think something is happening to us and I need your help. I can't reach my mom and you're the only relative that lives in town."

"I have been feeling a little different. I need to shave my legs or something, never felt so damn fuzzy before," she replied. Carol heard her moving from her bed.

Then suddenly her ear was slammed by a loud scream from her cousin. Carol was so startled she almost threw her phone and had a moment of juggling it. "What? What's going on, Marg?" she asked fearing the worst. Had one of those things gotten to her?

Finally before too long Margaret got back on the phone and said, "my eye color changed! Oh and what's worse is my skirt got torn last night somehow!"

Carol didn't know how to respond, not so much the eye color part but that she was more worried about a tear. She did realize she hadn't checked on her eyes and they might have done the same.

"I uh, OK listen. I'm trying to find out what's going on with these... changes. I'll come by and get you," she said and felt her stomach growl, "after I eat. I swear I feel like a starving teenager again."

"Yeah OK. Yikes, my legs itch. My ears too," Margaret replied.

"Just stay home until I get there. I'll try and be fast," Carol instructed, knowing she would probably be ignored.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going to get some lunch. See you soon!" She replied cheerfully.

"Stay put!" She said as loud as she dared but her cousin was already gone.

"She's not going to stay there. Damn it," she muttered.

Fortunately, by then her meal was brought out to her. It was a larger steak than she'd ever eaten before but now she was uncomfortably hungry. She ate fast and found herself greedily licking the extra meat off the t-bone.

It came with a side of potatoes and asparagus. She sniffed at it curiously but decided it wasn't worth touching. "Smells awful. I'm not that hungry," she thought and grinned. Her expression turned to fear as in her peripheral vision she watched her whiskers go from little stubs to two inches long.

With a hand over her face she asked for the bill so she could get some privacy. "I need to find a scarf... anything to cover my face."

As she left the restaurant a man was trying to rush in to get out of the cold. They bumped into each other and he shoved her backwards in frustration. "Watch it lady!"

Carol snarled at him and bared her teeth. Her upper lip formed into an arch like shape as well. Making her face increasingly less human looking. He jerked back and smacked his head on the door frame. She broke away from him and ran to her car. Not without giving him a passing hiss. She knew she needed to control it but it felt good to startle the idiot.

Back in the car she looked in the mirror and checked her eyes, "Bright purple? What's maybe it can be stopped or reversed? Where's my scissors?" She was muttering to herself. Digging through her glove box then her center console.

She found her old pair of scissors and paused to look at herself. "I think it's getting so much worse. I won't be able to go out soon. Hell, my lip? It's a cats? Fine it's not much but I need to cut these whiskers off."

She watched in the mirror as the blades got close to them. A deep sick feeling overtook her as she tried to just squeeze the handle together. A worried whiny growl came from her chest and she tossed the scissors across her car. "I can't! I can't do that!" She yelled and sunk into her seat. "It was like I was about to cut off my finger."

Resigned to her appearance she gave up and started for her cousins place. "I'll have to ask about if she can talk to her folks. Maybe they know something."

Part Three: Homeward Bound

During Carol's drive to her cousin's, she kept seeing flashes of oddities on people. One moment a man rushing down the sidewalk had a fluffy tail the next he was completely normal. A couple who were both loading children in a minivan had rabbit ears. She kept rubbing her eyes or blinking to clear the strange sights.

What seemed to unnerve her the worst was they all were almost panicked. Anyone normal didn't seem to be frightened but each of the people with odd features were rushing about.

"I'm losing it. I have to be losing it right?" She thought as she neared the gate to her cousins community. She parked outside it because of the restrictions on visitor parking.

She dug through her few items she'd left in her car and thankfully found a scarf. After wrapping up her face to conceal her changes she approached the guard at the gate. She wished she had money like Margaret but at the same time knew she'd rather be away from the town.

When she checked in with the gate guard Charles she knocked on his little shack's door. She was shocked when he appeared as a large white bull. "Good morning Carol. Here to see Margaret? She called to make sure you got let in." He said. He removed his hat with a hoof like hand.

She stared at him frozen at the sight. Luckily her scarf covered her gaping mouth. "Y-yeah... thanks Charles," she said weakly.

He opened the gate for her and she stumbled in but couldn't stop looking at him. He was huge, much larger than she'd ever remembered him.

He watched her continually looking around nervously. "Ms. Carol? Are you alright?" He asked out of concern.

"Yeah! Totally great!" She replied as she stumbled over her own feet. She tried to say it convincingly but an uncomfortable warble accompanied it.

She quickened her pace and hide her face as best she could. She climbed up the stairs to the second floor apartment her cousin lived in. Her scarf fell down her face a little and her whiskers plus the darkened nose were visible. As she was barely able to hold off a panic attack with everything going on she didn't notice.

After Reaching Margaret's door she knocked loudly and looked around. No one was in the hallway so she hoped she wouldn't be looked at. A little "hey," came from beside her.

She looked down at a little girl who was maybe four years old. The child was staring at her face with the most innocent smile. Carol froze up and didn't hear her cousin coming to open her door.

The little girl had wandered off from her mother as they exited their apartment. "Kitty!" She said happily and smile broadly.

Carol's mouth was hanging open in shock. Her still growing ears nearly lifted off her hat as they raised in shock. She slammed into the door as Margaret opened it, the two of them tumbled inside and Carol slammed the door.

Carol slumped down and Leaned back against the door. Margaret regained her footing and yelled, "Hey, be more careful will you?" She then realized Carol was frozen in a far off gaze.

"Hey, what's the matter Carol?" She asked and knelt down next to her. She didn't know what to do for her cousin in that moment so she just held her hands.

Carol took a deep breath and spontaneously left out a loud scream. Margaret was startled and recoiled a little. Carol eventually said, "I'm turning into a cat." She grabbed Margaret's upper arms. "I'm turning into a cat and I can't stop it! I just want to be normal again! You to be normal again too!"

Margaret gave her a hug. "Shh shhh. I'm OK it's just a little weird I know but we'll find our family and get answers OK?" She offered trying to calm Carol and stop her panic.

"It's more than a little weird. Don't you worry about what's happening to us? I mean your ears are nearly full big cat ears!" Carol asked as small tears welled in her eyes.

"I am worried and I have been worried. And... are my ears cute?" She asked and felt for them.

Carol managed a laugh. "Yeah, I guess they are. Calico cat colored even," she replied and hugged her cousin.

"Hey Carol I know you. You think about plans better than I do. You have an idea what's happening don't you?" Margaret said and started helping Carol up.

"I... I think I have some idea. I talked to someone who knew more about this stuff. I'm worried about sharing what's happening to us with him though," she told Margaret.

Margaret looked a little worried. "Why? Is he untrustworthy? If so why do we believe what else he told you?" She asked.

Carol shook her head. "No, not like that. He's a hunter of strange things I guess. I think he's told me the truth but what if he sees us as things to be hunted?" She continued.

Margaret shuttered and quickly grabbed her coat and a similar disguise as Carol's for her face. "OK if that's the damn risk we should go... if you are able to," she said and hugged her cousin tightly.

"Yeah. I can go now," she said still looking pale and drained. Then thinking of what they needed to do corrected herself. "You need to pack a bag. Just in case we are gone a little while longer than is preferred."

Her cousin thought for a bit and asked, "This may be a stupid question but I guess you don't want me to just pack my finer clothes?"

Carol took a deep breath and nodded. "Jeans, boots, gloves, think if you're stuck on a frozen road in the pass because that's our only choice," she instructed hoping her cousin would catch on.

Margaret accepted this and went to her room to collect her things. Carol thought about resting then remembered she would get distracted if she didn't keep on her. It surprised Carol that Marg was taking this a little more seriously than most things. She even only got distracted by her friends on her phone six times.

After Margaret packed enough clothing to satisfy Carol, she had to help Carol get wrapped up to hide her face again. "I'm scared about my mother. Why is she not answering? Have you tried your parents?" Carol asked.

Margaret shook her head. "My folks are somewhere in Europe. Up on a mountain so there's no reaching them," she answered to Carol's dismay.

"Fine... let's get going I guess. Hell's bells," she said in frustration.

It was finally beginning to get later in the afternoon. Around 4 PM and the sun was beginning to go down, along with temperatures. Margaret followed Carol to her car and saw Charles at the gate. She'd begun to see what Carol had been so worried about. "Charles? This might be a really odd question... are you a bull?" She asked nervously.

Carol took a minor comfort in the fact Margaret had seen Charles as the same bull person. He smiled at them both as best a bull could. He then said, "Why yes. Are you two both maturing? Your parents must be so proud of you."

He offered to shake their hands and while Margaret was excited to, Carol did so carefully. She wondered if he could tell them more, "I, well my mother isn't around and I can't reach her. Maybe it's a long shot but is there something happening we don't know? I've seen some other people like you and they're all scared looking."

He played with his hands a little bit. "Wait. You're not with your clan? My goodness surely someone explained your situation to you?" He asked and looked back and forth at them.

They both shook their heads. Carol exposed her changing face to be more direct to him. "They were out of town. The Bridge is screwed so we are trapped here. I never got told anything about this. Margaret either."

"I'm so sorry for you. I understand it must have been a terrible experience for you both. They got you the retainers I see though. You will be OK once you get to them," he said sorrowfully.

Margaret tilted her head a little bit. "Uhhh, a retainer? Mind explaining what that is?"

"Well it assists in our kinds maturation. Your stockings, though everyone usually gets their own suited to their personality and traits," he replied.

"Wait wait," Carol said and made a slow down motion with her hands. "These things are transforming us? If we take them off would it pause?"

He immediately replied, "No, no! Don't take those off unless you are sleeping. They reduce the rate you will change. It's a... calming agent designed to make you adjust slowly rather than explode into a panicked mess of fur and rage."

"Well, that would have been useful to know," she replied. Carol was glad she didn't go feral or something worse. She wasn't even sure if that was possible but anything could be. "But back to my other question. What's making everyone nervous?"

He shuffled his hooves and sighed. His reply was, "Word is some really bad stuff is coming. I don't know exactly but with hunters around? It's not looking good for humanity or us hybrids."

"Maybe we should accelerate finding our pride... I mean clan... no damn it family!" She said feeling embarrassed.

"Yes, go soon. I know where you're going because that farm has a lot of the felines there. You'll need your clans guiding hands in this," he replied and finally opened the gate for them.

"Margaret was confused. "You knew where we were going? Oh never mind, Carol let's go before anything else happens."

Carol agreed and they said their goodbyes. Loaded Margaret's bag into the trunk. Back in their car they took off quickly for Carol's place. Neither saw Vern trying to chase them down as they drove off. He paused by Charles' booth to catch his breath.

They were back at Carol's apartment rather quickly. Both noticed the traffic load today was focused on getting out of the town. "OK, so quick stop to get somethings and we start for the farm?" Carol asked. Mostly to make sure Margaret hadn't randomly needed to go somewhere else.

"Yeah sounds good. Oh wow! Carol my BFF is getting married!" she said then immediately got lost in her phone again.

Carol let out a low growl and said, "Great why don't you video call them?" in a sarcastic tone.

Margaret didn't get what she was getting at and got extra excited. "Ooooo! Here you and me can congratulate her!" she yelled and tried to squeeze up to Carol. She was just about to start a video call much to Carol horror. She barely managed to swat the phone away to Margaret's confusion.

Carol grabbed her cousin by the shoulders and yelled, "Are you kidding me?! I'm turning into a cat and you're about to expose me and yourself to Nancy?"

Margaret for the first time looked very embarrassed. "Oh... I'm sorry Carol. I get excited about things I know. I'll be focused now I promise," she replied and gave Carol a hug.

Carol immediately felt a little guilty, which she confessed, "I know. Sorry too, I'm just scared and I don't want either you or me to get hurt because of this."

Marg nodded and they climbed out of the car and started for her second floor apartment. Margaret tried to keep things calm by asking, "Do you know even as a cat you're adorable? I'd say more than I am."

Carol had to laugh a little. "You're always obsessed with looking cute or whatever. Maybe if this is what we are going to be forever you can give me lessons," she replied as she unlocked her door.

Margaret gave her a little playful shove. "Like you need those, goofball," she said happily.

Carol was getting embarrassed by the line of conversation. She quickly switched it to a more task oriented one. She collected a few days worth of more work related clothes. She paused at a few of them and asked, "Margaret? Even in this weather that we've been wearing these stockings in. I have not be cold at all. Have you noticed that?"

Margaret nodded and suggested, "Are they enchanted?"

Carol felt weird thinking about it and voiced her thoughts, "I mean maybe, sounds silly but with everything else who knows. I guess we shouldn't take them off now either."

Margaret nodded, as she watched Carol pack it made her decide to not try to help. Carol clearly knew where she wanted everything and she wasn't looking for help. Carol completed her bag much faster than she had anyway. Before they were about to leave Margaret remembered to ask about the information she'd found. "Hey, before we go anywhere can you show me what you got told exactly?" she asked.

Carol slapped her forehead and said "Yeah! Sorry I forgot about it, I would have left the book here too!"

Margaret watched Carol rush into the living room to look for something. She asked her, "There's a book? What's it say about us? Or whatever Charles said we were. Hybrids?"

Carol looked at the time, and said, "OK, I think we have enough time to talk. Can I give you a quick overview first?"

Margaret nodded and they sat down together to talk. Carol tried her best to explain whatever she'd gathered about their race or whatever they were. She didn't actually understand it either so it was not an explanation she was proud of. Finalizing the same topics Vern had told her she said, "...And so we are weird animal creatures or God knows what else. If it's confusing I don't understand it well either."

"There's a few rough... OK a lot of weird and unclear parts. Just to confirm you don't think we are turning into those alligator thingies?" Margaret asked feeling worried about that option.

Carol gave her cousin a rare comforting hug and shook her head. "No, lizards don't usually grow fuzz or anything like that. I think it's one of these cat peoples," she said in a sweet comforting tone.

Margaret nodded and looked with her at the possible options. "I prefer that to most options I think. Do you think it's built into me to like that option?" she asked and leaned on Carol.

Carol nodded a little then admitted, "I feel like I like that option most too. It could be built into us to find it appealing like some type of instinct."

"How long until we get big muzzles? Margaret asked excitedly.

Carol shuttered at the prospect. She felt around her face hoping it wouldn't happen but her nose was either getting longer or a big muzzle was finally forming. "I'm scared to think about that," she said then looked at Margaret, "Actually I think you look mostly normal still. Why is all this happening so fast to me?"

Margaret looked at her watch and said, "I hope your mother knows something about all this. Seeing as I can't reach my parents."

Carol stood up and as she turned to talk to Margaret her face suddenly was hammered with pain. She grabbed her jaw and yelped loudly, as her cousin jumped up to comfort her. Margaret stared wide eyed at Carol as her face was forced into a proto-muzzle. As soon as the pain went away Carol asked her, "What are you looking at now?"

Her cousin was unable to say what had happened due to shock. She knew they were changing but hadn't witnessed anything so forceful and bone shaking before then. Carol rushed to the bathroom mirror and stared horrified at her new face. "It's... It's... I'm a cat!" she yelled and grasped at her pushed out jaw and nose.

"It's not so bad! I mean with a little fur you'd be really cute," Margaret tried to offer.

Carol meanwhile was beginning to tear up. "Cute!? Fur!? I don't want either one, I want to be normal so I can go to work!" she said loudly. "How the hell can you be so calm during all this? We are literally losing our humanity!"

Margaret shrugged and looked down at the floor. "I... I don't know. I'm sorry you're upset and I want to help. Maybe I should do the driving for you? Could that help you be calm?"

Carol hugged her cousin tightly. "OK, I guess so. I'm sorry for yelling a lot. I'm just really scared and I've never felt so homesick for my mother's company before."

"Maybe we should go like right now," Margaret suggested. "I mean if you're changing like this and your whiskers are getting longer. Does that mean you don't have long left before you change completely?"

Carol quickly grabbed a few extra winter items, mainly blankets and insulated covers. "I don't know and that is making me scared sick," she replied.

They both covered up as best they could to prevent anyone from seeing their changes and hurried to their car. Carol kept absently licking her lips trying to get her head around the sudden muzzle. In their panic they had forgotten dinner and now she was craving fish again.

A thought entered her mind and she felt uncomfortable suddenly, "Marg? What if I grow a tail? Did the book say they grow tails?" she asked.

Margaret was distracted by hunger as well and took a little extra time to respond. "Uh, I don't remember if it said anything about it at all. Do you not want me to say it would be kinda cute?" she said eventually.

Carol was battling with herself on the subject. "I guess it would be. But I'm not supposed to have a tail!" she said unsure how to feel about it.

"If we are born to change into these creatures then are you sure about that?" Marg asked and placed a hand on Carol's shoulder.

Carol didn't find any comfort in the idea. "I feel abandoned in this. Where's my mom? Where is everyone?" she asked.

Margaret didn't have much to say in reply. "I don't know either. I know if she could she would be right with you. So it worries me."

Carol finally realized they were about to leave town and the last chance for food was getting closer. "Oh sorry, but can we get something to eat from a drive through? I can't go in looking like this," she asked.

"Oh sure, Burger Dude's is right there. Is that OK?" Margaret asked and listened to her stomach growl too.

"Yes, anything really at this point," she replied as they turned into the lot. They had just missed the dinner rush so it was quick to order and get to the window. Carol hid her face as best she could. She was amazed that Margaret just let them see her odd features.

"Hey are you wearing cat makeup or something?" the young man at the window asked as they paid. He leaned on the window sill and looked them over.

Carol felt a fearful anger about being seen like she was and accidentally dropped her scarf to hiss loudly at the man. He jumped back a little but seemed to shake out of it quickly. Margaret was fast to cover for Carol's outburst, "Yeah! We are going to a play. Uh... Cats, but a local production. Don't mind my cousin she's a method actress," she said with the sweetest smile she ever put on.

Carol was horrified at herself and trying to hide as best she could. The worker seemed to calm down and quickly collected their food from the short order cooks. They sat in the parking lot to eat quickly. It was a mostly meat meal for the two of them, as anything else didn't even taste right anymore.

"I'm sorry for embarrassing you. I don't know what came over me," Carol said after they finished.

Margaret shook her head, "Nah, you didn't do anything wrong. You're just a more natural cat than me!" she said smiling.

"Natural cat? I'm not tracking," she replied and tilted her head.

"Like, I mean you are just so natural at being cat like I guess," Margaret replied.

Carol groaned and curled up in her seat. "I don't want to hear that. I'm a woman, not a cat," she said and Margaret dropped the conversation.

As they left the town and watched the lights fade away behind them, Carol asked, "Will you be OK driving in snow?"

Margaret nodded happily and flicked on her high beams. "Oh sure! You should rest some. I mean I don't understand this process any better than you do but I'm betting you are tired from your changes all day," she replied.

Carol let out a sigh. She looked at herself in the passenger mirror. She felt around her developing muzzle and realized now it was like a small cat's face but lacking the fur. She folded the sun visor up and realized she was involuntarily growling.

"Oh Lord! I'm a freak," she said in a defeated tone and covered her face.

"No, you're not!" Margaret said back sharply. "If you talk like that I will turn this car around."

Carol had a small laugh and said, "Shut up, Marg."

Margaret gave her cousin a shake with her free hand and replied, "You and me were born to be like this. At least it seems like that. That also means it's genetic like having blonde or brown hair. So technically speaking if you didn't change like this wouldn't that be unnatural for us?"

Carol felt around her face again, "I don't have to like it," she replied glaring a little.

Her cousin nodded, "No, but tell me. Don't you even a little feel like it's something that's been missing? I've been feeling leading up to this, that I am missing some part of me. Maybe you just need to take a step back and calm down."

Carol frowned at her a little but had to agree, "I... I don't want to be this way. OK, I admit it yes. I suppose you are correct. Maybe I do feel a little more comfortable than I am letting on. I'm just scared to let it happen. Where's that stupid book at?"

She went to digging through her bag. Eventually she found the ragged thing and skimmed through to the hybrids section again.

Margaret glanced at her trying to read and said, "Isn't reading in the dark bad for your eyes?"

Carol shook her head and replied, "No, that's not true. Besides I have night vision now it seems, so it's not that dark."

Marg took a few glances around the darkness outside and smiled. "I didn't notice but that's really cool!" She said happily.

"Eyes on the road, Margaret," Carol instructed. She went back to the book and skimmed through the section again. "There was something about age. Oh here! Most maturations begin on or near the 25th birthday. Well that's weird."

Margaret glanced over and asked, "why's that weird?"

Carol shook her head and looked at Margaret. "How old are you?" She asked.

Her cousin replied, "25. Like it says, so not weird right?"

"Yeah you're 25 that works out. Do you even remember how old I am?" She questioned next.

Margaret didn't answer right away and realized that she didn't remember. "Ugh, not 25?" She said sheepishly.

"No! Seriously, You were at my last birthday. I'm 26, so why is it a year late?" Carol replied filled with indignation.

"Sorry, we haven't been together a lot so I forgot. I didn't mean anything by it," Marg replied.

"I just mean if it's supposed to be at 25 why am I a year late?" Carol said to refocus back on topic.

They were finally entering the pass and the temperature was plummeting outside. Margaret shook her head as they continued driving into the night. "I couldn't tell you. I'm sorry I don't know more than you do," she replied.

"It's alright. Let's just get where we're going and worry about it tomorrow," Carol said and tossed the book into the back seat in frustration. She immediately felt bad because it wasn't her property to damage and worried what Vern would say.

"Damn it. I shouldn't have done that. I don't want to upset Vern," she muttered and fished it out to check on it.

"Vern? Oh yeah the guy you got it from. Weren't you scared he'd hurt us?" Margaret asked confused at her cousin's concern for a possible threat.

"Honestly I doubt it. I over reacted and I now I wonder if he didn't know to begin with. Why else would he be helping me?" Carol asked.

"To find more of us to hunt?" Margaret suggested.

Carol shook her head, "No, I doubt it still. He wasn't threatening to me. I think I would have picked up on it," she replied.

"What did he look like?" Margaret asked. She was hoping to help keep herself awake by talking.

"He's a handso- I mean decent looking man. You spoke with him when we went drinking," Carol said.

Carol blushed a little but it was too dark for anyone to see it. Margaret got the biggest grin and excitedly said, "Ohhhhh! You like him don't you? Like really like him!"

Carol smacked the back of Margaret's head. "Stop it! I'm not trying to find love right now. I've got my hands full with you," she yelled. She desperately wanted her cousin to shut about it.

Margaret however was jumping up and down in her seat. "I'm so happy for you! You're going to be the cutest couple if you're married!" She replied clearly intent on continuing the conversation.

Carol buried her head in her arms to hide. "Stop it! Please just stop it. Even if he's cute and strong, I can't see us being together," she said trying to defuse the excited woman.

It backfired on her, significantly. Margaret spent the next two hours of the drive talking about Carol getting married, first dates, then the worst was children. "I can't wait until children. Or should we call them cubs?"

Carol was covering her face with a spare pillow and lightly punching her face through it. Not causing damage but desperately needing Margaret to not talk about anything else.

Out of nowhere the car died and both of them stopped their fight to stare at the dash. Margaret attempted to start it a few times but it was completely dead, not even the starter would roll over.

"What happened? Did you run out of gas?" Carol asked now feeling scared of being stranded.

Her cousin shook her head. "No way. We had tons and... it's like the battery was fried," was her response.

Carol pulled out her phone but it wouldn't light up. "My phone, it's dead too!" She said under her breath. Margaret pulled over and tried her's as well. It was also dead.

They sat in silence for a few minutes as the cold grew worse slowly without the running car. Eventually Margaret turned to Carol, "Hey, what do we do?" she asked very softly.

Carol sat trying to think, after a few minutes lost in thought she replied, "Honestly? I don't know. I think without our phones and the car acting like a dead battery or something... We can't walk it... We can't go back... I think we have to sleep in the car. Don't open the door so we can conserve some heat."

Margaret nodded slowly and asked, "Are we going to huddle together to conserve warmth?" she asked.

Carol instantly yelled, "NO! The last person I want to be in close contact with is you. If it gets that cold then yes it will have to happen but not until then."

"Maybe the cold will make our fur coats come in," her cousin then suggested after.

"With my luck I'll wake up with a big tail, but it'll be furless still just to screw with me," Carol said grumbling.

Carol dug out the extra blankets she'd packed and gave one to her cousin and wrapped up tightly in the other. As much as she found Margaret frustrating she was at least happy she wasn't alone stranded. Thought she reasoned it was mostly dead weight she had gained. They eventually drifted off to sleep but Carol kept feeling like something was watching them. It made her rest uneasy, and by the early morning she woke up feeling convinced that there was something around them.

She slowly turned her head, to look from her side to Margaret's. It was too fogged in the car for her to see out well. Then her heart nearly jumped from her chest, Margaret was gone. In a pointless attempt to prove otherwise she tossed through the blankets that remained in the drivers seat. Her door was unlocked and so she must have left willingly. Then a yell caused her to slam her head against the roof. "Marg?! Hold on!" she yelled as she barreled out through the drivers door to avoid the snow drift on her side.

She felt out onto the iced road and barely got to her feet again. Just down from her was Margaret and towering over her was a horrid wolf thing like she'd seen in town. Time was frozen for her as a white hot rage exploded from inside her. With her light fur frizzed and her fangs bared, she sprinted at the creature. It didn't have time to react before she leaped onto this back, hissing and spitting as she clawed at its eyes.

Margaret got up as best she could and froze at the sight of the under six foot woman terrorizing the biggest predator she'd ever seen. It bucked her off after she'd already destroyed it's eyes. She was thrown into her cousin and they slid along the road for a way on the black ice. Carol came back to her senses slightly and prevented Margaret from talking by slamming her hands around her mouth. She whispered, "It- it's blind. Don't make a sound,"

It was thrashing around half screaming half howling and throwing blood everywhere from it's clawed out eyes. Carol was listening to her cousin making quiet whimpers. A strong instinct was driving her to protect her no matter what. The same thoughts about her pride sister were echoing in her mind again and again. Satisfied Margaret wasn't going to scream she switched to a tight hug instead as the beast slowly struggled in a random direction. Carol wasn't convinced it couldn't smell them but it wasn't trying to come after them again.

Her fear quickly changed to a different subject when the creatures head spontaneously exploded and a super sonic crack was all they heard. She pushed her cousin down as Margaret burst into tears. "Stay down, maybe they won't shoot us," she said softly and they just waited unsure what to do now.

Heavy boot falls coming up the road following their tire tracks. It only took a few minutes but it felt like hours for them to get right up to them both. This time Carol was frozen too, she couldn't fight someone with a rifle. They stood in front of the two shivering women who had clamped their eyes shut.

Then a familiar voice said to them, "Carol? Oh thank God. Are you OK? You're soaked in blood!"

She opened her eyes and looked up, "Vern!? Oh Vern you're here?!"

Part Four: The Gang's Back Together

Vern and another man she didn't recognize helped the two of them up. She impulsively hugged him, smashing his rifle against his chest and said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

He laughed a little, not in mockery but happy to see her too. "You are not hurt right?" he asked and pulled up her hands to look at. "Wow, you got some monster claws now."

Carol felt a jolt of shame for her weird appearance and tried to hide her face. "Wait, I'm sorry I look like this. It won't stop! I don't want to look like a monster."

Vern's companion smirked at him. He quickly corrected himself and cleaned her face with a cloth, "No no, that's not what I meant. You know a little bit about what you're going through but you still need to get with your pride. Calm down and let us get you there safe. You're not a monster in any way."

She looked around a little and saw he had his camper truck with him. Margaret had calmed down too but both were on edge still. "Before you ask anything we need to get you both to warm up in the camper. Viktor will collect your stuff in a little bit, we need to do a perimeter sweep first," Vern said as he guided the two ladies to the camper.

This was the time Carol first realized she was barefooted. Her shoes had been lost in the mad dash to protect her cousin. "I feel like I lost control, it scares me," she said looking at her blooded hands.

Vern helped them both in the back where it was warm. "No, you protected your family. It's not just natural, it's heroic," he said and handed her a box of sanitary wipes. "But you might want to clean the heroics off yourself." He was smiling as he said it.

"T-thank you, Carol," Margaret said and took a few wipes to clean the blood Carol had gotten on her off.

Carol hugged her cousin tight as Vern left them alone to go meet with his companion. For the first time she willingly gave her cousin a few little grooming licks. "I couldn't let it hurt you. I'll admit I don't get along with you well but you know I'll always protect you," she said. "But what were you doing outside?"

Margaret nervously looked away and then said, "I had to go. Like go, go..."

"Oh, well I guess that can't be helped. Besides I'm not going to be mad with you right now," she said.

Margaret smiled and gave her a few nuzzles back. They were both soon purring softly as they finally felt alive again in the warmth. Within a few minutes both Vern and Viktor returned to the small camper. Viktor left Vern to talk to the two women and went to the truck's cab. Vern climbed in and sat near them to talk. "How are you two feeling? Oh Carol, here. I brought your uh, heels? Sure you don't want something better suited?" he said and passed them to her.

Carol took them from him and glared a little. "It's about the last thing I have that makes me feel normal. I'm going to keep them. Besides I think these pantyhose are special because I've yet to feel cold in my legs." She put them back on and felt a little better again.

Vern nodded and said, "Yes, I would imagine those are enchanted with a few different wards to keep you safe. Damn old stuff too, just about no one left that can do it."

He paused to look them both over, "You've both been changing well. Carol, you seem almost completely changed now. Ear are even on top of your head too."

She reached up and felt them, "Oh no, I won't be able to work normally ever again. How will I support myself?"

Vern was about to say something when Margaret interjected, "But why did the car stop working? I mean everything stopped working."

He took a deep breath and asked them, "Have you heard of EMP effects?"

Margaret shook her head but Carol nodded. She then went on to say, "Yeah... like part of the possible after effects of a nuclear attack?"

Vern nodded and turned on the military radio he had back with them. It sprang to life and sounded like a ton of frantic, stranded army units trying to make sense of a major event. He turned to them and continued, "What has happened is a small exchange of thermonuclear warheads."

They both stared wide eyed at the prospect. Carol managed out, "Like the end of the world?"

"Local government is falling apart. So pretty much, as far as I know the retaliatory strikes might be going out now. Pretty much we need to get moving before the county gets locked down by military," he said, then gave a pat on Carol's shoulder.

"How did it happen?" she asked as he went to the front of the camper to talk with Viktor.

"Tell you what I've heard in a second. Hey, Vik. You know where that farm is?" Viktor nodded but said nothing. Carol was a little scared of him, he towered over everyone else there.

Vern seemed to notice her apprehension and turned to talk to her, "Don't worry about Vik. He's harmless... well unless something tries to harm his friends. What's your uncles name? We are going to his farm correct?"

She nodded and replied, "Yeah, Daniel. I think he called it, Last Call Farm? Or something. I never understood the reference. He doesn't even drink!"

Vern looked back to Vik and said, "That's where we are headed. Oh, and I'm fairly sure your folks have been prepping for this. Damn, hybrids don't share what they know with anyone else that's for sure. Sorry, didn't mean it like that."

Carol looked at her cousin who was kind of staring off at nothing. While normally she'd have been happy to have her shut up, this was worrying. "Marg? Hey, talk to me," she said as they started off.

"Sorry, it's a lot to take in. Oh God! I might not see my mom and dad ever again!" she said bursting into tears.

Carol tried to console her but knew she couldn't think of a more likely outcome of this all. It was the first time she'd ever seen her cousin actually crying and it greatly unnerved her. Vern didn't try to interject into their mourning. Carol was also trying to think about what might happen to her, the mild amusement of not needing to go back to the office was a slight comfort.

After a few minutes of quiet riding Vern brought up Carol's question. "You asked what caused this. I don't know for sure, but it's related to that wolf that was chasing you around. Turns out there was more than one and they are not as stupid as I thought. You were right, they do talk. Hell they talk too much when they think they have the upper hand."

Carol was still trying to calm her cousin. She took a few seconds to look at Vern and asked, "You can't be saying they launched the nukes?"

He shook his head, and busied himself with exchanging the upper on the AR15 he had with him. "No, they are pawns in someone else's game. Sounds like someone is trying to reset things. That enchantment I talked about, the old ways have been fading out. This is to reverse it, only problem is they don't care who they kill along the way."

Carol shook her head in exasperation, "Can't you tell someone? Get help to stop it?"

He sighed and opened his jacket to show a patched up gunshot wound. "We are being targeted in this as well. Me and Viktor are the last hunters left alive in the state. Things are falling apart fast and I'm sure it's all part of their plan."

Carol gasped at the sight of the wound. "Oh Lord! You need to get to a hospital!"

He shook his head, "No time for that. Long term it's likely fatal now. We need to get you to your clan and... I don't know what's left for us after that."

Viktor spoke in reply to that startling Carol who had gotten used to him being tight lipped. "We stay with Hybrids. Kill anything that is threat as usual," he spoke in a heavy eastern European accent. Carol couldn't guess his country of origin based off it.

Vern attached a suppressor on the end of his rifle and nodded in some agreement. "Alright. Hey, when I kick it, I want to be buried on a hill. Over looking the valleys," he said and groaned in pain.

Carol grew upset and yelled, "Don't talk like that! I know we haven't known each other for long but there's no way in hell you're going to give up so easily."

Both he and Viktor laughed. Vern began loading magazines with ammo and replied, "You're going to be a good lioness I think. Pretty clear you were born to protect everyone."

Carol blushed a little, she didn't want to admit it but felt proud of becoming a lioness. Margaret had calmed enough to ask, "What about me? What am I becoming?"

Both Vern and Carol looked at her. "Calico cat," they both said in unison and laughed a little.

She smiled a little after that and said, "Oh, that's cute. We should get tails right?"

Vern nodded and resumed his loading. "Yeah, it's a later thing that usually marks the completion of the changes. Don't ask me why it's always last," he said.

Carol looked at her dirty clothes and said, "I need a change, and a meal."

Vern again nodded and checked his watch. "After we get there you can get both. Your stuff is in the roof compartment." He then looked at their stockings and said, "Don't take those off, they-"

Carol cut him off, "Keep the changes moderated. Charles told us."

Vern nodded, "Good. There's not a lot I can tell you about what it will be like to be fully integrated into your family's hybrid lifestyle. You'll have to talk to them about that."

As they turned onto the road leading into the farm Viktor slowed down a lot. He yelled back to Vern, "Get weapons ready. We may be going hot faster than planned."

Margaret whispered to Carol, "Accents are hot aren't they?"

Carol ignored her cousin's latest one sided flame and instead asked, "What's happening?"

Vern threw on his sling and shouldered his weapon. "Tell you soon," he said as he jumped out the back. Viktor climbed out the front of the truck and the two women were left in silence.

A few minutes later Vern opened the door back up. Carol and Margaret jumped fearing it was some horrible monster coming to kill them. "Come on. We need your brains, and noses for this," he said.

Exiting the camper they followed Vern up the road to join Viktor. She was scared by all she saw, the place was wrecked badly. Dead wolf monsters were all over and most of the buildings had been breached. Carol almost started hyperventilating from everything she saw. Then she smelled something, or someone she knew. "Mikey?! Mikey!" she screamed and left the group to dart into one of the less damaged buildings.

Vern yelled to make her stay put but she ignored him. It was another of her cousins, she had no idea how she knew his scent. It was him and she knew it. Inside the structure she saw more bodies of the wolf things. She ran to one of the bodies and without even thinking she used all her strength to roll the heavy corpse off. Under it was an unconscious cheetah, she checked his pulse and said, "Oh Mikey. What happened to you?"

Vern joined her and pulled out some smelling salts. Carol leaned far away from the foul smelling things. He put it under the young man's nose and he shook into a mild consciousness. Vern noted Carol's reaction to the smell and quickly sealed it back up. He then removed a small crystal pendent from around the man's neck and put it into Mike's pocket.

Carol watched that and asked, "What did you take off?"

Vern was busy looking the man over and checking him for injuries. As he did so he said, "It hides their forms to non-hybrids and hybrids that are not matured yet. I needed it off to check him for wounds."

"And is he hurt?" she asked and wrung her hands from anxiety.

"No, I think he fainted and just hadn't woken up yet," he said as Mike finally seemed to understand he was being looked over.

"C-Carol? Oh wow you really did mature. Your mother always said you would," he said in a weak shaky voice.

The two of them helped him up and got him outside to join Viktor and Margaret. After some minor introductions and greetings Vern asked him, "What happened to your clan?"

Then Viktor chimed in, "Yes, little hybrid. There aren't anything but wolfen bodies all over. Where did they go?"

"And what did my mother say about me?" Carol jumped in desperate to know more.

Mike held his paw hands up as to slow them all down. "OK, OK. Listen, one at a time. They most likely withdrew to the bunker systems. It was a horrible night long assault of these damned things. No matter how many we killed they kept coming in droves. Carol, I really want to tell you all about it but it must wait. If they are there your mother can tell you everything herself."

Carol nodded and let them do the talking. She grabbed Margaret and they both listened to him continuing, "Carol's mother is the clan mother. We tried to reach out to her and Margaret but all the cell towers were sabotaged. Every attempt we made to get out and reach them was assaulted but these damn things. Trust me Carol, Margaret. You were never supposed to undertake your changes alone and without clan guidance."

Vern nodded at the new information he was given. He clapped his hands together and said to everyone. "OK, here's the plan. We need to eat setup a perimeter and find the clan survivors. In that order."

Carol began to wonder if the type of cat they turned into reflected their physical stature and personality. Mikey had always been a scrawny kid and he was a cheetah so it checked out. Her cousin was an oddball but affectionate so a calico cat wasn't too surprising. She made a mental list of things to ask when she found her mother.

The meal wasn't very warm, or even filling really. Vern and Viktor were talking over their plans for the day, Mikey was talking to Margaret about some of the things they had questions over. She was sitting alone watching them all.

Eventually, Viktor stood up and walked to Mike. He thrust a large rifle into the cat's hands and said gruffly, "Little cat? Do you know how to shoot?"

"Y-Yeah a little? I've shot targets a lot mostly," he replied and shakily held the weapon.

Viktor growled slightly. He then said, "That will have to do. Keep it in semi-auto. You're burn all our ammo otherwise."

Vern then said, "I'm going to look for your folks. Viktor will setup a perimeter, you three cats stay-" he was cut off from finishing.

Carol stood up and walked over to him. "NO! If you're going to find my family, I'm with you."

Vern began to open his mouth but a low chuckle from Viktor stopped him. "Heh, You should take this one. She might even keep you alive."

Vern sighed and said to Carol, "You should change first. Don't want to be wandering the woods in wet cold clothes."

She was surprised he let her do it so easily. She rushed to the camper and got herself changed into dryer clothing. Eventually emerging Vern's first comment was, "Still a skirt? I guess at least you put some boots on. Even if they are still too dressy."

Carol snapped back at him, "I've been hammered on enough by all this shit. Give me one thing in that I can at least feel nice."

He raised his hands again and said, "Sorry. It looks good I'll admit."

She flushed a little and smiled at him. "Oh? T-thanks, Vern."

He smiled too, which also caused Margaret to finally smile again seeing the two of them all lovey dovey. He helped her down from the camper and rubbed her open hands. She had developed her paw pads just recently.

He said, "Ah, you are getting your pads in. Good for you to grip better."

She followed him as he left in the direction Mike had given for the bunkers. As they entered the tree line she said, "My hands look like little paws. Is it weird it makes me kinda happy?"

Vern shook his head. "Nah, for you it's natural. Cute even."

She saw a squirrel dart from one tree to another. Her ears went to alert and she chirped at it. It distracted her from Vern's use of the word cute. He watched the nearly fully developed lioness and smiled at her.

"I have heard the changes are like welcoming a kitten into the clan. I guess it makes sense now," he said.

His words made her want to giggle like a school girl. She kept telling herself to stop reading too much into his words but she couldn't help it. They got to a large stream and a single log cut down to form a makeshift bridge. It was clear a second stand occurred here, many more dead wolf things littered the ground on their side. Vern without warning Carol, lifted her into his arms and carried her across the log.

At first she dug her claws in accidentally, he didn't say anything but she quickly retracted them again. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she looked up at him. She rapidly thought to herself, "Stop it! He's just helping me across! Stop it, stop fawning over him. Good Lord!"

Eventually she was set down on the other side. She tided her skirt and tried to hide her flustered state. As they walked she was able to think of a line of questions for him. "Vern? I... I'm sorry for not telling you everything that was going on with me. How long did you know?" was her first question.

Vern smiled back at her as they continued. He said, "Oh, pretty quickly I knew something was up. Then you started asking about things that weren't remotely connected to the wolves. And the funny sounds you made. Uh, what else?"

She interrupted him, "OK, I get it I wasn't very good at hiding it."

He laughed and gave her a surprise hug. "Not at all. It's just I'm used to spotting the signs."

She melted a little again, and felt safer than she had in a long time. Then the sight of a bunker entrance loomed in front of them. She ducked behind Vern as they stared at the large metal door. He smiled at her and said, "You have a full muzzle now. Looks nice on you."

This provided a slight distraction as she felt around her furred face. "I need a mirror. Well I guess it can wait," she said as Vern slowly swung the partly opened door wider. He was prepared for a fight but nothing came from within. They entered slowly, Carol glued to his back in fear. Even he wasn't sure if it was safe to enter.

It opened up into a command center of sorts. Radios, weapons, medical supplies littered the surrounding tables. A few dead wolf creatures were here but it seemed like their assault had dwindled by this point. Carol found a switch and flicked it on startling Vern with the sudden brightness. "Sorry!" she quietly said in embarrassment.

Vern shook his head and laughed a little. "I think they locked themselves deeper in. I'm sure they are alive. Not a single body of their group yet," he said.

He went to the radio and guessing it was turned to their frequency picked up the mic to speak, "Hello? If you can read me and you are a member of the feline hybrid clans, please respond."

He gave it a few minutes and tried again with the same message. Nothing was being replied back to him. "Carol? I need your help with this," he said and motioned for her to come over.

"Me? What can I do?" she asked and walked over slowly. "I don't know anything about them. I wish I did!"

He shook his head. "No, you are a known person to them. Even if you don't realize it, they will recognize you no matter what. Just like make your funny cat sounds into the mic or something."

She snatched the mic from him and grumbled, "Funny cat sounds. Golly, you really know how to flatter a lady."

She took a deep breath and lifted it to her face. "Mom? It's me Carol. I've got Margaret and Mikey safe back at the farm. Please, talk to me. We're all scared and the changes they've... I need help. I need my family with me," she said almost crying a little at the thought of not finding her mother or being lost forever from them.

They listened for a while but nothing was coming back through to them. She set the mic down and leaned against the counter in a slump. Vern was about to say something to her when the radio sprang to life.

"Hello? Carol? This is Daniel! Lord are we glad to hear from you. Your mother is here but busy at the moment. Where are you? Over."

Without a second thought she yelled back into the mic, "At some bunker thing by the farm! Where are you?!"

His reply was, "Nearby actually." he laughed then continued, "There's an elevator nearby that goes down to us. It's currently stuck, if you can get it moving or at least out of the way we can get out!"

She looked at Vern who was already investigating what he thought would be the elevator. She returned to the mic and asked, "Do you have an idea of what we need to do?"

There was a pause before he could reply, "Frankly, not much. I would advise trying to check out the lifter itself. Right above the shaft. I don't know who you are with, but does anyone with you know anything about mechanical stuff?"

She looked to Vern who was already beginning to access the lifter. He looked to her and nodded, saying, "Yeah, one way or another we'll get this going."

She spoke into the mic, "Yeah, I guess so. Do you not have another way out? Seems like a death trap to me."

Her uncle replied, "No, we do. It's just we'd rather not use it yet. Kinda an one way trip."

Vern climbed down from the access panel and said, "Blown fuses, do they have extras?" Carol then relayed that question to Daniel.

"Damn it! Most of that stuff was stored here. Not the best look for us I know..." was his reply.

Carol slapped the table and looked at Vern. "Now what?"

He was rubbing his beard and thinking to himself. "We need to scavenge something. Or rig it with foil and a coin... I would rather not die to a terrible coin fuse though," he said eventually.

She went back to the radio, "Hey, what's around here or the farm that might use the same fuses?"

Another pause followed before an answer was given, "Try the grain elevator, Pretty sure it's no use to us now. Also those fuckers killed the cattle."

Vern nodded and Carol replied, "OK! We are going to look. Hang in there and we'll be right back!"

The two of them quickly made their way out of the bunker and back to the farm. They were rushing so they didn't really talk much during it. Back at the farm she was amused to see Viktor and Mike working to clear the bodies from the area. A large mound was being formed from them far from the center of the farm.

"Little cat, you must really build some muscle. You are scrawny like twig," Viktor's voice boomed as they picked another one up.

Carol was too busy sticking with Vern as they went towards the grain elevator to check it out. She'd always seen the structure as huge and imposing, her fur raised as they got closer to the monolithic building. Entering one of the main doors they began searching for a fuse panel somewhere. A terrible scent came to Carol's nose and she recoiled in fear. Running to join Vern more closely she grabbed his sleeve and said, "Wolves! I smell them so strongly here!"

He nodded and moved her behind him and leveled his rifle. "Safety off, stay behind me," he ordered.

It didn't take long for them to find the monsters. They must have been sleeping there following the attack. Waiting for stragglers to wander in. They roused and with snarls and barking howls leaped at the duo. Vern dumped his rifle's magazine into the first two, then pulled a heavy revolver and destroyed the head of the third.

Carol was amazed both at the speed of the encounter but also the volume of the unsilenced revolver. She was holding her head in pain from just the single shot. After he made sure the room was clear and that no one else was coming to help the deceased wolves, he reloaded.

Then he turned to Carol and said, "Oh Carol. I'm sorry, I forgot that the revolver wasn't muffled. I'll switch to something quieter as soon as we get back." He hugged her and she felt a little better.

"Oh yeah... I understand guns are loud. Never heard one inside before now," she replied.

He nodded and let her go. "OK, help me look for a panel." he stepped away but was holding his side and moving slowly.

She followed him and saw how white he looked. "You're pale as a sheet! Vern, you need to rest or lay down, something!" she said.

He shook his head, and replied, "Can't, I might not have much longer. I need to get what I can done. Repay my debts." he rested against the wall as he scanned around. Carol was going to protest further but he spotted the basement access. "There, maybe utilities in the basement."

They slowly made their way down, Vern was showing blood through his coat by this point. "Fucking... Must of torn it open again..." he muttered.

A quick search around in the cellar and they found the fuse box. Vern not caring what exact fuse he needed just took them all. Carol found a small box to put them in for transport. Carol was fearing for Vern's safety and well being but he wasn't allowing her to do anything to help. They quickly left the elevator and only briefly stopped with Viktor to explain what was happening.

He seemed to finally show signs of sorrow when he saw Vern bleeding again. Again a short discussion was had about him resting but Vern wouldn't listen. Before Carol could follow Vern as he headed back to the bunker complex Viktor Spoke with her, "If you can, please make him listen to reason. No one else needs to die today."

With that he let her go, she rushed to catch up with Vern who was waiting at the tree line for her. They wordlessly returned to the bunker and Vern installed the fuses that matched. He climbed down and looked through the box one more time.

Carol watched with interest, then asked "Is it working now?"

Vern shook his head as he dug through the box. "One fuse is missing... A single fuse."

Carol felt disappointed but then asked, "The uh, coin and tin foil trick?"

Vern chuckled, "Yeah, let's do it. Uh do you have a coin?" he asked.

She frowned and dug through her pockets. It took a dig through the various drawers in the room to find a coin to use. "Here try this one," she said as she passed it to him.

He climbed back up. Carefully he wrangled the single coin into the fuse slot. "I have no idea how well this will work but let's give it a go."

Climbing down he saw that Carol was lit up with joy. She'd finally gotten her tail and it was lifting her skirt up behind her. Vern laughed heartily and pointed to it for her, "Carol, you might want to get your tail down. It's lifting your skirt a bit too much," he said.

She glanced behind her and with one hand pushed her skirt down and the other to hold her tail to her chest. "Shut up! I couldn't help it!" she yelled feeling embarrassed again.

Vern stumbled to the radio and slumped over from pain. She ran to him and said, "Sit down! You need to rest!"

He attempted to say something, but she pushed him into a chair, "Nope! You don't have a say. You are going to rest at least while they get themselves out of that lower area," she spoke over him. "Really... Someone needs to tell you a meaningful death and a stupid one are not the same!"

She grabbed the mic again and said, "Hey! Daniel! Try the lift we think it might be working!"

He was happy to hear it and before long they heard the machine running again. They were soon joined by a large group of fellow hybrids but the celebration ended quickly when they saw Vern.

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Whispers about hunters, and the fear of them echoed in the group. The unnerved group was parted by Carol's mother emerging from between them.

She was a large proud looking lioness just like Carol was growing into. She had marvelous fur and bright shining purple eyes that lit the darkness. Carol was blown away and had never imagined her mother to be so strong looking before, but that wasn't nearly as important to her in the moment as getting a hug after all that she'd gone through.

Carol leaped into her arms and they embraced joyfully. Carol couldn't help but start crying from the stress relief alone. "Oh honey, listen right now is not great for explanations but they will come soon. Just a little bit longer and you and Margaret will have them," her mother said happily.

She looked at Vern and asked, "A hunter? We knew things were about to get bad but... I can't believe a hunter would have helped you."

Vern was sitting breathing shallow breaths, his eyes were closed. It took him a few moments to refocus on them. He took a few shaky steps towards them before Carol helped him stand up. "Hello Ma'am. Vern is my name. It's an honor to be in the presence of a clan mother. Your daughter is very strong, barely needed my help against one of the wolves."

Her mother was nervous about him but asked Carol, "Do you trust him? If so we will administer aid immediately."

Carol nodded and urgently replied, "Yes! Yes, please help him. He got us here and helped me understand what was happening."

Her mother nodded and a few other extended family members she didn't know very well helped carry him off. They headed back to the farm together as most of the group focused on getting their gear shifted back to the farm to reinforce it against further attacks. They formed a basic medical station in one of the less damaged houses. While Vern was being looked over by the clan medical doctor, Carol and Margaret were talking to her mother.

"Alrighty, Let me tell you about your true heritage," Her mother said happily.

Part Five: Behind the Veil

The time spent talking to her mother was fascinating to both young women. Most of all she promised that they would be informed of everything to do with their kind in the coming days. "Carol the reason you are a year past your cousin. Being 26 and not 25 when you began maturing. It's because your father wasn't a hybrid like Margaret's. She naturally began changing but you needed help," she explained.

Carol looked at her body and asked, "So, the gift wasn't really from my grandmother?"

Her mother shook her head, "No, no. It was from her and me. We agreed in the weeks prior to her passing and me taking over as clan mother, that you needed a little primer in your maturation," she explained. "When she passed I knew it was time to give it to you. I didn't say anything about this because our culture is to allow it to start then assist, but as you know everything went wrong."

"Are human hybrid couples common?" Margaret asked.

"Not at all. They are so rare we didn't even know if Carol was going to mature correctly. Frankly one of the reasons I didn't tell you was I wanted to be really sure you were able to mature at all. I should have known the clan mother's bloodline was far too strong to be subdued by your father's human genes. God rest his soul."

Carol turned her head in confusion. "What? As in I am supposed to be a clan mother too?" she asked unsure what she had gotten herself into.

"Yes, not anytime soon I hope. As long as I'm alive I will be the clan mother and will train you in our ways," Her mother told Carol.

Carol breathed out loudly and replied, "That is a lot to take in."

Her mother nodded and said, "Oh I know. Don't worry, you have many years left to learn everything. Both of you do actually."

Then she pulled out a couple of those crystal pendants she'd seen Mikey wearing. She handed one to each of them and said, "Here, this will allow you to appear human again to all outsiders. We will still see you as yourself."

Carol and Margaret thanked her for the gift. Carol put it on half expecting to feel something happen, but nothing did. "Is it working?" she asked.

"Oh yes, you won't notice anything different humans will not see what you really look like though. It will help keep you safe from strangers and their fear of the unknown," her mother told them.

Carol had one last thought, "What if I wanted to leave?"

Her mother looked a little worried, "I would hope you do not at a time like this. But everyone is welcome to come and go. I left myself before you were born, met your father and... well you can guess how that ended," was her reply.

Mike came running up to the three of them breathing heavily. He took a few gasps trying to catch his breath. They all waited patiently for him to start talking, Carol though felt it was ironic for a cheetah to be so winded.

"Carol, you should go to Dr. Jackson and Vern. It's important," he said finally.

She jumped up and with a parting goodbye sprinted to the makeshift medical facility. Bursting into the place she found Vern laid out unconscious and Viktor speaking with the doctor. They turned to speak with her about Vern. The doctor was a tall lean lynx who didn't seem to have a lot of time to waste. His short tail twitched in frustration.

Dr. Jackson took the lead, "Carol, so Vern is for the moment stabilized. The main issue is we are missing several things to actually treat him. Both blood that is a compatible type, and something very special. I've already filled Viktor in about that part."

She looked at the two of them and asked, "Can't someone here donate blood for him?"

The doctor shook his head and told her the bad news, "Sadly humans cannot use blood from us hybrids. If we can find some O- that would be best. A lot of it actually."

She looked at Viktor and asked, "Well, when are we going?"

He smiled as he looked at her, "Young cat. Do you not think you should get rest while you can? You have been through a lot already."

She shook her head and crossed her arms, "No. he saved me so I will at least assist in helping him. I won't be able to live with myself otherwise."

He nodded and motioned for her to follow him. She took one last look at Vern sleeping before she left. The pale state of his complexion was upsetting to her. She followed Viktor to the truck again and watched a more effective defensive line being setup by her clan.

She asked him as they walked, "Are we expecting more of the wolves?"

He nodded and said, "Yes. Very likely. They seem to be in a whole migration pattern so there may still be thousands of them. Most likely we will face stragglers here."

"Where did they all come from?" she asked feeling that so many large creatures should have been detectable before all this.

He frowned as they reached the truck. "That I cannot say. I wish I knew," he replied.

She sighed hoping maybe some calmness would come and allow her to actually process everything she'd gone through. She climbed in the cab with him and they started off slowly down the road.

A fearful thought came to her, she played with her pendent and asked him, "Is everyone we meet going to be desperate and dangerous?"

He shrugged and just said, "Maybe. We will stay far away from others during this, young cat. Did you... Did you tell your mother you are coming on this last journey?"

She put her ears back and looked away nervously. "N-no. I feared she would not want me to go," she admitted.

He nodded in response and then offered his thoughts, "I feel you do not fully understand your rank in the clan. This is not your fault. You are next in line to be queen, if someone was to capture you... They would have a large bargaining chip."

Carol nodded as they drove. She held her arms to her chest in fear for her future on all fronts. "Yeah, I guess you are right. But," she said before being cut off.

They went down a different road. Disabled and wreck cars lined the sides, he had to continually weave his way through the mess. He continued, "Before this started you could do your own thing. Life will be difficult now, you won't be able to do whatever you like."

She lowered her head, "Yeah I get it. I'll do my best to make sure I do the right things," she said back.

He smiled at her, "I know you will. Vern liked you, did you know that? That is why I will stay, it's what he would want whether he lives or not," he said.

"I hope he does. I know I've only known him for a few days but there's something about him that I like, maybe love," she admitted. Her train of thought shifted to, "Why am I telling this random dude all this? Damn it Carol! Shut up!"

As they sat in silence a horrid realization came to her, "Oh no! If I'm supposed to be the queen later in my life that means I'm some sort of princess! Damn it, I hate everything to do with that stupid cliché!"

He chuckled a little and nodded in agreement. "Maybe don't think of it in those terms then. Clan mother is the usual term. I do not know what they would call the heir to the clan mother."

Their conversation was cut short when they arrived at a wrecked military convoy. Vik pulled off and watched for movement, then climbed out and motioned for Carol to follow him. They made slow by steady time through a drainage ditch towards the wrecks. The smell of blood was so strong to Carol that she wanted to wretch. When they got closer they could see why, it had been attacked by the wolves as well.

"Must have been a surprise. Very interesting indeed," Vik said as they got a little closer. The military looked like they had been ripped to shreds. While there were many dead wolves, the overwhelming numbers had won out.

"We will need to return to collect ammo with a group, for right now search for medical supplies," he ordered.

Carol made her way around the trucks and tried to avoid stepping in the blood pooling around the road. Most everything was destroyed or not what she wanted. She saw one body with medical insignia on the arm. She checked him but found nothing but ruptured organs. She jumped back from the sight and would have thrown up if she had eaten anything recently.

But then she looked next to him. It was a red cooler, her mind turned with ideas of what might be inside. She turned to the grisly task of pulling the body out of the Humvee to get it. He crumbled to the ground as she pulled him out of the way. As she pulled the box out it seemed to slosh a little. "Please be worth it, please be worth it," she muttered to herself.

She got it onto the ground and opened it up. "Hey Viktor, is this what we need?" she asked looking at the blood packs. She really hoped she would save Vern the way she had saved her, twice now.

He ran over and looked into the cooler then said, "Yes looks good, little cat."

He hadn't found his part of the mission and so they went back to the truck. He put it in the center seat between them and they set off again for where he hoped to find the last item. Carol still didn't know what they needed but hoped it wouldn't take long. She was finding herself uneasy out away from her clan.

He kept his eyes scanning around as they drove. He looked to her and said, "We need something very special. Part of the hybrid magic I guess. I don't ask why, I don't want to know these things. It is not for me to find but you could I think," he said cryptically.

She raised an eye brow and asked, "Uh, what? What am I finding?"

He pulled off on a weird path and stopped. Taking a deep breath he turned to her again to say, "It is some kind of flower. To a human it smells like nothing at all, to you it might be the sweetest smell of all."

She nodded, then said, "Oh, so I need to locate it?"

"Yes," was all he said. He pointed to the meadow in front of them, "There. I will keep watch over you. Do not take your time."

She shook her head and got out of the cab. Slowly making her way into the meadow she watched him get on the roof with a rifle to look out for wolves. She felt like they were the worst thing she'd ever seen, but had to remember they were just lackeys for something worse. The thought made her shiver so she returned to trying smell the flower.

"Of all the stupid things to need to find. A flower that only I can smell?" she muttered as she smelled the air. "I don't even know what it smells like at all."

Her patience was running short as she wandered around trying to find anything like she was told. If it wasn't Viktor she would have begun to think she was being hazed. Sitting down to rest a second her grumbling and growling was interrupted by a funny smell. She turned to face where it was coming from, her eyes grew wide at the huge white flower that was growing from an unassuming plant.

She sniffed at it and her eyes watered. "Wow! That's sweet I guess. I like it but man is it too strong for my tastes," she said and cut its stem.

Quickly running back to the truck she jumped in with Viktor. "This is it right? I mean I don't really know much about this stuff," she asked.

He took a quick look and sniff and shrugged, "I cannot smell anything. We will hope it works," was all he said before driving them away.

As they were heading back Carol was feeling hopeful that everything was going to be OK. Just as she started to relax a little a howl shattered her calmness. They both looked at each other and Viktor pulled a hand gun to keep it ready. A bang from the roof announced the arrival of an unexpected guest. Viktor greeted them by shoot several holes the roof. A scream of pain came then the beast fell under their tires.

They were coming from all sides and he began laughing and taunting them in his mother tongue. He swerved to run a second smaller one over. Carol screamed at it's decapitated head

landing on their hood. He was firing and reloading at a break neck pace Carol was just trying to dodge the claws and paws that made it inside the cab long enough for him to shoot them.

Eventually her luck ran out and the door was wrenched off the truck. She was almost pulled right out and under the tires of the truck. With an ear piercing scream she clawed her way back in. The madness causes the cooler to get knocked around as she was trying to avoid dying. Viktor yanked her back inside just as the cooler tumbled out of the door.

"Noooo!" she screamed and tried to reach for it but it was too late. She watched the contents shatter all over the road as they finally outran the pack behind them. Tears streamed down her face as she punched the seat in anger. Viktor got on the radio and called forward that he was being followed by a large pack they needed to prepare for a second assault.

Again he pulled Carol away from the missing door and closer to him. "Carol, are you unharmed?" he asked as he blasted down the road.

"Yes," she said still crying, "But the blood! I... I've killed him by losing it."

He shook his head, "It's not your fault, young cat. Ambushes are brutal no matter what. Vern would prefer you to survive more than himself if there was a choice," he offered as comfort.

"I was supposed to save him like he saved me. Repay my debt," she continued and hid her face in shame.

"You sound a lot like Vern," Viktor again shook his head then told her, "People die. Good people die faster. You can't save everyone, sometimes you can't save anyone. When we get back go and be with him. I will need to join the defense."

She kept crying but nodded, "I'm sorry Vern. I'm so sorry," she said to herself.

Thankfully due to skilled driving they kept far ahead of the pack behind them and got into the farm with her clan posted ready for a proper fight. She grabbed the only thing left, the flower and ran to the clinic as fast as she could. Inside she could already hear the machine gun fire along the defensive line.

She handed the flower to Jackson who was visibly disappointed that it was all they recovered. He set it on the table and the rabid howling made him put a hand on Carol's shoulder and say, "Listen, I don't think he has much time left. I've got to get to the front line. Just... spend your time with him before. Well you know."

With that he left her alone. She walked slowly in, her tail dragging on the ground. He was breathing slowly on the makeshift bed and she called out to him, "Vern?"

He perked up slightly and looked her way. "Hey, Carol. Must have gotten you a disguise?"

"Yeah," she said softly and walked over to him. She held his hand with both of hers tightly.

"What's the matter? You've been crying?" he asked and did his best to sit up.

She looked down and nodded slowly. It was a struggle to look him in the eyes. She could hardly talk when she said, "We... I lost the blood we needed. It's my fault you might not live."

He laughed and gave a weak squeeze of her hand. With a shake of his head he replied, "Now I don't believe that one bit. You and Viktor would have done your best. Don't beat yourself up."

She nodded but didn't really agree with him. After a while of just being with him he made a small request, "If I could ask for one thing. Could you remove that crystal so I can see the real you?"

She was a little shocked and asked, "Really? I'm just all fuzz under it." She removed the crystal and assumed it had done reverted her appearance. Not feeling or seeing a difference herself made the thing very strange to her.

"You look nice. There's a lot more than just fuzz to you. You have fight and I know you'll do well for your family in the coming collapse," he said and smiled at her weakly.

"Why did you protect me? My mother seemed to think it was very strange of you to do that," she asked.

He thought for a little while on how to explain it. With a deep breath he said, "Hunters are very solitary workers. We usually don't talk to many people and I got used to it. So imagine my surprise when a group of hybrids of your kind save me following a nearly fatal encounter with an undead hoard in Georgia."

She sighed before saying, "So that is your debt? That you wanted to repay somehow?"

He nodded and felt around her hand pads smiling. "Yes Ma'am. Don't feel bad about me dying here. We don't usually live far into our 30's. I guess I am on the shorter side of the life spans for hunters. With the old order being unnaturally restored I don't think there's a place for us anymore."

She shook her head and quickly said back, "No! There is a place here. With Me- Er, I mean us. The clan."

He was fading out and starting to take longer between replies. She wished that the doctor would return but from the sounds of the fighting he would be busy. She decided she didn't care about restraint for the moment and gave him a hug. Carefully as to avoid hurting him further.

He pet her head a little and finally asked, "Hey, I know we've only known each other for a short while, but... If we could, would you agree to a date?"

She laughed through her tears a little and nodded. "Yes I would. It might not be for real between us but I thought it would be nice to risk it for once," was her reply.

He took a few moments to refocus his vision on her. "Sorry, blood loss makes seeing tough," he said. "Never had a date before?"

She shook her head. "Nah, I've been too busy, and didn't like anyone I met."

"Well, maybe in another life..." he weakly whispered then coughed, "We could have... Sorry lost my train of thought."

She moved to hold both his hands. His breathing was very shallow Carol was terrified that at any moment he might be gone forever. He closed his eyes and she tried to keep him awake. "Vern! Don't go. Please!"

He made a last attempt at calming her. "I don't really want to, but I... I'm going to close my eyes. I can't really see now anyway."

He didn't talk more after that. It was only then Carol realized that during their talk the wounded from the fight were being carried in. She wished someone could have helped him, but maybe it

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wasn't even possible now. Dr. Jackson and a few others were rushing around tending to everyone they could. Then after turning back to Vern she realized he wasn't breathing anymore.

"Vern? Oh Lord almighty. I'm really sorry, Vern," she said very quietly.

She sat for a few hours just holding his hand and feeling all the warmth drain out. A few times she lightly dozed from exhaustion and had little dreams where he woke up. Every time she woke up from one of them she felt the return of reality crushing her heart a little more. In her opinion it was like her mind was torturing her with things that could not be.

"Carol?" came a soft voice and a hand on her shoulder. It was Margaret, she came to join her and talk. "I'm sorry about Vern. How long have you been sitting here?"

Carol leaned against her and said, "From when the attack started, until now."

"Shouldn't you come and take a rest? I know you didn't want to see him go but... We're worried about you," Margaret said calmly.

Then in came Dr. Jackson again, with an assistant. He checked on Vern and waved his assistant over. They started removing his body and Carol got out of their way. She hugged her cousin and watched him being removed to what she assumed was a burial. Before they left Jackson stopped Carol and told her some interesting news.

"Carol, Listen. I know you are upset, but please keep your hope going. I cannot speak of this much," he said and motioned to Vern's body. "Hope is not lost."

She looked from him to the assistant covering the body up. "What? I really don't understand," she said scared to get her hopes up.

"I will tell you about it in time. Right now I have a lot of work to do on this. Go get rested, and I or your mother will tell you in the morning," he continued and walked both her and Margaret out the door.

The night wasn't restful to her in the least. Horrible nightmares and dreams about things lost forever were all she had. Waking up in the morning she dragged her self out to the thrown together breakfast station outside. Getting a coffee and something to eat she joined her mother at a table.

"Carol, there you are. I wanted to tell you something important," she said in greeting.

Carol nodded and tried her best to pay attention through her exhaustion. What her mother said next was more powerful than all coffee on earth, "We have a way to revive Vern."

She spit out her drink and stared in disbelief. "What!" she said loudly.

"It won't be fast but considering how he helped save us. We decided it was a worthy reward to the man," Her mother said and hugged Carol, "So please. Keep your hope strong, we have much to do in the coming months."

She took a look around the place. It really did look like a mess but was fixable. More extended family was getting in as well to help get everything going. Some people were talking about sending scouting parties out to find what had happened to other communities in the last few days.

Then of all things she saw Viktor and her cousin together. She had seen it last night but didn't really process that Margaret had fully changed too. Now she was sitting on Viktor's lap yammering about one thing or another. The only strange part was Viktor seemed amused by her and enjoying it.

The woman was indeed a calico cat, also fluffy as could be. Carol wondered if she would be taking two hours everyday to brush all that fuzz down. She got up and made her way over there to them both. "Hey, she's not being too much is she?" Carol asked playfully.

Viktor put a hand up as if to say no. Then he simply said, "Cat is fine."

To her it seemed like a way to say she was barely acceptable. Though they both realized by this point it was a high compliment that he said it at all. Her cousin happily responded with nuzzles and a few little chirps. Carol sighed and decided to leave them to it. She set off trying to find everyone of her family members she knew personally to see what kind of cat they were. First she needed to clean up, then her day, and new life would truly begin.

Epilogue

Carol kept herself busy learning from her mother and assisting around the farm. Vern's passing had heavily effected her but what kept her going was the promise that he could still be saved. She kept on asking Dr. Jackson about it frequently, looking for progress. He promised her that it wouldn't be much longer so she kept accepting that as a good enough response. It wasn't like she could do it herself as much as she'd be willing to try.

Enough time had gone by that spring was coming into season. The attacks from the wolves had died out as most of them had been killed. A feeling of peace was finally returning. She traveled to her favorite tree to rest on and bat at the butterflies that were flapping around. It was peaceful though it felt like something was missing. "Vern, I'm sorry I failed. I know you didn't think so but I feel that way," she said to herself softly.

Her rest was suddenly interrupted by Margaret calling for her. She looked up and saw her cousin joined by Viktor. "Carol! Come quick, your mother thinks it's time to try to save Vern!"

With that she jumped up and race after them both. She had to life her dress up to allow for the speed she was going at. A joy that she didn't think she'd ever truly feel welled inside her. Maybe Vern would wake up soon, she decided to risk having that hope.