

# Growing Pains



Kell Clover

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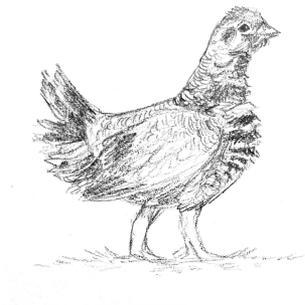
Other things of note:

This story involves:

Sustained Injury, graphic animal death, altered mental states, frequent use of strong language, nonsexual nudity, intimacy, distress and arguments, loss of a loved one and grief, implied past abuse and bigotry, isolation, species dysphoria, dehumanization (this is positive), mental health issues such as self loathing and anxiety, graphic transformation scenes, near-starvation, earthquakes.

Reader discretion is advised.

You may also notice that a character in this book is referred to with both she/her and they/them pronouns. It switches a little randomly, but the character mostly goes by she.



For my other heart

~ ~ ~



## Prologue

A breath hitches in the throat of a pale young adult, wading through the greenery of a forest that fails to echo home. The foliage is thinner, drier than they are used to. The plants are unfamiliar, tame. They left home, and the endless emerald forests around it behind a long time ago out of necessity, rather than choice.

And to get the hell away from their mother, but that's another story.

Tonight the long-sealed wound on their shoulder aches. Each indent of the monster's teeth in their scar throbs with a hazy memory of snapping twigs and flurries of hot, dark movement. They don't know they're gripping their shoulder to the point of scratching until they blink their eyes open. This is the place where it all first happened.

They look around to see if the spot is truly secluded, before sitting on a moss-addled rock and resting their head in their hands. It's going to hurt, as it always does, but for a few moments they can breathe easy. The anticipation almost hurts more than the actual event coming for them. In the anticipation, they are left to think, and that's where the pain rolls in.

But, here and now, in the quiet embrace of the night, nothing can touch the young adult. Not sociality or economy, not the concerns and threats of living in a world of concrete and plaster. Not the roles expected of them, or the prejudice that comes with it. It's bittersweet, knowing they'll have to return to it all.

As the silver fills the sky, they take a deep breath. After this it's back to the routine. Back to the complicated feelings. Something tells them it shouldn't be like this.

They tell themselves it has to be.

The desire for more than what they've had to struggle with, for something better, it always played in the back of their head and heart. *There's something greater than this. There's something worth giving into.* It was a mantra they didn't quite believe in yet.

But they will, eventually.

They just need to weather the growing pains.

## 1 • Cycle

Casey wasn't sure how he missed the moon. Though it was marked on the calendar in splotchy red ink, scheduled in his phone and his computer, the week of the full moon had gone completely under his radar. He'd just been so awfully busy with work lately that it didn't cross his mind. Issues with data corruption and deleted files were a living hell to deal with. He'd spent days fixing problems. After an exhausting session of working, he'd spent the rest of the day enjoying some time to himself.

Now he was standing in the bathroom, his eyes fixed on the open window pouring milky light into the room. The moon was *radiant* tonight, the most beautiful and horrifying thing he'd seen in a while. His face and dark copper hair was still slick with water as he realized the storm that was coming, and started fumbling for the cabinet.

*Crack.*

Casey cried out as his legs buckled. He gripped the counter in time to avoid braining his head on the faucet, but he could barely hold himself up. He reached again for the cabinet's latch, instead collapsing to the floor as his legs gave another jolt. The bones were always the worst part. Every inch they grew and

twisted felt like hellfire. The heels of his feet lengthened into hocks, claws curling out from beneath his toenails. His hands, too, began to change shape, shuddering as he held himself off of the floor. Claws pushed out of their tips with a torturous intensity. There was a series of painful pops in his back. His vertebrae and ribs were dislocating, then realigning themselves in new order. During this, the muscles around his shoulder clenched, tearing themselves and repairing rapidly to hold his new frame. Casey trembled, trying to stay quiet, but the sheer pain caused him to wail. It scared him to hear his own voice sound so *distorted*.

There was blood on the floor, dripping steadily from his gums. He howled in pain as his teeth began to writhe out of their sockets, new, *sharper* ones forming from underneath. It felt like a hundred needles, digging their way out from the inside of his jaw. He watched helplessly as his human teeth dropped to the floor. Molars, incisors, canines...all slick with painful residue. His spine burned. The remnant of his tail thrashed against the cabinet as it gained length. Fur began to creep down his neck, back, and limbs quickly. It tickled like an army of ants on his skin.

With such an intensive transformation, Casey didn't notice his partner Jynn throw open the door and enter the room. "Casey??" they said, catching their breath. Jynn had heard something loud, followed by a series of unsettling noises, so they came running. The sight before them was grotesque; a barely

recognizable beast with heavy shoulders and bloody jaws slumped on the floor. He was crying, screams heightening with every shudder of his body.

Casey's ears pricked, Jynn's voice breaking through the pounding of his skull. His own thoughts were hard to parse. *God...not like this...* he thought. "Jynn..." Casey rasped through clenched teeth, "*Get...out...*" Another cry escaped him as his shoulders rearranged.

The thin person before him tucked the messy, raven-dark hair out of their face, and rushed in to help. Jynn looked around, flinging open the medicine cabinet. "No, I'm...I'm staying! I gotta help you somehow!" They rifled through the bottles frantically, looking for his painkillers.

"I don't want you seeing this..." Casey winced. His voice was deeper than he felt comfortable with, and gravelly from the screaming. It was like an animal had made a home in his throat. He gave up on talking for now, mouth in too much pain.

"Don't worry about that right now! I don't care!" Jynn said, finally locating the bottle they needed. They shuffled over to Casey as fast as they could, wrenching open the painkiller. Quickly, they tumbled several capsules into their palm. "Casey, listen to me. I need you to swallow these, okay?"

Casey felt his insides lurching. He could manage, but it would probably burn. The taste of stomach acid had already hit the

back of his throat. Through tears, he slowly nodded. “Okay, okay.” Jynn shoved the pills into Casey’s mouth, withdrawing their hand as soon as possible. They gasped as a stray fang cut into their skin. Seeing Casey’s pained expression, they hid the cut from his view. It didn’t hurt *that* much, and any extra stress would just become panic. He was the apologetic sort, Jynn didn’t want him to worry.

Casey waited for the painkillers to take effect. He had bought these kind specifically for transformations because they were fast-acting, and the closest thing to morphine his pharmacy had. The drum of his blood and searing pain in his muscles and bones were slowing down, bit by bit. Jynn quietly held their friend as he began to breathe more steadily, releasing the tension from his body. It was a strange sight to see someone usually so stoic in such a vulnerable and...*monstrous* state. Jynn hesitated before they spoke. “I’ve never actually seen your...um....” they couldn’t quite find the right phrasing, and settled for “Your situation.”

“My...situation?” Casey slurred, confused. His groggy state didn’t lend well to clear thoughts. Jynn gestured vaguely at his body. “This. What just happened to you.”

“Oh.” He stared at the floor, trying to figure out what to say. Talking, as warped as his voice was, felt off. Unnatural. He was used to being out of the house, and *alone* when the moonlight hit. Anywhere away from Jynn, from scenarios like this. These

transformations were far from secret, and his partner was even supportive of it, but Casey always insisted on maximum privacy.

“I was scared it would change things between us,” he whispered. Hearing the words out loud made him wilt. Even in his delirious state, admitting it came with a weight he wasn’t ready to let go of. Putting his personal worries into the open air *terrified* him.

Jynn didn’t say anything at first, and just gently held his face in their hands. “I still love you.” They bumped their forehead softly against Casey’s. He broke down, feeling that warmth. Throat rough, his sobbing was laced with hiccups. Jynn comforted him, pulling the large beast into an awkward embrace. “I was so scared...” Casey sputtered. They stroked his copper fur gently, from the crown of his head all the way down his neck and shoulders. It seemed to calm him a little.

“Shh, I know, it’s okay. It’s going to be okay,” they reassured. Casey whined softly. “Are you sure you don’t...hate me? Hate *this*?”

“Why would I hate you?” Jynn couldn’t think of a reason in the *world* to feel that way about him. They caressed him, tilting his gaze back up at them.

“I’m a monster...a dangerous thing.” he breathed.

“Honey, you’re just *you*. Bigger and furrier than normal, sure, but still Casey. That’s not going to break our relationship.”

He went silent for a moment, considering this. It definitely alleviated a lot of pent-up emotions he hadn't reached yet. Processing it all was going to take time. That was something he could tackle in the morning. "Hey Jynn?" he asked, glancing at the sink.

"Yes love?"

"There's blood everywhere...hair...*teeth*.....can you help me wash up? We can just go to bed or something after. I'll sleep on the floor if I take up too much space..." Jynn tousled what used to be hair. "Of course, but you don't have to sleep on the floor."

Jynn helped Casey to his feet, bracing his back with one arm. His legs tremored, threatening to collapse with each step. Turning on the faucet, Jynn started washing the blood out of his fur with a cloth. "Hm...this fur is pretty dense, how does it feel?" they asked. Casey ran a paw through the matted fluff. He'd never had time to contemplate his body like this. "Warm," he said. Jynn chuckled, a weak smile on their face. "If it weren't for all the blood, I'd say it's pretty soft." *Soft*... he wasn't aware until now. He was pained to realize it sounded nice. His fingertips were still sensitive, so he took the moment to explore. ...*God, it really is soft.*

Jynn put a hand on Casey's chin. "Lean down please, there's some on your face." They scrubbed out as much as they could, having trouble with the blood accumulated at the corners of the mouth. The warm cloth had gone from white to a deep red as they

went. Jynn had to pause to clean the thing itself. “I feel like a shower would have been a better idea,” they mumbled, “but then again, you’d end up tracking an awful lot of water around the house.”

“Jynn, I can’t fit in the shower...” Casey said. They looked him up and down. “Right. Yeah.” they wrung out the washcloth and continued scrubbing.

After finishing up and drying off, they headed to the bedroom. Jynn shook out the adrenaline, flapping their hands, and hopped onto the mattress. Casey prepared himself to crash on the floor, but Jynn patted his usual spot on the bed. “Come on.” He stood, looking at them hesitantly. “You...sure?”

“We always sleep together, You know that. Plus, you’re like a living pillow right now, and I’m not going to miss out on that.” Jynn tried to reassure Casey that this didn’t change their relationship. It was just another quirk, another hurdle to jump.

“It’s like you don’t mind at all...my head was always telling me you would,” Casey remarked as he carefully climbed onto the bed. Though there were muffled creaks and groans, the frame held firm. He fumbled with the blanket until realizing he didn’t quite need it. He was too tall for it anyway, at over seven feet. His eyelids were drooping heavily as he nestled in with Jynn.

“Not at all,” they said. It was true, but what Jynn didn’t want to admit is that they found all this interesting. Whenever

they said their goodbyes to Casey, they imagined his other form was unpleasant. With how he spoke about it, it sounded horrible. Seeing it in person now, it was amazing. Jynn rested their head in his fluff. *He's kind of...adorable like this.* They thought, feeling the softness against their cheek. They let the train of thought simmer in their mind as they snuggled in.

“Goodnight hon~” they murmured.

“G’nigh...” Casey slurred. He was already half asleep, steady breathing filled with deep rumbles. It had to be one of the most wonderful sounds in the world.

## 2 • New Normal

Jynn awoke to a mouthful of fur and confusion. They had dreamt about Casey that night, the way he looked normally, for the most part. Some of it did include his new appearance, but those moments were fleeting and dark. It was far more comfortable to let the usual visuals drift in the haze. There was one thing off about the night's dreams, though. Everywhere they went, whether it peeked through a window, under a door, or in the open sky, the moon was there. It didn't do anything but loom overhead. The only chilling part was its persistence, and the way it kept snagging Jynn's attention. They had been staring at it for quite a while before waking up. Now, seeing Casey in the daylight, he was positively radiant. It was like watching a stranger sleep, but a very comfortable stranger nonetheless.

Jynn shook his arm gently. "Psst, hey." They whispered. Casey blinked, eyes still heavy. He looked like a tired cat. "Hmm?"

"Good morning," Jynn smiled. For a moment, things felt normal. Casey sleepily gazed at them. Their long, dark hair was a tangle, and they had a hand on his shoulder. *They look so beautiful in the morning...* he thought.

"Good morn--" Casey's words caught in his throat. Something was wrong. His voice wasn't right, Jynn was too small, and there was the strangest sensation across his entire body, as if there was something warm on his skin. Panic settled in as Casey

realized he wasn't human, but still inside the house for some reason. As the feeling spiraled, a startled whine left his throat. He pawed at the blanket, trying to escape. *Jynn is here, Jynn's not supposed to be here, I'm not supposed to be here, I have to get out, get out, get--*

Casey's expression read clearly. He was stiff, eyes darting around in animalistic panic. Jynn reached up and cupped a hand to his face to calm him down. They felt bad for spooking him, and weren't sure what to do in this situation. The feeling of their hand on Casey's face was both soothing, and anxiety inducing. It solidified the fact that he was here. For better or worse. "Hey, hey, it's okay Casey. Remember last night? Remember what I said? You're safe."

Hearing this snapped him back into reality. *Last night. Fuck. They saw everything.* Casey remembered the event with a jolt. Running it back through his head he tried to recall what even happened. One moment he was washing his face...the next there was the moon...then, after a lot of pain, Jynn was there. It was blurry, he had to calm down to process it properly. What did Jynn *do*? Something about painkillers, comfort...it was all coming back now. "Sorry, I'm not used to waking up like this."

"It's okay love, you usually go off for a few days and come back. Now you're just here instead, home. I don't expect you to adjust easily to it." They said, rubbing his shoulder. Fidgeting with his fur felt nice. "...Yeah." Casey took a deep breath. *Home* meant

sleeping on a mattress and eating *actual* food instead of scraping together whatever he could find, or outrun. It sounded peaceful.

“Come on, let’s have breakfast.” Jynn hopped off the bed, foraging through clothes scattered around the floor until they found a t-shirt loose enough to go with their boxer-briefs. Casey followed suit, only to discover that nothing was even close to fitting at the moment. After all, he went from a little over Jynn’s height to practically towering over them. From shoulder to shoulder, he was almost twice their breadth. The comparison was *jarring*. “Uh, I don’t think I have anything to wear.”

“You can throw on a blanket, I don’t mind. We could try looking for clothes a size up next time we’re in town.” Jynn replied without skipping a beat. Casey was surprised. “How are you this nonchalant about it? You’re acting like this isn’t new to you.” Jynn leaned against the doorway. “Well, it is and it isn’t.”

“What kind of answer is that?” There was a thud as Casey’s tail flicked and hit the bed. He crossed his arms, a little confused. “I have my ways of coping with change. Simple as that,” they said with a shrug. “Besides, I want you to feel normal.”

Casey sighed and let his arms fall. “Alright, I appreciate it. Nothing about this feels normal but I’ll trust you.”

“It might sooner or later, baby steps until then. Anyway, I’m sure you could use a coffee.”

“That sounds good.”

With Casey out of commission, Jynn took over cooking duty. They fried up bacon and eggs, and pushed some bread into the toaster. Casey was seated at the table, the blanket over his shoulders. To him, the cooking smelled heavenly. There was nothing his scavenging animal brain wanted more than delicious meat and carbs. Without thinking he was taking in deep huffs, snout in the air. “Honey...I can hear you snuffling from here!” Jynn laughed, ushering some eggs onto a plate. Their home was small enough that the table was *in* the kitchen, but it was still an impressive feat. “Oh sorry...I can’t help it,” Casey said, sheepishly covering his nose. He was intensely embarrassed; he didn’t even realize he was doing it. Jynn smiled and carried on, “I was going to make pancakes, but considering the last time I messed with batter almost burned the house down...”

“Don’t remind me...” Casey replied. Jynn dished out the breakfast for the both of them, plates steaming as they were set on the table. “At least I can make this!”

In moments, Casey’s serving was gone. Jynn stared in shock as he ate *everything* in only a few bites. Casey noticed the silence and glanced up, a piece of bacon still hanging from his jaws. He sat up straight and covered his mouth again, flustered from Jynn’s expression. “Ah, uh, sorry. Gotta eat quickly out there usually or my food gets stolen.”

Jynn chuckled warmly. “No, no! I understand! It’s just looks a little funny, that’s all.”

“Hmm...I guess so...” subconsciously he hid his face further. He felt awkward about it, not meaning to eat like a wild animal in front of Jynn.

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Now scrubbing the plates in the sink, Jynn asked “So, what do you want to do today?” Casey was absentmindedly humming, still getting used to the deeper tones in his speaking voice. He paused to consider the question. Working today just wasn’t going to happen, and Casey didn’t feel like doing anything isolated. Having time alone where his mind could wander felt like a bad idea at a time like this. What was something they usually did together...?

“Can we watch something?” he decided.

“Sure, what do you have in mind?”

“I dunno, a movie? A show or something? I’m fine with anything really.”

“How about something calm?”

“...Like what?” Casey asked.

“I was thinking maybe some animated movies,” Jynn suggested. They always liked those, especially the ones with animal protagonists. The old 80’s and 90’s films with dragons,

wizards, castles, and all that fantasy stuff was up their alley as well. Casey wasn't as hardcore of a fan, but with Jynn around, he was able to enjoy it. "Great idea," he replied.

The couch felt smaller than ever with Casey's tall frame taking up most of the space. To make up for it, he let Jynn lay on him, wrapping them in his blanket. On screen, they watched the movie protagonists discover a glittering cave. The walls glowed, color pulsing with each step on the stone floors. It was all painted by hand as far as they could tell, and it was mighty impressive.

"The backgrounds are so beautiful..." Jynn remarked. They said that every time they saw this movie, Casey could never forget the wonder in their gaze. He loved that more than the films themselves. "Yeah, I'd love to visit a place like that if it existed," he admitted.

"Same..."

For hours they both laid there, watching movies. Occasionally Jynn would get up to grab drinks or make popcorn. The brief intermissions between movies were spent dwelling on plot points and themes. Jynn's artistic brain really shone through; they loved dissecting a good story. The time flew by as they hopped from one movie to the next. By the time they paused the marathon to make dinner, Jynn noticed it was already eight pm. "Oh god, we've been watching these since ten..."

“What time is it?” Casey asked, rubbing his eyes. He was already a little sleepy. Jynn pointed at the time of the stove. “See for yourself.”

He peered at it, face lighting up in surprise as the numbers came into focus. “*Oh.*”

“I think we’ll be eating a little late tonight.” Jynn added.

“No kidding...” as if on cue, Casey’s stomach growled. Thinking about it made him hungry. Impulses to *hunt, chase, track* rose to the surface as he looked around. A hot guilt flashed over him as he glanced at Jynn with fleeting ill intentions. Unaware of this, Jynn laughed and opened the fridge, surveying its contents. “What should we eat?” they asked.

Casey’s thoughts traveled in a morbid direction, but instead he focused on considering his usual diet during weeks like this. “Do we have any chicken? I’m craving grouse but I don’t want to eat something that screams at me right now.” he suggested, only half joking. Jynn faked a wide-eyed look, broke into a soft laugh, and returned to the fridge. “We have some nuggets in the freezer...do you really eat wild grouse?”

“I eat whatever I can catch, but those birds taste especially good.” he rumbled. The crack of the neck, the steam of the frail body...the pursuit itself was a vital ingredient in the meal, but he was too ashamed to mention it.

“Damn, bring some home next time,” said Jynn, smiling.

“Sure.” He didn’t have the heart to tell them it would all be eaten before it even got close to the house. Being a large predator takes energy.

“So, quick question,” said Jynn, pausing with their hand on the freezer handle. “Can you still eat the same stuff you eat while uh, human? Like, if you eat chocolate do we have to take a trip to the vet or are you cool?” Hearing this, Casey looked indignant. “Jynn!”

“It’s a valid question!” They said, planting their hands on their hips.

“I’m not a dog!” he protested. Despite this, the way his ears pricked and snout wrinkled were very doglike. Jynn tried not to sicker. “Well?”

“I can eat normal things. It’s fine.”

“Great, we’re having chicken nuggets then,” Jynn said, taking the box out of the freezer. They began opening it, but struggled as one part of the cardboard wouldn’t yield. The cold must have made the adhesive solidify further. It didn’t help that they had a habit of chewing their nails, leaving them dull and useless. “It’s like this thing is superglued on…”

Casey took the box from them. It was small in his hands. He didn’t dwell on that fact for long as he turned it over. Carefully he sliced open the glue-laden area with a claw, and handed it back. “Problem solved.”

“Oh, thanks!” Jynn replied as they reached for the box. Glancing at their hand, Casey noticed a deep gash in the back. It was still red, but scabbed over. *It’s fresh...* he thought. “What happened to your hand?”

Jynn stared at it for a few seconds. “Just a little cut from last night, nothing to worry about,” they shrugged.

“What??”

“You just made a sudden movement while I was giving you the painkillers, and my hand was in the way. It’s fine, really!” they covered the spot with their other palm.

“Sorry about that then...” said Casey. His thoughts raced with a thousand questions, and only bad answers to match. He decided now wasn’t the time.

“No need to apologize, you were in a lot of pain.” Jynn continued to open the packaging, and set the nuggets out on a baking tray. “Anyways, I’m glad you’re doing okay today. Whenever you left...I got worried. Sometimes I was scared you wouldn’t come back.”

“But I always did come back. I’m not going anywhere, Jynn, I love you. I love living with you.” Casey pulled Jynn into a tight hug. It felt like being crushed by a fluffy trash compactor. “I love you too!” they squeaked. He released immediately, realizing it might have been too much. “Oh my god, are you okay?”

Jynn coughed, and gave a weak thumbs up. “I’m fine!”

“Okay, good, good. Had me scared I broke your ribs.” he breathed, relieved. Jynn reoriented themselves to continue setting up dinner. “No, I promise I’m fine...” Jynn said. They paused a little. “...it’s worth it.”

“You’re taking this too lightly,,,,” Casey poked at his fur again.

“No such thing. It’s just you, after all. That’s always worth it.” they replied.

“You’re sweet...thanks for the reassurance Jynn.”

“Of course, love.”

### 3 • Consequence

That night, Casey and Jynn were curled up in bed together. Warm, comfortable, and well fed, Casey slept soundly. Jynn's sleep, however, was fitful. Their stirring didn't wake either of them as they tossed and turned unconsciously, clenching their wounded hand.

In their dream they were in a forest. It was as if the sky and treeline had become one within the consuming dark. It was hard to look at the seams that shifted inside it. The scene was incredibly lonely, with dread tainting its edges. From behind a dense cloud layer, like the opening of a fluorescent eye, the moon came into view. Its light was heavy and piercing. Jynn felt themselves squint in its glare. They looked down at their hands, now gleaming in the light. Something was happening to them, the cut pulsing like the sky above. There was a painful jerk from within. The bones of the fingers seemed to move on their own, growing. Their wrists twisted, bones rearranging forcefully. All around the moonlight danced fervently. For a dream, the pain felt sickeningly real.

Casey woke to the sound of wincing next to him. Blinking his eyes open, he looked down at Jynn. In a fit of distress, they were muttering and whimpering. From what little he could see of their hands, something was wrong with them. He reached over, shaking his partner gently. "Jynn?" They didn't wake, and just kept

on shivering. He shook them again, careful not to scratch them. At times like this it was inconvenient having borderline paws. He wished he had the gentleness of his old hands back. Jynn's eyes slowly opened in response, squinting. They were watery, like they were about to cry.

"Jynn, are you okay?" Casey asked. They didn't respond. There was a glassiness to their eyes, staring *through* him. Their mouth was caught in a grimace, air hissing through sporadically. *They aren't awake*, he realized. He pulled Jynn into an upright position, supporting their back. Louder, he said, "Jynn! Wake up!" It took more effort to snap them out of it.

Jynn's eyes widened further, and a sharp, ragged breath came out of them. Frantically they looked around the room, up at Casey, and down at their hands. They were trembling. Jynn never got nightmares...the rare few times they did, they could shake it off when they awoke, but nothing had ever kept them trapped like this. Nothing had ever made them so full-bodily upset. It was worrying.

"C-Casey?" they rasped. It came in a whisper, rough and afraid. Casey rubbed their back gently. "I'm here, I'm here. Are you okay?"

"Something's happen--happening to me...it hurts..." they hiccupped, trying to get out the words. Casey felt his stomach drop. Something was seriously wrong. It dawned on him that his

ultimate fear had become a reality. “What is it?” he asked, holding onto the futile hope it hadn’t.

“My cut...” they said.

“Show me your hand Jynn.” As gently as Casey could, he held their hands up so he could see them clearly. They were *changing*, reconfiguring themselves. The bones shifted beneath the skin. Claw tips began to poke out from beneath the fingernails, wrenching them open. It was awful to watch, and worse to experience. Without a second thought Casey let go and got out of the bed. He knew exactly what was happening now; that cut was an infectious *bite*, and it was all his fault.

As Casey flung open the bedroom door, he said “I’m going to get the painkillers! Try to stay calm!” Jynn let out an affirmative whine before he ran out. In the bathroom, the cabinet was still flung open. The pill bottle was laying on the floor, on its side, where it had been left. Grabbing it clumsily, he rushed back to the bedroom. Bracing himself for the worst, he stepped in. It was much louder in there. Jynn was bent over now, crying out. In between winces they screamed, “it hurts, it *hurts!*” Casey couldn’t bear to hear it. He dumped two painkillers into his hand. *Is this enough? Too few? I usually take two to three...* There wasn’t time to think, just to act and hope it would work. He passed the pills to Jynn, who desperately shoved them in their mouth. Forcing themselves to swallow, they nearly choked. Casey held their back

again in the curve of his arm. He wasn't good at reassuring with words, so he tried his best to emulate Jynn. "you're going to be okay, I'm here with you. The first time is always the worst. It won't be so bad after," he said.

Almost in opposition, Jynn's back contorted violently. They howled in pain as their spine twisted. Casey could see raven-black fur peeking out from under their shirt, creeping across their skin. Desperately they tore the damn thing off. Up until now, he'd never seen a transformation from a secondary viewpoint. He didn't know how scary they looked, only how they felt. There was an empathetic pang in his chest with every struggle. Jynn shrieked as their teeth began to fall out of their lengthening jaws. To reduce the amount of blood getting everywhere, Casey grabbed a towel from the pile of clothes and spread it messily below Jynn. "They'll grow back, I promise," he said. It was immediately obvious this wasn't reassuring at all. Instead he tried again. "Just breathe, Jynn. You can get through this."

Through all the panting, he barely caught them whisper "Th-thank you..."

For over an hour, Jynn went through their grueling transformation. At times, Casey couldn't even look. It was too much. He held Jynn's hand firmly, squeezing it now and then and letting them squeeze back. Their claws hurt as they dug into his hand, but it was worth it to give them something to hold onto. If

only he didn't have to listen to their pained noises. Jynn sounded like a wild thing. Like something that had never tasted speech on its tongue. Some of the yelps were shockingly loud, startling the both of them. Having new, impossible sounds arise from within was never really something you got used to...at least not for a long time.

When it was all over, Jynn collapsed in Casey's arms, breathing heavily. They were soaked in sweat, tears, and could scarcely open their eyes. Blood was caked all around their mouth, framing their new set of teeth. The difference in appearance was staggering...Jynn had a much slimmer build than Casey, but had grown far larger than their human body. Now, they were also covered in a coat of sleek, black fur. Aside from a long, messy mane resembling their old hair, it was all fairly short in comparison to Casey's pelt. Their tail flicked languidly as they caught their bearings.

"How do you feel?" Casey asked, softly. He stroked their back.

"Sss...sore..." Jynn replied. "...Sore everywhere."

"Same thing happens to me, your body adjusts to it." He recalled how long the tenderness in his muscles lasted the first time. It was awful.

"I didn't think the cut...would do anything...It was tiny," they spoke between huffs. A coil of guilt tightened in Casey's chest. "I'm so sorry I did this to you," he said. Jynn managed to

open their eyes, which had changed to a brilliant emerald hue, and gave him a look. “It’s not your fault.” Their voice was becoming more stable. Now with Jynn’s eyes open, Casey found it even harder to face them. “It’s hard not to blame myself.”

“I know, but you shouldn’t. Please don’t feel guilty about this, Case.” Jynn wiped the corner of their mouth with their palm, and recoiled a little as they felt their face’s new shape.

“But you can’t come back from this. There’s no cure, nothing. You either try your best to pretend to be human until it all comes pouring out, or you stay like this. That’s *all there is*,” Casey said, angry at himself for letting this happen.

Jynn grunted, “It’s fine. I don’t mind it.” Casey had to take a second to process the answer, turning it around in his head a few times. “you don’t mind..?”

Only the spectating silence of the room answered back. Jynn wasn’t sure if they wanted to say what was on their mind. They were working up to it. Different starters played through their head, and held their tongue. “I...” they said, still internally going back and forth. *He’ll understand. Just say it.*

“What?” he responded. Jynn held their breath. *Here we go.*

“I kind of wanted this.”

The air hung still. Regret started seeping in.

“You...you *wanted* this?” Casey was in complete disbelief. After watching his friend go through one of the most physically

painful moments of their life, and still wrought with guilt, he struggled to wrap his head around it. Why would anyone want to go through this? They had to be out of their *mind*. He knew Jynn wasn't insane, so there had to be a reason.

Jynn flinched, trying to come up with a justification. "Not on purpose, I think. I've just...wanted to be different. For a long time."

"Why?" Casey asked, still making sense of it all.

"I don't know." Jynn looked dejected. He didn't seem to understand. They weren't sure what was going on in his head, but hoped it was just the shock winding down that made him so affronted. After a pause, Casey shelved his thoughts, took a deep breath, and pulled Jynn into an embrace. They winced before settling into it, muscles still sore. "I'm sorry I got worked up," he said.

"Ow...it's okay."

"I've just been struggling with this for a while. I didn't want you to, either. You deserve better." Casey said. "I get it. It's okay," Jynn responded, "thanks for the apology."

Casey rested his head on their shoulder. They sat for a while, holding onto each other in silence. It was peaceful, warm.

"Hey Casey?" Jynn piped up.

"Yeah?"

“I think...I need a new shirt.” Jynn smiled weakly. Casey let out half a laugh, caught off guard. The remains of a previously nice shirt, now clawed to hell, laid on the bed in a heap.

“Yeah. You do.”

#### 4 • Complimentary

That morning, Jynn was up early. They had hundreds of questions and curiosities, fascinated by their new body. They stared at themselves in the bathroom mirror for long stretches: running their hands through their dark pelt, over their thin yet boxy snout, behind their softly pointed ears...it was all so alien and new. Casey knew the feeling. He was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, trying his best to answer anything Jynn needed to know, and dodging their wagging tail.

“Everything smells so intense...” Jynn remarked, giving the air a sniff.

“Yep, you’ve got a powerful nose now,” Casey said, and tapped his own, “good for prey.”

“Don’t you get overheated like this..?” they continued, poking at their fur.

“Only in the summer. You get used to being warm.”

“Why does my voice sound different??” they said. The questions were unending. Casey sighed. “Probably because your whole throat is different, I think. I didn’t used to talk like this anyway, so I’m unsure.”

Jynn’s curiosity was relentless, but Casey was just glad they made it through the change okay. He didn’t have anyone around to help during *his* first. He was going to do everything in his power to make sure Jynn had a better experience. They deserved it.

“You know...all the werewolf stories really play down how much it hurts,” they said, flicking at their new whiskers. Casey groaned. “Werewolves? Really?”

“Got a better name for this?” Jynn turned, gesturing to himself. Casey shifted his eyes to a corner of the floor, slightly embarrassed. Jynn grinned. “Ohhh you *do* have something! Out with it then.”

“I was thinking...ah...” he hesitated, trailing off. Jynn folded their arms.

“Come onnn.”

Reluctantly Casey continued. “...Were-beasts? Or just...beasts. *God that’s stupid,*” he mumbled. Jynn ruminated on it for a moment. “Makes more sense than wolves I guess. I like it!”

“Yeah...I honestly have no idea what I— what we are. Oversized martens?” he joked.

“Honey, not even close.”

Casey smiled. Jynn was such a delightful bother. Even after everything, they still argued semantics.

~~~

In the kitchen, Jynn discovered the difficulties of manipulating intricate objects with their new hands. Though they were relatively the same, just bigger and hairier, the process of turning had rendered them sore and clumsy. A lot of their fine

motor control was gone for the time being. Frying eggs wasn't just difficult: it was messy.

"I'm *not* used to this...I feel like I'm using my bad hand for everything." They said, trying to clean up spilled whites. Casey chuckled. "Here, I think I can do it." He took over stovetop duty, carefully cracking a few eggs into the pan. Some mistakes were made, but for the most part he was successful. Jynn stared in envy. "How did you do that so easily?"

"Perks of practice," he replied, wiggling his fingers.

"I guess. You've had what, three years? It's day one for me," Jynn considered.

"Well...*sort of*. This is my first time cooking while I'm...uh..." he paused, thinking.

"A beast?" Jynn interjected.

"Ah, yeah." Casey was bashful, he didn't expect Jynn to be so keen on the term. It had, of course, started as a negative label, but he was starting to warm up to feeling neutral about it. They giggled seeing his reaction. "You're adorable, Case."

"What?"

"You. Are. Cute." They doubled down, poking him in the chest with a smirk. Caught off guard, he poked them back. "Well if *I'm* cute, so are you."

Jynn giggled more. They ran a finger through Casey's whiskers, tickling his nose. He snuffled. "We are! It's great." They flicked

their tail as if to punctuate. Casey huffed. “You’re lucky we’re friends.”

“Or what?” Jynn retorted, playing with his whiskers more. “Gonna feed me burnt eggs?” The smell of a disaster happening in the frying pan wafted through the air. Casey scrambled to attend to it. “Oh shit, the eggs!”

Jynn wolfed down their breakfast quickly, neglecting to even use a fork. They tried, at first, but it kept slipping out of their grasp. Besides, not using it just felt *right*. Something about it clicked. “I’m so hungry,” they said between bites, “what about you?”

“Same. You get used to it,” Casey replied, a little more reserved about his meal. After yesterday, he felt self conscious. Jynn still had more questions. “What else changes?” They asked.

“Bit of a broad question there.”

“Y’know, little things that are different. Things I should know,” Jynn explained. Casey took a moment to think. “Well for starters,” he eventually said, “you get chase dreams.” He took another bite of his breakfast. Jynn tilted their head. “What are those?”

“Predator, prey, running through the woods with a heavy hunger in your stomach...I hope you aren’t overly fond of small animals,” Casey continued.

“Well that’s...interesting.” Jynn looked uneasy. He wondered if it had struck a nerve, and quickly changed topics. “Oh, that reminds me, running is going to be a whole lot different for you.”

Curious, Jynn moved on from their train of thought. “How so?”

“You can use these.” Casey held up his hands. “Four wheel drive.” Jynn’s face lit up in realization.

“Oh!! Oh I can’t *wait* to try that out!” they tapped their claws on the table excitedly. The enthusiasm warmed Casey’s heart. Despite being embarrassed, he decided to offer something. “If you’d like, we can go out in the bush today, learn some things...” he said, trailing off to watch Jynn’s expression. The tapping intensified, nearly to the point of denting the wood finish. Even their tail started flailing. “YES! I’d love to!”

“You seem *real* excited about involuntarily becoming a monster overnight,” Casey commented. Jynn was too swept up to care. “Just let me have thisss.”

“Ha, alright. Let’s have some fun.” Seeing Jynn like this was beginning to make Casey realize that maybe...just maybe...his condition wasn’t completely horrible. There were a *few* things to enjoy. All he needed was a new perspective.

~~~

The sun was hidden behind a layer of clouds and canopy when they trekked out into the woods. The foliage was thick, not yet taken by the onset of autumn lurking around the corner. The breeze felt wonderful running through their fur. Casey had led Jynn to a clearing, in a small stretch of the woods where the trees were more patchy, and a little more light shone through. The sights and scents enamored Jynn as they sniffed their surroundings. Casey watched them explore, happy to see them enjoy it. Then, he called out to them, and waved them over. “Once you’re done there, come try this,” He said. Jynn’s ears perked, and they made their way over immediately. “Try what?”

Casey let himself fall into a quadrupedal position. It was extremely awkward to do in front of another person, in his view, but it was worth it to teach Jynn the ropes. He waited for them to realize the assignment, watching as they clumsily followed suit. He was surprised how *animal* they looked on all fours, barely even human at all. He knew he must have looked similar this whole time, and felt a small shame gnaw at his gut. Jynn on the other hand, was shocked at the ease of the posture. “*It’s so different!*” they remarked.

“I bet,” said Casey, pushing aside his internal negativity, “it was a big surprise for me the first time, too.”

“I feel so stable! *My arms were always too short to pull this off...*” mumbled Jynn. They lifted a hand to gaze at it.

“Hm?” *What do they mean by that?* Casey thought. He wondered what they were getting up to when he wasn’t around. Now wasn’t quite the time to ask, though. He didn’t want to interrupt their good mood. Jynn trotted in a circle, their gait somewhat lopsided. They were grinning like no one was watching, as if something down deep inside them was satisfied. Casey’s heart melted at the sight of the euphoria. Sure, it confused him a bit, but it was beautiful to see Jynn so delighted.

Now it was time for the real fun to begin. Casey tensed his shoulders, preparing to sprint. Once again he called out to Jynn. “Alright! Get ready, we start in three...”

They didn’t know what was coming. “Wait what are we doing?”

“Two...” he continued.

“Casey?”

“One! Try to keep up!” he huffed, launching into a full sprint. Jynn was startled by the sudden demonstration, and set off in Casey’s wake. Compared to them, he was *fast*. Jynn found himself tripping over themselves frequently, but started to get the hang of it as they went. Their muscles knew where to go, they just had to let it happen, and adjust. They pumped their shoulders. There was a rhythm to it; all their muscles moving in harmony. Push and pull, pull and push. They began to catch up, trailing behind Casey. Even through the ache their energy was renewed.

*It's like swimming in the wind, they thought, I'm so quick now. This is all I ever wanted.*

Casey stopped at an oak tree, waiting for Jynn to catch up. He leaned a hand against the bark, standing hunched while he caught his breath. It was always exhilarating to get to run, but without prey, the usual adrenaline was missing. When he lifted his head, he noticed Jynn was approaching at full speed with no signs of slowing down. "WAIT, STOP!" he shouted. They were on their way to a very bad concussion. Luckily Jynn halted just in time to avoid crashing into the tree, instead tumbling onto the ground in a furry heap. They groaned sorely. Casey walked up to them, giving them a hand with standing up. Jynn's legs were wobbly. "How was it?"

"*Amazing*," they wheezed, breathless. They propped themselves up against the oak. "Absolutely *amazing*." Casey watched them intently, without even realizing. Their movements, their face...Jynn looked natural like this, and in the back of his mind, it scared him a little. He'd spent an eternity getting to a point where he was *nearly* comfortable about it, and on their first day, Jynn had completely accepted what happened to them. He didn't want them to suffer, of *course* not, but he wished he could have felt happier about it like them. Three years of monthly agony left it tasting bittersweet. Again, he tried not to dwell. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. We can do this whenever you want. It's not like we have to catch anything, unless we run out of groceries..."

“Oh! That sounds good, I loved this,” Jynn responded. Their tail wagged subconsciously as they stood. The smile on their muzzle showed off their canines. It was cute, and took Casey’s mind off of his problems. “Come on,” he said, returning a half-smile of his own, “let’s get home.”

Before Jynn could say another word, he ran off again. In good spirits, they bounded after him. Learning all these incredible things with Casey felt like a dream they never wanted to wake up from.

## 5 • Confessions, and a visitor

Waning sunlight shone dimly through the window as the day reached its end. Casey and Jynn were curled up in the bed, quietly hanging out. Jynn stubbornly tried their hardest to read a book, but it was too small for them to hold reliably, and turning pages was a risky process with claws. They set it down in frustration. Casey took notice, and suggested, “maybe you should try audiobooks for the time being.” He gently put a hand on their forearm. Jynn sighed, and set the book on the nightstand. “Probably, yeah.”

“Tired?”

They closed their eyes. “Mhm, all that running earlier really wore me out...I was *already* sore. Now I’m twice as sore.”

Casey rubbed their arm. “Don’t worry, it takes—“

“—practice, yeah.” Jynn listlessly flopped their head onto a pillow. They stared up at the ceiling, lost in thought. Something felt off. “Hey, are you doing alright?” Casey pressed. He wasn’t exactly sure why, but he felt concerned.

“Sure...I’m just getting used to all this. It’ll be fine once I get the hang of it,” they said. They took a deep, heavy breath.

“I hope so, Jynn. You’re already doing amazing.” Casey gave them an affectionate nuzzle. They returned the gesture, but still had that hazy look on their face. Even with a snout, it was a familiar expression. Jynn was either thinking really deeply, or

reflecting on something. The corner of their mouth made a little tug. Jynn clearly had something to say. “You know, ever since I was little I’ve had this pervasive sense of something being...*not right*.”

“Oh?” Casey steeled himself. He could tell this was going to be heavy, at least for Jynn.

“You know how it goes,” they continued, “dysphoria, self discovery, all that. I used to cope with it by imagining myself as different things.” The way they spoke was slightly cagey.

“...What kind of things?” Casey didn’t quite understand, but he’d be damned if he didn’t try. Jynn’s face scrunched in reluctance, realizing what they were really getting themselves into. They just let go of a secret. Casey seemed willing to hear it out though, so hesitantly they continued.

“Monsters...shapeshifters...werewolves...fae...anything I could think of really. I had a bold imagination I guess, thought it was a game, but...well, it was coupled with a feeling. Something wasn’t quite right, there was *more* than boy, *more* than what I saw in the mirror. Something swirling under the surface.”

Casey was intrigued. “That sounds like it must have been difficult,” he said sympathetically. Jynn was relieved that he took that well. “Hell, it was. I could never pin down what that feeling even *meant*. When I figured out my gender, I thought, *oh! That’s what that was! I solved it!* but it was still there. It lingered. Even *after* my transition it felt like I was missing something. And...even thinking about bringing up something as weird as...as...” Jynn

choked up. Casey inched closer, resting his hand on them. “Hey, I won’t judge you for anything. This is a safe place to talk, okay? Get it all out if you need to,” he said. They nodded, wiping away a few tears. They continued on despite losing their composure. “I couldn’t imagine trying to bring up *this*, let alone my gender, to someone like my parents. I can’t explain something that’s so...inhuman? Does that make sense? I feel like a lunatic sometimes.”

Casey gave their chest a pat. “Jynn, you’re not a lunatic. Your parents will never be around to judge you again, remember? Besides, you’re *literally not a human* right now. I think that explains itself.”

“Well, *YEAH*, but I’m talking about before all this. Thank you though,” they replied. Casey was glad to see Jynn crack a smile at the last comment. “Alright, carry on.”

Jynn took a moment to breathe. “Like I was saying, it feels impossible to explain to anyone. You’ve vaguely heard bits and pieces about it but to be honest I thought it’d weird you out too, so I never said much. I was also worried it would be insensitive, considering your condition.”

“I sort of understand, but trust me, I’ve seen *far* weirder things than odd identities. I mean, just *look* at me,” Casey said, gesturing at himself.

“Ha, true.”

“I, for one, think you should just embrace it. Stop caring about what others might think. Go with your gut feeling and all that.” He gave Jynn’s belly a poke, tickling them. They giggled and pushed him away playfully. “Thanks honey.”

“Of course.”

“Not gonna lie, I’m really diggin’ this new look,” they smiled.

“You know what? It suits you.” Casey slid his hand on top of Jynn’s, and laced his fingers. They both stared at the ceiling in relaxed silence. It was nice to feel unburdened after a heavy conversation. Eventually Jynn piped up again, still gently smiling like something sweet was on their mind. “I think...I think I want to stay like this, Casey.” There was a wistful look in their eyes. It outshone any hangups Casey was still stuck on. “Are you sure?” he asked, just in case.

“I think I’m sure. I finally feel *right*.”

“Then if it makes you happy,” he said, shifting to lay on his back again, “it makes me happy.” Jynn cuddled in a little closer, nestling their head into his shoulder. The exhaustion had finally caught up to them both, and they let themselves fall asleep within the warmth and comfort.

~~~

It was still dark out when they awoke. Something had stirred them both out of the miasma of deep sleep. Casey fumbled for the bedside alarm clock. It was four in the morning, far from when they'd usually get up. *Fuuuck*, he thought, *we fell asleep early*. Jynn was still half asleep, eyes closed as they sat up. "Wha's the time...?" they yawned, stretching their arms. Casey still wasn't used to seeing them like this, but in his groggy state he couldn't care less. "Four."

"Noooo...that's bad. Why." Jynn blinked an eye open in disbelief.

"I don't know, let's just go back to sleep," Casey said, pulling the blanket back over himself. It was awfully hot under there, but he needed the pressure of a blanket to sleep. Jynn did the same. "Mm...yeah--"

Unfortunately they were interrupted by a terrifying sound coming from outside. It sounded like an animal yowling in pain. Casey shot up immediately, recognizing the noise, but hoping it wasn't what he thought it was. He shook Jynn, getting the both of them to hop out of bed and investigate. They stumbled out of the bedroom, Casey's ears pricked in alert. Sleepily Jynn ambled beside him, and went over to open the front door so they could peer out. It was hard to see in the shadow beyond the porchlight, but as their eyes adjusted, they noticed a figure. It was bent over, wailing.

“Hello?” Jynn called out into the night, voice a little creaky from fear. *No one* lived out here. At least, not that they knew of. For a moment it seemed like the sound stopped in response, but a series of shuffling noises after meant the thing was dragging itself closer. It was still difficult to see what, or even *who* it was from this distance, but Casey wasn’t taking any chances. He felt an involuntary growl build up in the base of his throat, hackles raised, and put an arm in front of Jynn.

“Hey, I don’t think it’s hostile. Listen,” Jynn said, pointing. They could hear it whining painfully between the more aggressive noises. Whatever it was, it needed help. Casey however, didn’t hear a word Jynn said. He was lost in a defensive state, standing protectively with his claws at the ready. His pupils were dilated; it was unsettling. Giving up on convincing him, Jynn pushed their way out of the doorway and into the dark. As they disappeared, Casey slipped out of his trance. He shook his head violently, grounding himself. “J-Jynn??” he barked. He was worried. He stepped forward, following them off of the porch. As he approached, he could hear Jynn talking to someone. He realized with a start that it was the crying figure they were kneeling beside.

The figure was shuddering. They were pale, covered in patchy fur, with proportions that looked *off*. Jynn tried to comfort them. “You poor thing...shh, it’s alright. You’re safe. Let’s get you up,” they grunted as they hoisted the person up, slinging their arm

over their shoulder. They walked back into the light, squinting as they limped to the house. Now Casey could see that this too, was a werebeast, caught halfway in a shift. Wordlessly he followed, helping his partner assist the stranger. He wondered how it was possible, and what could have caused the process to halt. He didn't even know it *could*. It was eerie. He didn't want to picture himself in their place.

~~~

Back in the living room, the couple had turned on a lamp and made things comfortable for their surprise guest. Seated on the couch, draped in a blanket, the stranger didn't say much. They stared off into the distance for long periods of time, occasionally twitching or shuddering. Being stuck in half shift luckily hadn't injured them, but they were physically warped and a little unstable. The half-muzzle of their face wore an anxious expression.

Jynn was seated beside them, a hand on their back. They didn't exactly know what to do, so they settled for questions. "So um, what's your name?" Jynn asked. They guessed they were young, probably in their early twenties.

"...Ben." The stranger fidgeted with the hem of the blanket, running it through their misshapen fingers. Most of the fingers had claws, but some were missing fingernails without anything in

place. There were three dark freckles on their face, two by the nose bridge, and one on the left side of their chin. Their hair and fur was a light dusty brown, grown haphazardly in thin patches over their whole body. It grew thickest on the nape of their neck, down their back, and from their chest to their abdomen. Draped over their left shoulder was a massive bite scar, individual teeth marks still clear, but healed over. Their skin was also bruised from the struggle. The blanket didn't just keep them warm; they were too hairless and injured to be naked.

"Hello Ben, I'm Jynn, and this is Casey. You're welcome to stay here if you need to, you're not in great shape," they said. The stranger nodded slowly, still a bit out of it. "Thank you...it was cold...out there." Their voice was hoarse.

"What happened to you?" said Casey. "Was that your first..?"

"I'm...not sure. It just...*stopped*...early. Not my first either." Ben looked uncomfortable thinking about it. "Sssorry for trespassing," they hissed through missing teeth, "I didn't know anyone lived around here. I needed somewhere to...y'know."

"We don't mind," Jynn assured. They patted their back gently.

"So, you two are like me? Huh...I didn't think there were others," Ben continued.

"Me neither," Casey replied, "I thought I was alone in this, aside from the one that bit me in the first place." The stranger

nodded in solidarity, then looked down at their feet, considering something. Whatever it was, they must have turned it around in their head a few times. Finally they spoke up. “Is there a cure?”

Jynn glanced over at Casey, who seemed uncomfortable after hearing this. They couldn’t really weigh in on it themselves, now that they *wanted* to stay this way, so they kept silent. Casey sighed. “No, there isn’t. I wouldn’t still look like this at this point if...” he trailed off, not wanting to hurt Jynn’s feelings. “Well, that aside, I’m learning to live with it,” he said. Ben’s shoulders slumped in defeat. Unsuccessfully, they tried to hold in hot tears. “Figures,” they said, “That’s what wishful thinking gets you.”

“Hey now, it’s not all that bad!” said Jynn. Confused, Ben turned to give them a moment’s eye contact. “What? How?”

“It takes some compromise, but if you view this as more of an opportunity than a curse...you open up a few doors,” Casey added. “I still have a lot to get over, but at least Jynn could change my perspective. It’s not worth it to hate yourself.”

“I still don’t get it, the changes *hurt*, man. It’s confusing, a-and painful, and it’s hard to do anything! How is that a positive??” they looked struck.

“Might as well make the most of it if it’ll hurt anyway,” he said. “What have you got to lose?”

Ben sighed, and got quiet. “...nothing, I guess.” They pulled the blanket tighter around their shoulders. Their conversational energy was running out, and the two didn’t want to

upset them. They gave each other a look, and Jynn stood up off of the couch. “We’ll stop bothering you for now, but please, get some rest. Let us know if you need anything.”

“Alright, thanks for taking me in.”

“Of course, goodnight Ben,” Jynn said.

“Night.”

They clicked off the lamp, leaving Ben alone to rest comfortably. Jynn and Casey were relieved to continue sleeping, and retired to their bedroom. Normally having a stranger in their house would make it difficult, but they were too tired to fight back the drowsiness. It felt good to help someone anyway.

## 6 • House guest

When Casey and Jynn woke up to start their morning, they found Ben asleep on the couch. Things were a lot more peaceful now in the daylight. Ben was nearly covered head to toe in the blanket. Quietly Jynn rushed back to the bedroom and grabbed another to lay over them, worried they were cold. Ben murmured a muffled *thanksss* between sleepy purrs and pulled it over themselves unconsciously.

In the kitchen, they both found something quick to eat while discussing what to do next. There wasn't a lot in the way of food that didn't require prep, so they settled for snacks instead. Casey had a sinking feeling they would have to start hunting at some point. They couldn't go into town like this, especially not with an unattended visitor. "*Do you think they have anywhere else to go?*" Casey whispered, taking a bite of some untoasted toast.

"*Hopefully..?*" Jynn replied. They had the space, sure, but there wasn't really enough to eat to support someone else. They wracked their brain for options, but kept coming up dry.

"*I wanna make sure they're alright until they recover, but then again, we weren't preparing for a sudden houseguest,*" said Casey. "*Yeah, I feel bad,*" they admitted, "*you think they'll stay like that?*" "*Stuck halfway through? I don't know. I've never seen anything like that before.*"

They both paused, once again peering at the living room, with no idea of how to proceed. For now, it was best to focus on making sure Ben was okay, and learn more about them now that they weren't in shock.

~~~

Surrounded by soft blankets, Ben woke up warm. The ceiling, blurry under her half-lidded gaze, had an airy light to it. It was a heavy contrast to the nightmare she'd awoken from...something about a transformation gone wrong. What a convincing one it was, too. But now that Ben was nestled in all cozy, she tried to let their thoughts drift. She was the sort to linger in bed on mornings like this, and rolled over to enjoy the comfort.

Sore. She was *incredibly* sore. Not only that, but her current location wasn't a bed. It was a *couch*. Ben didn't even own a couch. She shot up into a sitting position, only to be met with a house that wasn't hers. *This isn't my apartment...where am I?* she thought. She looked around the living room. It was modest, but furnished with care. There were quite a few shelves. Some were stacked with movies and books, others with trinkets and odd little decorations. It was charming, but *far* from her own home. What really caught her off guard was the familiar feeling. This couldn't be the house from their nightmare, *right?*

As she continued surveying, something in the adjoining kitchen caught her eye. Two tall, beastly figures loomed in there. They too looked familiar; One stocky and russet, the other lithe and dark, with a far longer mane. They spoke to one another in hushed voices. Immediately Ben hid under the covers, hoping they wouldn't take notice. This course of action, however, led her to see the poor state her own body was in. It wasn't exactly in great condition, and the sight startled her.

A sudden scream, followed by a thud, drew Casey and Jynn's attention. They ran to the living room, finding their guest on the floor, and tried to assist. Ben was all tangled up in the blankets, panicked at her own state of being. Seeing the couple enter only made things worse. In even more distress, she flailed within their cocoon, accidentally tearing a few holes. Jynn kneeled down, hands up in a non threatening position.

"Woah, woah, woah, it's alright, it's okay, you're not in danger," they reassured, slowly and calmly. Ben stared at them, wild eyed, until she broke out of it and caught her breath. She laid there for a minute, putting the pieces together. Jynn then extended a hand, helping Ben back onto the couch. "R...right," she said, "that *wasn't* a dream, was it?" Now the sore feeling clicked.

"I'm afraid not," said Jynn.

"Sorry I ruined your blankets." Ben was sheepish, clutching their own arm.

“That doesn’t matter, we have more. I could care less about the blanket though...are *you* alright?”

“Achey,” she replied.

Casey interjected. “We got painkillers if you need ‘em” he offered. In return Ben gave a grateful nod. “Thanks, I’d appreciate those if you don’t mind.”

“On it.”

Jynn took a seat beside them on the couch as Casey went off to find the meds. Helping people calm down was something they seemed to do naturally. “So, feeling better?” they asked.

“A little, thank you,” answered Ben. “I didn’t really remember what happened last night until now.”

“That’s fair, you were in shock, I think.”

“Yeah, something like that,” she said, leaning back into the couch. It really *was* a comfortable piece of furniture, no wonder she had thought it was a bed.

“You know, we have spare clothes if you need them,” Jynn offered, “It’s not like Casey and I have any use for them currently.”

“Oh thank god.” Ben closed her eyes in relief. Being nude around these strangers was unbearable. She preferred being shirtless at home, but she didn’t know these people. She was worried she’d have to ask for something herself. Just being here, she was already inconveniencing them enough, right?

From down the hall emerged Casey, holding the small pill bottle in his hands. “Found it!” He walked up to the couch and gently handed Ben the bottle. They took it eagerly, still aching. “Careful,” he said, “these are pretty strong. You should probably just take one.”

“Got it,” she replied. There weren’t many left in there anyway. Before taking it, she paused. “Hey, uh, got any water? I can’t swallow it dry.”

“Yeah, hold on lemme get you a glass,” said Casey, already on it. As he walked away again Jynn chuckled, “he can be forgetful sometimes.”

“Hey! I can still hear you,” he said.

“It’s true, calendar boy!” They grinned.

Casey was indignant. He turned on the tap, filling a glass. “You can’t go *there*.”

“...Calendar boy?” Ben asked. The context was lost on them. On top of that, it finally hit them how bizarre it was to see these *animal people* walking around a home, teasing each other. Like it was *normal*.

“Oh yeah, look around, you’re bound to see one somewhere. Casey loses track of time easily, so the calendars help him track full moons,” Jynn explained, gesturing vaguely around them, “but the other night he forgot entirely. Heavy workweek.”

“Oh I get that. I track it too...” Ben thought for a moment. They decided not to mention their method of choice was a period

app. “Wait, do you not use the same calendars as him?” She pointed at Casey, who was returning with the water.

“Well, that’s the thing, this is new for me,” said Jynn. They raised the back of their hand, showing off the still-scabbed scar beneath the fur.

She quietly put two and two together. “Ah...I see. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize, Ben. It’s not a dirty thing to me.”

“Yeah, just an accident,” Casey interjected, handing Ben the glass.

“One I don’t regret.” Jynn turned their face away somewhat. They couldn’t help it, it just felt nice to finally be like this. Ben still looked a little confused hearing that, but didn’t speak on it. They took a sip of water, downing the pill they’d been holding onto this whole time. It left a sour taste in their throat.

“So, before we get all buddy-buddy here I think we need an actual introduction. I still have no idea who you are, really. You don’t know me either,” said Ben. They were antsy now that they weren’t in immediate danger. Grateful, but still on edge. The stranger-danger mentality beaten into them from a young age certainly didn’t help. They quietly thought terrible things towards the people who cursed them with such anxiety.

“Ah right. Well, you know our names...” said Casey, making himself comfortable on the floor.

“Yeah, Jynn, Casey, I got that,” said Ben. “But, *who* are you? What do you do, what are you referred to as, you know?”

Casey drew a blank. Describing himself was one of the things he was the *absolute* worst at. Usually Jynn took over for him if anyone needed to know. Hell, even his resume was terrible before they met. They had sat there, back then, going over better options and rewriting it completely. “...I.T. Technician?” he decided. Ben looked him up and down. It was hard to picture him fitting into a desk in his current state. “Cool, that’s like, tech support yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Got any pronouns then?” she asked. The sentiment finally clicked in Casey’s head. He felt kind of stupid. “*Oh*, uh, I use he.”

“And what about you?” Ben turned to Jynn.

“Just ‘they’ for me please. And I don’t really have a job anymore, so I mostly just *make things*.” they said. They thought back on their sketchbooks, and the unfinished documents sitting on their laptop. Continuing that with their new situation was going to be a challenge, but they were confident they’d find some way to do it. Larger keyboards were a thing..weren’t they?

Ben nodded, intrigued by the vagueness of *things*. “Great. Guess it’s my turn then.”

“If you’re comfortable, yes,” said Jynn. “We’d also like to know what happened to you, if you remember.”

“I go by whatever, really. Ended up here because I was walking out of town again...When this time of the month rolls around I take a hike. As far away from people I can get for obvious reasons.”

“You also hold it in, then,” commented Casey. He felt sorry for them, it was a burden to keep it bottled up. Transforming back, too, was arguably worse than letting it all out. At least you had relief during the latter. It was unpleasant and exhausting to burn mass, to shed more than just fur.

“Yeah. I have a job. Can’t really afford to be some wild thing while working in an office,” said Ben. “Though, the idea of tearing customers asunder *does* sound tempting...”

“Do you live nearby?” asked Casey. “I’ve never ran into anyone else in these woods.”

“Kinda. I took a different trail this time, so it’s not like I’m in this area often.”

“Hm, checks out.”

“Still don’t know what paused your change, Ben?” Jynn piped up. The question had been burning at them. Ben frowned, scratching their chin with one claw. “No clue. Also, speaking of which, you mentioned clothes?”

“Right! Yeah. We should take care of that,” said Jynn, rising from the couch. They offered Ben a hand, then led them to the bathroom. She limped as she walked, legs not quite right, but she could keep up just fine. She recoiled a little seeing the dried blood

on the tile, but at least she could figure out the source. Jynn brought her a change of basic clothes--a white tee, a pair of black track pants, and some fresh underwear. "You can change here, sorry about the mess."

"It's fine, thank you. I appreciate it."

"Alright, let me know if something doesn't fit, though. Again, plenty of clothes we can't really use," they assured.

"Thanks, I will." Ben tried to smile, face still stiff from the half-cooked transformation. Their missing teeth and sore muscles made it look more like a grimace, but Jynn understood the gesture well enough. She closed the door and locked it firmly once they left, leaning against it. A familiar exhaustion had caught up with Ben. People, questions...they only had so much energy for it. Now they were stuck here as a guest, without even the option to retire to their apartment. It wasn't terrible, but they wanted to go home. They couldn't survive outdoors like this.

Now in a room with a mirror, Ben realized she hadn't had a chance to actually see how she looked. She opted to assess the damage before getting dressed. Even with the painkiller dulling the edge, some of that sore pain peeked through. She pushed herself off of the door to go check.

The body that looked back at Ben...wasn't so bad. In her mind, she had constructed some kind of grotesque, half-formed thing, hairy in all the wrong places and all around upsetting. She was relieved to discover she wasn't terribly injured either. Of

course, it was *odd* to see her own nose like this, stuck in its transition to a muzzle, but it was okay. Not great, not awful, just *okay*. Her shoulders had been lucky as well, still at her sides rather than sloped forward. All things considered, it could have been much worse. It could have felt *good*, and she didn't like that.

Satisfied with how well-off she really was, Ben finally pulled the tee over her head, and got dressed. “*Compromise...*” she muttered under her breath as she pulled the pants on each leg, “...*for now, I can compromise.*”

## 7 • Stuck

Ben stumbled out of the hallway, finally clothed. She looked a little strange, considering the circumstances, but a lot more comfortable. She was carrying the blanket over her shoulder now that she didn't need it to cover up. Lazily she tossed it on the couch, and leaned against a wall. "Thanks," she said.

Casey had pulled out the toaster for some actual breakfast now that Ben was awake, and was making enough for the three of them. He buttered them as well, careful not to get any fur in the margarine container. Jynn meanwhile had obtained some paper, and was trying very patiently to scribble something on it. They both looked up from their respective tasks, seeing Ben enter.

"Lookin' decent," said Casey, holding up a slice of bread, "toast?"

"I'm starving, yeah," Ben remarked, nabbing a piece off the small stack that had accumulated on a plate. It was the first thing she'd eaten in quite a few hours. Salty with butter, warm, and full of carbs. It was just what her body needed. Ravenously she couldn't help but devour *several* slices in succession. "Woah, empty stomach?" Jynn commented.

"You have no idea."

Luckily there was still plenty left for Casey and Jynn, who ate at a less desperate pace. They took their time, grateful there was still something to eat. When everyone was finally done, Ben

took a seat at the table with Jynn, leaned over, and peered at their paper. “Whatcha drawing?”

Jynn paused, lifting their pen. “Oh, ah, him!” They pointed at Casey with the end of it. The sketch itself was messy, but now she could see what it was clearly. The depiction was actually pretty good, capturing him at a flattering angle. “So you’re an artist?” Ben asked.

“Yeah, I’ve been drawing for a few years now!”

“Nice...must be hard to hold a pen like this,” she noted.

“I’m getting used to it,” Jynn replied. They continued sketching, looking up at Casey now and then for reference. It felt extraordinary to do mundane things with their new body. They wanted to re-experience everything they could this way. They held up their pen to line up the proportions. “Darling, can you hold still?”

~~~

As far as houseguests went, Ben was alright. Over the span of the week, she’d helped with housework and cooking, (among other things), and was invited in on movie watching. Like Jynn, she seemed to enjoy picking films apart, something they had fun going back and forth with. Altogether she was polite if not a bit impulsive. Ben’s persistent curiosity was refreshing. Casey was grateful for some self-time in favor of letting the other two build a

rapport. They all learned new things about one another throughout the days as well, becoming quite friendly in contrast to the caution and worry of their first meeting. It turned out Ben had just graduated from the local college, looking to become an audio engineer. In turn, she learned more about Casey and Jynn's history. She was interested to hear Jynn had never even gone through post-secondary, and all the challenges that came with it. Casey also had some odd stories from his time in tech support. They laughed over old memories.

Eventually, the final day of the cycle came. Casey held a change of clothes, and a towel, and paused as he stood on the porch. He looked back to the open door, where Jynn was leaning. Ben stood in the doorway as well, waiting her turn to transform. "Hey Jynn?" he hesitated. A part of him felt guilty. "This was...nice. Thank you for showing me that I can live with this."

Jynn cupped his face with their hand. "Of course, Case. I hope it isn't too rough this time. Thank you for giving me something I didn't know I needed." Their life would never be the same after that night...even thinking about it gave them a trickle of warmth in their chest. The ache for something more was distant now.

*Well, off I go,* Casey thought. He clutched the fabric tight to his chest and set off. It was getting dark out, the blue hour giving

way to lengthening shadows. He navigated through the trees until he found his usual spot, a discreet clearing, and set out his things. His mind drifted towards his friend as he prepared. *Jynn's going to be like that when I get back.* He made sure the articles of clothing were all right-side out, laying them on the grass. *It's what they want. I'm going to have to get used to them.* He was glad to know they were comfortable as a beast; It set him at ease that it was what they wanted, and that they didn't have to go through what he was about to do every month. He tried to keep the positives in his mind.

Standing in the middle now, giving any branches or sharp rocks a wide berth, he focused on change. He pictured his human form, holding onto it in his mind. He'd become well practiced in shoving all this beastliness back in. At this point, he'd normally feel a tightness coil in his chest, and tension through all his muscles. By now the pain should have been seeping throughout, the fur falling from his body like rusty snow, the *animal* sloughing off of him as he returned to humanity...but instead he remained the same. He opened his eyes, squinting from the anticipation, and let go of bracing himself. "*What?*"

It didn't make sense. He should have been on the ground by now, unable to think this clearly. This had *never* happened in the entirety of the three years Casey had been affected. A sudden panic washed over him, tail flailing. Was it late? Was it too early in

the night for him to start? He'd checked all the calendars, this *was* the right day. He had everything he needed, he did all the right steps. Despite everything, his routine transformation was frustratingly absent. He felt anxious bile hit the back of his throat, whining without meaning to. The inhuman sound only spiked his nerves. *I need to get back to the house, now.*

Sitting on the edge of the porch, Jynn and Ben held idle conversation while watching the woods. It was chilly out, so they let her lean on their fur for warmth. "Why don't you go with him?" Ben asked.

Jynn clacked their teeth, unsure what to say. "He doesn't like me seeing it, and I don't think I want to."

"Hm..makes sense, I can't imagine what it looks like from the outside. *Feels* fucking awful though."

"Apparently worse than turning *into* a beast..." They remembered the glimpses that night, of things pushing the skin around from beneath, of blood, of the whites of his eyes and the flash of his teeth. Imagining it in reverse was sickening.

"Is that why you don't want to change?" asked Ben. It was a loaded question, but Jynn answered quickly. "No, not at all."

"Then..." she started to ask another question, but trailed off as Casey crashed through the foliage, still in beast form. He was panting, distressed. He tossed the balled up clothes on the porch and leaned on it, his face buried in his arms.

“Casey? Why are you still--”

“*It didn’t work!*” he growled.

Jynn was confused. “What?”

“I couldn’t do it! It didn’t...I...” He dug his claws into the wood grain. “...I’m stuck.” They reached over and rubbed his shoulder for comfort. “It’s okay, breathe. Slow down.”

Ben stared, face full of worry. For *her*, being stuck was a freak accident, but if Casey couldn’t change as well, it could only mean bad news for the both of them. She had to check, to make sure that this was just a coincidence. Squeezing her eyes shut, she backed up from the two friends and gave in to the fearful urge to *try* to change. She prayed this state of her body wasn’t it for her, that she could turn back, or *forward*, and it would all work out. She was desperate.

Like Casey, however, nothing changed for Ben. “*Fuck, no no no!*” She sputtered, spiraling. “Something is wrong, I can’t either!” Both Jynn and Casey looked up at her as she backed up to the wall in rising horror. Casey threw his head back into his arms, upset. Their noises combined were dreadful.

All of this was *very* overwhelming for Jynn, who couldn’t keep up. They were used to helping one person, not multiple. Mediating softly just wasn’t going to cut it.

“Both of you! Calm down!” They raised their voice, surprised to hear a snarl lacing the shout. Everyone went silent.

“Listen, panicking isn’t going to help. This is unfortunate, but you’re only going to hurt yourselves if you get worked up. *Breathe.*”

Casey shivered. Jynn never yelled, especially not at him. He felt so guilty for upsetting them he could choke. Even worse, he was hit with guilt from all the times he hated himself for being like this, and how it reflected on them. How many times had they internalized his self loathing? *How many times had they envied being able to be something else for a while, only to be told it was disgusting?* He knew the shout shouldn’t have scared him, but the shock was enough to leave him shaken while he was this emotionally turbulent. “...Are you mad?” he creaked.

Jynn exhaled slowly, trying to smooth down their hackles. “I’m not. I’m sorry, I need a second. Both of you get inside.”

Ben stood up, swallowing her paranoia. Wordlessly she opened the front door, holding it for Casey as he sheepishly lumbered in. They shut it softly.

Once they were both gone, Jynn put their head in their hands, and sighed. *This is something I can’t fix. I barely know anything about this condition, they thought. Is it permanent now? Did biting me do something to Casey?* Worrisome questions they didn’t have answers to spun around in their mind. They may have been warm, but they couldn’t escape the chill that ran down their back. Jynn *loved* Casey as a beast, and watching him start to accept himself was great, but they didn’t want him to be forced into it.

Minutes passed as the adrenaline wore out. Slowly they calmed down, still heavy with dark thoughts. Dwelling on it alone wasn't going to do any good. Besides, Ben and Casey needed comfort at a time like this, not isolation. They felt terrible for snapping at them. *Maybe we all just need some sleep*, they considered. Jynn patiently stood and walked back into the house, leaving the porch and the dark face of the woods behind.

## 8 • Omens

The forest was rife with cloying silence. Its shadows were near-viscous, like a haze of fog clouding the expanse. Eternally shining through the conifers was the moon. It was still full and hungry as it hung in the maw of the sky. There was an absence in place of the usual hum of nocturnal beings, the call of birds in the dark, as if the gleaming moon's presence demanded the stage. The pervasive lack of any scent felt just as muted as the soundscape. This was the dream that haunted beasts before their first transformation. The very same place where, in their sleep, Jynn, Casey, and Ben found themselves that night. They had all gone to bed to sleep off the stress, and figure out what went wrong in the morning. What should have been the last night of their cycle was now something *new*.

Separately they dreamt in the same colorless space.

Casey hadn't seen this in *years*, but it had a striking familiarity. He could never forget; it had been the one night that set the rest of his life on a whole new track. The moon throbbed like a heart as he looked back up at it. The only difference now was that, in this dream, he was already a beast. He had time to really take in his surroundings, without the distraction of pain and

budding transformation. It was eerie, sure, but there was a serenity to this place.

After a long while of stagnation, Casey spoke up. “Am I supposed to be here?” he asked the ether. He figured if there was no one around to speak with, the area *itself* would be the one to ask. His words broke the silence, the whisper like a pistol. He was met without response. Instead, the moon’s light continued to pulse, now faster. The ground shifted slightly, as Casey noticed color creeping back into this intimidating little world.

Slowly, as the shadows retreated, Casey found himself in a *very familiar* forest. The scenery matched the woods around their home, where he had run countless times. This part of the dream was *new*. His attention was drawn to a particular path through a nearby copse of trees. It stuck out, having an oddly compelling aura. Before he could really think about it, he was already moving towards it.

There was a tug in his chest that drew him ever closer. Like some magnet had been embedded there, pulling him along, he dropped to all fours to navigate the new path in a run. There was something here, down this trail. He could feel its grip tighten on him the further he ventured. Whatever it was, it was intangible, and he had a feeling it would only continue to call no matter where he went. There was a scale to it as well, something he couldn’t wrap his head around until it was finally in sight. He ran as quickly as his mind would allow, anticipation rising with every step.

As Casey breached the narrow path into a clearing, the destination lay before him: a stream. There wasn't anything remarkable about it...it was a pretty view with smooth stones beneath its clear waters, flowing gently. Rocks lined its sides, mossy with age and forming a distinct line far off into the foliage-concealed distance in either direction. Casey paused, taking in the sight. The pull in his chest adjusted, now that he stood before what felt like an *obstacle*. A strong urge told him to go past this point, to leap over the water and land on the nearby bank. An easy task. As he tensed his shoulders and haunches for the jump. Ready to *go*, to surmount the little creek, to journey somewhere he'd never set foot....he woke up.

---

Only a few days ago, Jynn had seen this dreamscape. Expecting the pain from before, they jerked their hands close to their chest, only to feel fur cushion them. They gazed down in confusion at their bestial body. Then, like a trickle, the realization settled in that they'd already been through this, already undergone that life-changing *metamorphosis*. Though Jynn's surroundings were reminiscent of that first nightmare, this surely wasn't the same dream. There was no pain, no fear crawling down their throat. The face of the moon was just as mundane as always,

shining with that simple beauty they'd always admired. There was color in the nature around the clearing.

Then came a sound from behind them. It was a song without words, the kind you'd hear escape the throat of something living in distant, wild reaches of the world. A cry like an eagle, a wolf, an ethereal *call*. Unable to resist the feeling welling in their lungs, Jynn tilted up their head, echoing a howl of their own. Now the air truly felt clear. The saturation of this little world in the woods filled them with an odd pride. As they surveyed, the call struck again. Now they could tell which direction it came from, and turned to see a narrow path nestled in between the trees...

Jynn too, followed the path to the stream. The almost siren sound drew them along. As they paced in front of the waters, taking in the scenery and breathing in the scentlessness of the plants, they wondered what was so important about this place. Another call from deep within the verdant shadow of the other bank rang out, answering them. Immediately they sprang over to investigate, misplacing a step and plunging their hand into the water. It was cold, but welcoming. The rocks beneath the current were soft, eroded from time, lacking sharp or jagged edges. Jynn discovered they proved wonderfully calm to walk through, and their footing was sure and safe. They were almost overtaken to stop and just rest there in the stream. Yet again came the call, and

they pressed on. They planted a step on the bank, excitement falling to wakeful breaths as they came to.

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Nothing waited in the sky for Ben. The dream was dulled in moonless dark, and clouds were only signified in the absence of stars. She had seen this place before, albeit much brighter on the night of her first turning. It was confusing to say the least, a new moon in place of the familiar glaring circle she met in waking. Usually her dreams had a lot more going on, like daily stressors and brain junk, but this was a stark contrast. Quiet, boring. The exact kind of contemplative atmosphere Ben filled with distractions when she could. In her sleep, however, she couldn't exactly reach for a music player to drown out her worries. She didn't even have pockets to shove her idle hands in, instead left staring down at her half-changed body.

*Why didn't it go all the way?* Ben picked at the patchy fur on her chest, unsatisfied. Being stuck was a new type of punishment. She was left with a lurking desire for more, for *the rest* of what was tantalizingly unfinished, but was disgusted when it actually crossed her mind. Being a beast was manageable, she could work around it, sure, but *wanting it?* Her lifestyle just couldn't accommodate. Ben had to keep working, keep pushing until she could get a career, get enough going to live how she saw fit. She'd

never move out of her shitty, indebted apartment as a monster. People would be scared, they'd hate it. Whatever job she'd take would probably consider firing her for missing a week of their time. And hell, her dreams of audio engineering would all come crashing down, never to be realized. It felt hopeless.

This is why she always turned to her hobby in the first place. The podcasts and songs she used to mask inward thoughts were always a comfort and a marvel. It took an underappreciated amount of work to mix and cut audio, to put things together in a way that would sound *incredible*. The line between enjoyable and ruinous was very, very thin. She loved the sheer mastery of it all.

So when something pounded like a drum from deep within the trees, a pulse returned to her. It was unmistakable...a *beat*. Steady like a heart, paced like a lonely track waiting for harmony. It was impossible to ignore. There was a song out there, waiting to be completed. Knowing she had to finish it, accompany it with *something*, Ben ran headfirst in its direction.

The river was unexpected. After such a dense stretch of trees, Ben was close to tumbling in at a sprint if not for having heard the churning water last-second. She glared at the river, conflicted. The thudding beat never stopped, even more persistent over the volume of the waters. Now she was frustrated. This was a dead end. Traversing this thing was even more dangerous with a

failed transformation; hoping to cross it would get her killed. Hiding behind reasoning, she didn't want to admit to herself she was afraid of the other side. The beat only became louder, tugging at her. It needed her, she just needed to *reach it*...but she wasn't ready to face the current.

~~~

There was a knock on the bedroom door, interrupting a discussion between Casey and Jynn. They both awoke at the same time, and had begun sharing details about their oddly similar dreams. The possibility of it being a coincidence, down to the pull, was doubtful. Considering the strange events that evening, they were sure it had something to do with the shift cycle being abnormal. Casey had a feeling Ben was awake for the same reason as they were, and let her in. Silently Ben sat on the edge of their bed, contemplating. She stared into nothing for a while, thinking about what she'd heard through the door, before asking, "You too huh?"

## 9 • Search

Locating the area from the dreamscape wasn't as easy during the day. Details were harder to match in the light, and though Casey was familiar with the forest, he'd only gone so far a handful of times. Even worse, the slippery nature of remembering visuals in the morning meant some landmarks weren't possible to describe with any real accuracy. After an hour of searching with no success, the trio had to come to a decision.

"We have to split up," said Casey. Jynn nodded, a direction already in mind. "Good idea, that way we'll cover more ground."

"What if I get lost? I'm not used to this place..." Ben reminded them. It was a valid point, also backing up the fact she didn't want to be alone. Jynn piped up, struck with a solution.

"How about every once in a while we shout a signal, kind of like what I described earlier? Marco-polo style." They cupped their hands around their snout to demonstrate, but Casey put a gentle hand on their forearm, lowering it. "Smart, but maybe wait until we're a ways away from each other."

"Ha, okay. What do you think, Ben?" they asked.

Hesitantly, she agreed to it. It was better than nothing, and if they really wanted to find that clearing they'd have to split. She pointed in a direction, and said "alright, I'm going that way then."

Jynn gave a nod, and followed suit, pointing where they decided to venture. “Great, I’ll head over there. Casey, I guess you’re left with...”

“This,” he replied, gesturing in front of him, “Let’s get started.”

Now with a wider range to search with, the three beasts finally began to narrow down their target. Familiar trees, rocks, and other landmarks proved useful in guiding them closer to the clearing, all the while shouting call and response signals to each other. It was getting harder to remember the clear details of the location, but they were positive they’d know it when they saw it. As this secondary attempt at searching was nearing another hour, Casey felt a jolt. The pull from his dream yanked at something in his chest, and in surprise, he called out to the others.

Jynn and Ben quickly made their way over to Casey, concerned. “What happened?” asked Jynn, checking for signs of danger. Casey’s alarmed yelp sounded like trouble, and the two of them came as fast as they could. Luckily there was no threat to be seen, and instead he placed a hand over his chest. “I think I know where to go, I felt it again.”

“Are you sure that isn’t a cramp? We’ve been out here for a while-” Ben suggested.

“There it is again!” Casey jerked slightly forward, once again compelled to move further. They couldn’t believe their eyes.

Even after the oddity of the shared dream, they all had slivers of doubt in the back of their minds. Now, Casey was their living compass.

“Holy shit,” Ben remarked as they all stepped into the clearing, trailing Casey’s lead. “This looks just like it!”

“Which means the trail must be here too!” Jynn said, glancing around.

Casey gazed up at the sky, now cloudy. Framed by the conifer trees, the space where the moon would have been was empty. It all lined up. He’d probably run through here once or twice while out hunting, but he couldn’t be sure. Dreams aside, the place was unremarkable, and he didn’t know what to do next. The twinge in his chest rose again, this time in the direction it drew him in the dream.

Jynn was standing there, searching eagerly for the path, but was met with only bushes and trees. Still, the pull only strengthened as Casey approached and pushed aside some of the greenery with his hands. It was tough work: the branches, stems, and brambles were thick. They creaked and snapped as he applied pressure. Beyond the small obstacle, there was an open space between the trees. Both Jynn and Casey were shocked to see that, though partially hidden, the path really did exist.

“Ben, we found it! Come here!” said Jynn, waving her over. Now the other two felt that same tug as they gazed upon the path.

It felt strange that this trail lay unassumingly before them, plain and overgrown, as if it didn't know its own significance.

"Let's go, maybe the stream is through there too..." Casey said. He felt like he could put faith in it now.

"River, it was a river," Ben corrected. "Also hey, before we go marching off to god-knows-where for unknown reasons, shouldn't we go back to the house and prepare? Just in case?"

"I think we have everything we need," he assured.

"But what if we aren't *ready*-?"

Jynn laid a hand on her shoulder. "It'll be fine, promise."

They walked single file through the narrow path. More brambles and branches made the trek difficult, but with Casey in the lead, he was able to get them out of the way for the others. Though this was certainly a trail of sorts, it apparently hadn't been used by much of anything in a long time. Far-decayed logs and dense moss decorated it in peaceful solitude. The trees themselves almost seemed more *ancient*, as though the path had preserved them. Their thick trunks and scaly, gnarled bark nearly formed a wall on either side. There was an unfamiliar tinge to the air as well, cooler, but almost sweet with the taste of damp leaves. It couldn't be petrichor, could it? It hadn't even rained. A ways off they could see the end of the trail now, a muted glow winking in the distance between the foliage. Mirroring the dream, they all felt the pull strengthen as the trio got closer.

The stream greeted them with its indifferent waters. There was no welcome in its tepid current, no 'hello' in the way it trickled on, yet it was such an overwhelming sight they all gasped in shock. It was the unreal made real; a piece of proof exceeding all others. Jynn ran up to investigate, excited, and began running their claws through the water. The more diminutive size of the stream compared to Ben's vision threw her off guard. Casey anticipated the next step would be strange, moreso than the enclosed path.

"It feels just like it did last night...a little cold but *nice*," noted Jynn. They were thankful it wasn't a raging river, like their new companion insisted. In fact, it was rather shallow, an incredibly easy thing to cross if desired.

"Huh, it wasn't this low in my dream," Casey said. "I wonder who's was most accurate."

"From what we told each other...my version of the stream lines up, but Casey I think your 'pull' was the closest," Jynn mentioned. He nodded, crouching down by the water's edge. "Speaking of which, it's definitely telling me to get to the other side," he responded.

"Hold on," Ben piped up. She was standing further back, arms crossed. An uneasy expression dominated her face. To her, something about this place felt...off. It was just a little flowing water, but there was such a mental gravity to it. The presence

alone made her hair nearly stand on end. Who knew what it was capable of if it could snake into their unconsciousness? It was so oddly *targeted* in her own vision; dangerous and formidable. It was nearly a joke to feel so much fear for something so harmless, but Ben had a hard time moving forward, even with an internal magnet heaving at their mind. She was rooted in place.

“You okay Ben?” Jynn called back, pausing their playful fidgeting.

“Yeah, yeah I’m just...” she tripped on her words, noticing her breathing was off-kilter. Without reservation, she blurted “...I’m panicking.”

“Sit down if you need to, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Isn’t this whole situation weird? Like, *really* weird? And I thought we were supposed to talk about the...the.....” she trailed off, deciding a conversation about being *stuck like this* was the last thing she could handle right now. Casey spoke up. “Well, yeah, it’s weird, but it might help fix everything if we follow it through. Worth a shot.”

“I can walk you across if you’re nervous, Ben,” Offered Jynn.

“I guess...” she seemed to ease up slightly. The hope of finally getting out of this halfway form was motivating.

“God, it’s starting to hurt a little staying still. I’m gonna cross.” said Casey. He rose up on all fours, then tensed like a

spring. The other bank wasn't a far jump away, but still he hesitated as he held the stance. Something told him that *this was it, the point of no return*. As he readied himself, in both body and mind, Jynn lined up beside him, and braced herself as well. Afraid of being left behind, Ben joined them as well. She hunched awkwardly, not wanting to loom by standing, but not quite as proficient with a quadrupedal pose.

“We can do it,” Jynn encouraged, “just go!”

They all leapt across the stream in tandem. There was a ripple sensation across their bodies as they passed, as if an unseen cloud of dense air had been broken. Casey and Jynn were propelled far by their powerful haunches, landing firmly on the ground, while Ben only made it *most* of the way. With her feet in the water, she quickly stepped out to meet the others. The three of them were amazed. They had made it to the other bank, still very much *awake*.

## 10 • The Point of No Return

On the other side of the stream, it didn't seem like things were all that different from before. The water gurgled gently, showing no signs of being passed over or disturbed. It was almost as if nothing had happened at all, and the force of the call was simply imagined. That is, until Jynn, Casey, and Ben felt that wrenching *TUG* in their chests yet again, drawing their focus to a cluster of bushes that lay ahead. A verdant darkness dwelled between the leaves. It was alluring, and difficult to pull their gaze from. Captivated with the need to venture further, Jynn took the first step forward. "Whatever's through there is *important*," they said.

"Just be careful," Casey warned. He didn't want to hesitate any longer, he was just as compelled as Jynn. Still, he couldn't help worry about the possibility of danger. It was in his nature. Jynn poked their head into the bushes, then slipped further in, until the tip of their tail disappeared with the rest of them. The wall of green in front of the group had enveloped Jynn entirely, and must have been hiding more behind it than appearances would suggest. Ben gave Casey a trepidatious glance. "Guess I should go in then, huh?" she said, before swallowing her anxiety and following suit. Casey gave the quiet stream one last look, and headed through.

The passage was dense with leaves. Soft, dewy, and all encompassing. There was not much space, and it was near impossible to keep his eyes open without them being assaulted. Blindly he crawled through, hundreds of little leaves getting caught in his pelt and washing over him like a wave. It muffled all sound, apart from the shuffling. Moving *forward* was easy. The leaves were angled in such a way that backing up, *returning*, was difficult. He kept moving until he could smell his companions' scent. Suddenly, after some wriggling, he tumbled out of the thicket and into a clearing. Something shuddered behind him as he withdrew his tail from the leafy mass, and he had the feeling it was no longer traversable.

His friends stood on fours only a little ways away, staring up. Casey followed the tilt of their heads, discovering that there was a massive set of mountains towering above them. The clearing itself was large, lined with both deciduous and conifer trees. Heavy vegetation carpeted the space between it all. It was beautifully temperate. *Lush*.

"*What is this place...?*" Casey muttered, shocked. Jynn turned around quickly, picking up on his voice. "Case! You made it!" they beamed, "I was starting to think it *devoured you alive*."

"Well that's morbid," said Ben.

"I'm fine, just a bit disoriented," he assured them. Taking in the view made his head spin. It was so colossal. "This, uh, definitely isn't home, is it?"

“No, but...it’s *gorgeous*,” Jynn said, gazing back up at the mountains. The snow-crested peaks were jarring in comparison to the few mountains they were used to. These were tall and awe inspiring goliaths compared to those humble overgrown hills. Casey found himself lost in the sight too.

Somehow, that leafy passageway had led them somewhere far from where they’d started. It was unbelievable! The siren call it stirred in the trio’s chests was already strange enough, but this? A transportation? It was the kind of thing you only saw in stories and fleeting escapist daydreams. Casey was certain Jynn had dreamed up something like this before, especially considering what he knew about them now. He wondered how many other people like Jynn were out there, yearning for what was deep down inside them. For the inhuman, the mystical. *I’ll ask them about it later*, he thought, *they’d probably have some idea*.

Ben picked at the grass below her. Her thoughts were like whiteriver rapids, churning with questions. “I can’t believe this.”

“Me neither,” said Casey. He sat down beside her. “I’m still trying to believe the past few days.”

“I’m just trying not to think too hard until I can fully wrap my head around this. Processing...*magic*...isn’t easy.”

“*Magic*...” Jynn mouthed, still distracted by the vista.

“Sure feels like that, something so surreal,” Casey continued.

“Yeah.” Ben gave him a hint of a smile. “...Can’t wait to wake up, though.”

He tilted his head. “Wake up?”

“Well, this is a dream right? It’s gotta be. One of those tactile ones...where you can feel the...the grass n’ shit,” she said, plucking another green clump out of the dirt. Her tone dropped in the last half as she trailed off. Her heart wasn’t in it.

“Ben,” Casey said, “you know it’s not.”

“..Yeah, nevermind.” She cut herself off. “Forget it.”

Jynn hummed a note, zoning back in. Their attention had been focused solely on the new area around them. “Hm? Something happen?”

“I’m fine, sorry. Just...was hoping this was all made up,” Ben said dismissively. She tossed the grass back on the ground, stood up on two’s, and walked off to go look around the perimeter on her own.

Jynn was confused. “What’s wrong?” they asked Casey.

“I think she’s having second thoughts about coming here.”

“Oh, I see. I hope she isn’t upset over it then. I have a suspicion we can’t leave for the time being,” Jynn said. “You felt it too right? Whatever that was over the stream? The leaves...*close*?” Casey couldn’t place their emotion. A conflicting sense of both wonder and melancholy flavored their tone.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Do you think we pissed off the fae or something?”

“The *fae*? Really, Jynn?”

They looked embarrassed, immediately regretting the question, and attempted to explain themselves. “I mean, well...doesn’t this line up at least a little bit? Secret passages hidden in the in-betweens of the world, like a trail hidden through trees, a barrier over running water...it sounds awfully fae-ish to me.”

“Okay I get it. When you put it like that it sounds like *something*, but I don’t think that’s what we’re dealing with.” Casey didn’t want to invalidate them, he just figured they had gotten a little too caught up in the mystique. Admittedly, he didn’t know enough about the concept to put stock in it.

“What do *you* think it is then?” Jynn asked.

“Uh.....” he went through mental acrobatics trying to think of something, but came up with a total blank. “We’ll figure it out eventually. Hell, maybe you’re right.”

“Pfft, it’s alright. I don’t have all my eggs in that basket. It’s probably something else,” said Jynn, giving him a pat on the head, “unless the fae are hairy, bitey, and awfully contagious.”

“Are you implying what I think you’re implying?”

“Listen, who’s to say they *aren’t* beasts? Maybe the whole ethereal humanoid thing is a massive ruse! Maybe that makes *us* one of them too,” they grinned.

“Jynn...” he sighed. Their creativity was bottomless, but he could tell they were overplaying it to ease themselves off some little anxiety. Slightly judgemental reactions sometimes made their rejection sensitivity flare up, and Casey knew he’d towed a bit of a personal line by being skeptical.

“I’m just kidding,” they said, hearing how unamused his reaction was.

“You’re deflecting again. I’m sorry if I sounded critical. I know stuff like that means a lot to you, even if I don’t quite get it.”

Jynn bit the inside of their cheek, nose scrunched slightly. “I guess I am, sorry.”

“You don’t gotta apologize. That’s my job right now.” Casey gave their shoulder a brief nuzzle, trying his best to assure them. He’d hardly even realized how animal the action was until he pulled away. Jynn seemed to appreciate it nonetheless. “Thank you...I was worried you thought it was stupid,” they said.

“Course not. I just have a different way of thinking.”

“Alright.” Jynn sat upright on their haunches and shook themselves, fluttering their hands to get the tension out. When they were all done, they glanced over at the half-beast poking around in the periphery. “We should talk to Ben.”

All the trees were large here. They towered in old-growth glory, trunks weathered and boughs plentiful. Ben recalled a time they used to live in a town near the coast, surrounded by

mountains, where the forests looked just like this. Cedars and spruce had dominated those woods. She'd read an information plaque along a hiking trail about how vital they were to processing carbon dioxide and housing fauna. She was told by another that cedar bark was useful for weaving all kinds of incredible things, and the wood made for good boxes and canoes. She'd already known, but back then she couldn't help but pause in front of the scenery and take a trip down memory lane. Her childhood was filled with field trips to cultural museums and dozens of hikes. *Home.*

Musing over her time spent in the more rainforested part of British Columbia, Ben decompressed. She ran her palm over the fronds of a fern. By the time Casey and Jynn approached, she had cooled off enough.

“Oh, hey,” she greeted them, hand slipping off the foliage.

“Doing alright?” Casey asked.

“Better. Shock's died down at least,” she replied. “This place is more familiar than I thought it'd be.”

He leaned against a tree, nodding. “That's good, any idea where we've ended up then?”

“Not *really*, it would help if I knew the mountain range better though.” Ben traced the grooves in a tree beside her. “We're further west, I think.”

“Just a guess but, maybe near Smithers? Haven’t really been there *much...*” Jynn suggested. It was a bit of a small town, so they’d only ever passed through on their way to other places.

“Hm, there are mountains around there, but these ones don’t have enough peaks to be the Seven Sisters range,” Ben noted.

“Further, then?” said Casey.

“Seems like it, yeah.” She stepped out further to take another look at the mountains facing the clearing. Ben tried to focus on the climate, and where she might have seen peaks like these. Then it hit her...the environment was so familiar for a *reason*. It was the one she’d grown up in. “Got it!” she said, “We’re near the Skeena range! That means there’s a *massive river* we can follow!” Ben was excited, finally able to grasp their general area. However, this was a little lost on Casey and Jynn, who weren’t quite as familiar with the location. At the very least they knew of the Skeena itself; a large, powerful river known for its plentiful salmon. They trusted Ben’s intuition on the mountain side of things.

“So we just have to find the river, then follow it until we reach a town?” Jynn asked.

“Seems easy enough, but that’s dangerous, looking like this, isn’t it?” said Casey. He was certain that the inability to change form would last longer than he or Ben planned, and Jynn was a whole new can of worms. This is how they were now, a beast, and appearing like that in public would be extremely difficult.

Even if they did make it back to civilization, wouldn't it be *more* harmful than waiting things out?

"Hm, fair point. At least we'd get proper directions, a highway to travel alongside maybe," she replied.

Jynn interjected. "I'm all for it, but let's make absolute sure the leaf passage is closed before we go too far."

They both agreed, following Jynn to the area they had initially emerged from. The bushes were thick and dark, much larger than the beasts, resting against a raised stone-face. Jynn crouched down and crept inside. Quickly, they discovered that there was nothing there but solid rock past the bushes. They looked all around, investigating them, but found nothing useful.

Relaying this, the group decided on making the journey to the river. According to Ben, who was dismayed by the passage's disappearance, there would be plenty to eat along the way. As long as they were able to catch fish and small game, as well as identify berries. It was a great time of year to be tasked with long travel anyway, as it was warm enough not to risk pneumonia, and lush with shade. Inconvenient as it was, it could have been far worse.

With the mountains as a compass, they set out, ready to brave the wilds ahead.

## 11 • Trailblazing

The sun burned high in its noontide throne, but the canopy was generously dense. The small group wore a dappled shadow as they pushed through bushes and weeds, following Ben's lead. When there were trails to follow, they had only been tread by wildlife. At times, it was difficult to proceed without coming across a patch of thorny shrubs or brambles. Fortunately, several of them happened to be blackberry bushes, which gave the trio something to eat. Ben had assured them that there were no poisonous lookalikes, so between long stretches of marching, if they came across another blackberry bush, they'd pause to have a few.

It was a blessing for Jynn and Casey to have coats of thick fur. Thorns caught in irritating ways, sure, but they were unable to scratch. Ben, with only clothing to shield her, was covered in small nicks. She could easily tolerate the little scuffs. She only wished she wasn't so slow moving through the brush. It was hard enough moving on all fours with her body so stunted, but the terrain only compounded the snail's pace of their travel.

A few ears perked at the sound of trickling water. They were coming up on a rivulet, almost hidden by a sea of broad green leaves. They looked soft, layered over one another atop thick

wood-like stems. Thirsty, Jynn took a few steps forward, but Ben lunged out in front of them with a startling bark.

“BAD IDEA.”

Jynn was confused, hackles raised. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s devil’s club,” she stated.

“What’s that?” they asked, looking over the plants with curiosity.

“You don’t know...? Right. It’s a very, *very*, thorny plant. It’s got cool medical properties but you will want to *steer clear* of them for now. See those leaves? They have spines too, on the underside,” explained Ben.

“Oh, I see ‘em. *Ouch*.” Casey sucked in air through his teeth. Picturing those long thorns in his skin was unpleasant. “There’s gotta be a way around, right?”

“I think so...” said Ben, looking around. After a moment, she spotted a fallen tree resting on the ground. It had apparently crushed many of the thorny plants when it fell, creating a narrow opening in the dense thicket. There were still several branches sticking out of its trunk, but maybe it would make for a quicker route... “Follow me,” she said, leading them to it.

Ben proceeded first, cautiously stepping onto the tree. Once she was sure it was safe, she began the dreaded task of walking across. Luckily the copious amount of branches meant there were more than enough places to hold onto as she went. It

also meant some of them got in the way. She grumbled as a bough poked her in the face, and slid across her half-muzzle. Once Ben was safely on the other side of the patch and rivulet, she beckoned for Jynn and Casey to join her.

Jynn made it across rather easily, only annoyed by how easily their fur caught on a few of the branches. They dug their claws into the bark securing their grip far more effectively than Ben. Looking at their nimble movement, one would think Jynn had been a beast their entire life. They were coordinated, focused, and with only a misstep or two, were able to join Ben at the other side. Jynn gave Casey an encouraging shout as he stepped up.

The creak of the wood made it immediately clear that he was heavier than the other two beasts. He shifted his weight on and off of the tree, but it didn't give. Casey considered what was worse, wading through a cluster of wickedly spiked plants intentionally, or falling *into* them. "I don't know about this..." he said, "...I might just go the long way around."

"Casey, you'll be fine!" Ben shouted.

"Yeah you got this!" Jynn added, "just be careful!"

Casey eyed a possible alternative route to the side for a while. Then, begrudgingly, he raised himself onto the fallen tree and began the arduous task of traversing it. The wood sounded far from happy, making its complaints in creaks and groans. He winced with every crack, his tail flicking. He held onto the

branches firmly. *Just a little further now...* Casey thought. *Doing good so far. I'm getting the hang of this.*

Unfortunately, a branch he'd been using to brace himself unexpectedly snapped, throwing him off balance and scraping his hand. Jynn, who was watching intently, rushed in to help, but stumbled and collapsed into the dense green. Casey managed to dig his claws into the tree and rein himself in before he could do the same. He panted, adrenaline high. Jynn whined painfully.

"God, are you guys okay?" Ben asked. She took a few steps onto the tree to meet Casey, who had a death grip on it. He was starting to calm down, but his left hand looked like it was bleeding. "Yeah, yeah just...hough. Stings a little," he said, observing his paw. Jynn continued to groan from beneath the shrubs. Ben climbed down to assist them, trying to avoid the spines.

"You'll be fine, Jynn, we just gotta pick them out."

"Mrehh, it's like a million splinters..." they complained, sitting up. They yelped as they accidentally swished their tail into an unseen young stalk. Ben winced. "Ooh yeah that's not good. Up you get." She also received her fair share of pokes as she helped them to their feet, and guided them out of the patch.

They rested beside the next stream they found as they removed thorns and cleaned out pricked skin. Ben had an easier

time getting rid of the spines, lacking the dense fur Jynn sported. As a tradeoff, Jynn's pelt had caught more of the thorns before they could enter the skin. Meticulously they both got rid of as many as they could manage. Infection could be a serious problem out here, and risking it, even with a broken off splinter, was a bad idea.

Casey ran his hand through the current, washing out the cut. The fur between his pads stuck to the blood uncomfortably, but at least it wasn't deep. Some splinters were impossible to get out. His hands weren't the most dextrous anymore, his fingers far clumsier than human ones. Using his claws would only make the wound worse. He let out a frustrated huff. Jynn, who had just finished being de-pricked, kneeled down beside him and leaned on his shoulder. Casey waited for them to speak up like they usually did, but they didn't say a word. Despite the silence, Jynn seemed content, so he decided not to question it.

Ben was left a bit awkward, sitting upstream. They dipped down to drink and wash their face. The sensation of water passing through their few missing teeth was another reminder of their unfortunate situation, but they kept at it all the same. Walking through this place had inspired a mighty thirst. Small discomforts had to be put on hold for the time being.

Once Ben's needs were met, she wiped her muzzle and joined them where they sat.

“So, how’s your hand doing Casey?” she asked. He gave it a glance. “Not so bad, but roughed up. It’ll probably heal soon.”

“Good. By the way, nice catch back there,” she added.

“Oh, thanks...*I really didn’t want to fall.*”

“Pfft, that’s fair. Poor Jynn did instead.”

Jynn nodded, still quiet. They looked tired.

“We should find somewhere to camp until tomorrow, I think we’ve done enough traveling for today,” Casey suggested. He was worn out too, especially after crossing the tree.

“Hm,” Ben hummed, mulling over the idea. She wanted to keep going, but her new companions didn’t seem to be as fit for long hikes as she was. Considering how scuffed up they were by the encounter with the devil’s club patch, camping soon was a good choice.

“Alright, let’s go find shelter.”

## 12 • Hunting

Beneath the shadow of a large, stone overhang, the trio made their shelter. They gathered moss and boughs to make the dirt more comfortable, and dug down to make a shallow hollow. It was reminiscent of some kind of nest. With the stone overhead, it was like resting under a looming giant. At least, according to Jynn's imagination. Once everything was situated, pangs of hunger reminded Casey that he needed to teach Jynn how to hunt. When asked, Ben made it clear she already knew how, but she offered to help.

With Jynn in tow, they cooperated in finding a scent to follow. A beast's sense of smell was an excellent tool. No longer did the air carry only a flavor, it carried *information*. Scents painted a direction, and an identifier. It wasn't something Casey was always entirely conscious of. He just knew what prey smelled like, and how to find it. Now that he was being mindful of Jynn, he realized they also had their snout to the ground. Humoring them, he asked "whaddya smell there, Jynn?" They paused their snuffling and raised their head. "You and Ben so far...and a lot of dirt."

Casey laughed, "Same here."

"Hold on, I think I got something." Ben stopped in her tracks. As the only one walking bipedally, she crouched closer to

the ground. She'd caught a familiar musky scent. After a moment of taking it in, she leapt forward to run on all fours, but quickly stumbled and fell. Her limbs were barely proportioned enough for *walking* like that, running was *clumsy*. "Fuck," she grumbled, pulling herself off of the ground, "I might have to sit out on this."

"Maybe you should try changing again sometime?" Casey suggested. She shot him a look that said *I can't*. "Why don't you?"

"It's not the best idea to be human out in the wilderness," he said, "and besides, I just feel bad you're stuck *halfway*. Don't have to get defensive about it." Casey wasn't surprised at Ben's attitude. He could only imagine how frustrating it was to be so limited.

"Alright, sorry," Ben huffed. "I'll wait for you back at the uh, rock...thing." Jynn watched her trudge off with a conflicted expression.

"She's pretty moody, isn't she?" they said.

"I don't blame her. She's got a lot going through her head, I think," Casey replied.

"Still, pretty rude."

"She doesn't mean any of it. I know how she feels, bein' stuck a certain way..." he said. He would have continued, but he noticed something had caught Jynn's attention. Their snout was held high, ears perked, and their tail was flicking. "...oh you got it?"

Jynn nodded, mouth slack. They took a few steps forward with their eyes fixed ahead. Knowing what would come next, Casey realized the hunting lesson might start before he was ready. “Wait, Jynn—!”

It was too late. The sleek beast had kicked off into a sprint, following naught but their nose, and their instincts.

Casey ran after them, intent to make sure they didn’t do something reckless. Because Jynn was slightly faster than him, it was difficult to keep up. Their body moved efficiently, a wave of coordinated momentum all the way from their head to the tip of their tail. Only days ago, they had never even *stood* on all fours...now watching them move like this only strengthened the feeling that this is what Jynn was meant to be. This is what came natural to them.

A sudden thrum of wingbeats erupted from a nearby bush as the two rushed close. Casey watched in dismay as a grouse flew up into the safety of a tree, bobbing its head as it stared down at them. Jynn panted, staring back. “You can’t just run without thinking...” Casey said. He sat down to catch his breath. “You have to be patient!”

But Jynn wasn’t listening. Scanning the tree up and down, their eyes were fixed on the fastest route to that fat little bird. Their shoulders flexed, and before he could stop them, Jynn shuffled up the tree. *Oh god, they’re a little farther gone than I thought.*

“Jynn! Stop!” He tried pulling them down, to no use. Seeing their tail thrash like a serpent, he got an idea to snap them out of it.

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“I cannot *believe-!*” Jynn seethed.

“I’m sorry, okay? It was the only way.”

“You *bit* me!” They were nursing their tail, smoothing down the hackles. Being torn away from their pursuit by what was, in their opinion, a *very unnecessary* bite, left them irritated.

“I didn’t want you getting hurt! You weren’t thinking! Seriously Jynn, you started *climbing up a tree*. How did you plan on getting back down?” It dawned on Casey that this was their first time seeing prey since the change. He had been that way too his first time, relentless and driven, but back then he had to learn how to do everything by himself. There was no one else to stop him from doing something dangerous. He was going to make sure someone was there for Jynn.

“I...” Jynn noticed his concern, and came off their anger. “...I don’t know. I just *wanted* it. More than anything. I wanted it between my teeth, I wanted to...” They trailed off.

“Does that upset you?” Casey asked. He recalled the conversation in the kitchen. They weren’t *that* uncomfortable...right?

“Um...” Jynn paused, considering it. “No, it-it feels too *good*.” Saying this, they hung their head, a mixture of embarrassment and uncertainty coursing through them.

“That’s okay. That’s normal, I think,” Casey said. “I still get that way sometimes, you just have to learn how to control your urges.”

“I’ll try my best,” Jynn said, with one ear swivelled in the direction of the grouse. The bird must have convinced itself it was invisible up there on that lofty perch, but its presence made Jynn twitch.

“How about this,” said Casey, “we can hide and see if the bird settles, or we can find another. What do you think?”

“Another. Can you teach me the right way, this time?” They asked.

“Yeah, come on.” Casey nodded in a direction as he began to walk, letting Jynn catch up beside him. He wasn’t sure how to teach all this, but he was sure they’d pick up on it quickly. Jynn had always been fast to learn and adapt, something he was usually behind on.

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A brown, dappled bird screeched as it narrowly avoided the heavy thud of Jynn’s paws. It scrambled its way into a bush,

chattering in fear and flapping its wings. Jynn cursed, fur bristled. “I had it that time!”

“I told you, stop rustling so much. You have to get as close as you can without spooking them, which means hiding *quietly* until you, y’know, catch ‘em,” Casey said. Jynn huffed. There must have been thousands of grouse in these woods, and they had already failed to catch six. Six slow-moving, stupid birds. Casey had generously snagged a few, not only for the sake of example, but the sake of their hunger as well. Watching him snap those frail necks and shear the flesh and feathers was certainly a...*new* experience.

*He makes it look so easy*, Jynn thought to themselves, annoyed at the fleeing bird’s chatter. They were improving, according to Casey, but it was hard to tell. Their unsatisfied drive was starting to itch more than the grouses’ panicked cries. “I’ll try again,” they said, walking back towards the hiding spot. They hoped pretending to be gone would draw the prey back out again.

“That’s the spirit, try not to get discouraged alright? You’ve got plenty of time to learn,” Casey said, following suit.

Only minutes after their false departure, the grouse was out again. It was a pretty little thing, patterns of brown and white speckling its slender body. Its tail was folded like a fan, dark and tipped with white. It took long pauses between steps as it pecked

at fallen pine needles. It was wary, but not enough to notice the two beasts weren't truly gone. Jynn readied himself to tackle it, now keeping their tail still before it shuffled the leaves of their cover and gave them away. Casey waited and watched with anticipation.

As Jynn leapt for the kill, a creature jumped in front of them, and clamped the grouse in its jaws. It was smaller than Jynn, but both its sudden appearance and the grouses' shriek had startled them badly. Jynn collided with the creature as they fell. They stood as fast as possible, and stepped back, releasing a gargled growl. The animal shook itself, similarly defensive, and hissed.

*Is that a cougar?* Casey had never seen one before, and despite his new size and strength, he was terrified of the encounter. Sure, he knew they weren't as aggressive as they were often made out to be, but this one had more than enough reason to lash out. He emerged from his hiding spot to help Jynn, despite the fear. *This might hurt...*

The cougar swiped, guarding its catch. Jynn yelped and recoiled, their fur puffed like a cat. *What am I doing?* They'd never been this close to a wild animal, especially one with a reputation for harming hikers. They felt their anxiety coil up on itself,

winding like a spring. Jynn's tail curled between their legs as they stood near-frozen in place.

The cougar screamed as Casey slammed into it with his shoulder, winding it and knocking it onto its side. He was just as shocked as Jynn, who stared at the scene wide-eyed. This plan wasn't fully thought through however, as the cougar soon recovered, and leapt up onto Casey, raking him with its claws. With the oversized cat on his back shrieking and tearing at him, it was hard to think straight. The cougar's claws were effective at getting through his pelt, leaving deep gashes.

Acting on protective instinct and panic, Jynn lunged, sinking their teeth into the cat's hind leg. It cried out, turning to deal with them, before losing its balance. It tried to cling on, only scratching Casey up further, before falling to the ground with a soft thud. Jynn then pounced on it, a hand pressing the animal's neck to the dirt, and tore into it.

Casey panted, bleeding. He stung all over, his various wounds tasting air. He didn't give his injuries a second thought, instead wheeling around to see Jynn on top of the cougar, biting it. They had the thing prone, and seeing the look in their eyes, they'd soon have it dead. It wailed and screamed, thrashing under the weight of its captor like a cut snake. It tried everything it could to escape.

“Jynn,” Casey breathed, “Let it go, I think that’s enough.” He didn’t care about the wellbeing of the cougar, he cared about his friend. Jynn was consumed by an animal fear, by a blind desire to *get rid of the danger* no matter the method. He never wanted to see them so violent. *Feral*. He couldn’t bear it, *this wasn’t prey*. The cougar wasn’t the only thing making noises either; the agitated groans Jynn made as they clenched its skin between their canines made Casey’s stomach churn. He limped forward, raising an arm to stop them. They growled at him, making him back up, before continuing to maim the cougar. There was a snap as their weight shifted, and the animal stopped moving.

Finally, Jynn stepped off of it, maw soaked. Light tan fur was stuck to them, in contrast with their dark coat. They breathed heavily, recovering from their morbid task, then looked up at Casey.

“Are...you...okay?” they coughed, regaining their focus.

He was unsettled. Jynn had never been aggressive. *Never*. A minute ago they were cowering, now Casey felt *his* legs shaking instead. Hurt, both inside and out, he didn’t know what in the world he was supposed to say. He just stayed quiet as he shuddered off the adrenaline.

Jynn’s gaze was pulled to the ground. Pounding, the blood rush made their head feel heavy. They couldn’t believe it. *A cougar, an actual, wild cougar...* The corpse was stained, the scruff of the

neck torn badly. *I did that...?* They could still taste the awful texture of its fur on their tongue.

“Casey...” they said, exhausted, “...we should go back. To Ben.”

Casey was starting to feel lightheaded. “Mhm...” He couldn't look at Jynn's face. *It's fine, they were just protecting you. It's fine. It attacked you, Jynn attacked back, simple as that.* His knees felt tingly. He wrestled with his thoughts, trying to convince himself he could stomach this. *It was a threat, it had to be taken care of.*

“Case?”

*They aren't going to hurt you. It's just Jynn. It's just...* It was hard to even stand. His hands and feet were losing their grip on the ground, on consciousness.

“I...I'm tired...” he mumbled, before the blood loss and shock made the world go dark.

### 13 • Something new

*Tug tug.* Casey felt something pushing on him. There was a muffled sound, someone talking. *Tug tug.* His eyelids were heavy, but he cracked one open. Everything was blurry. *What's going on...?* As he woke from his stupor, it started to come into focus. He saw the outline of the large rock overhang, and a familiar face.

“Wake up.” Ben was sitting beside him, shaking him gently. His back stung. Why was it so cold?

“Where’s Jynn?” Casey asked. He tried to sit up, but his injuries said otherwise.

“Hey, hey, lay down. They’re just resting. I helped them carry you back here, but they insisted on bringing the uh...catch...afterwards,” she explained. He tried to recollect what happened before he passed out.

“God...” Jynn would have been *so* tired after all of that. It was good they were getting their rest. He felt guilty remembering how scared of them he was. They *had* saved him, after all. Even with the cougar’s smaller size, it would have been capable of doing much, much worse. “I need to talk to them when they wake up,” he said.

“Alright.” Ben stood up, reached behind Casey, and grabbed her shirt. He realized he hadn’t noticed she wasn’t wearing it. Now, rather than off white, the shirt was stained in red splotches. It was easier to see her scar as well; a prominent bite mark on her

left shoulder. He wondered how that original encounter went. Was it as fleeting as his? Was there a struggle?

“Since you’re awake, it’ll be easier to clean your cuts,” she continued.

*So that’s why my back was cold*, Casey thought. He craned his neck to look, seeing that the fur near his shoulders had become dark and tangled with blood. Ben had been trying her best to clean it out. He watched her walk over to a small trickling stream and drench the shirt. She cared about him and Jynn, Casey could tell. It was written all over her face; the patient yet forceful way she wrung out the bloodied shirt, her determined steps as she returned. A week must have been all it took to get attached. All it took to feel a little less alone in the world. She’d told them herself, back then, she didn’t have anyone waiting for her. Solitude was all Ben had.

Now she started dabbing Casey’s back with the shirt again, getting as much blood as she could out of the fur. Without scissors available, the clumps would have to come out some other way, if at all.

“We should find you an actual place to bathe,” Ben said, “I can only do so much.”

“Maybe following one of those streams we’ve come across could lead to an actual creek,” Casey suggested.

“Not a bad idea. You need more rest, though, so you’ll have to stay here until those cuts close.”

“I take it we’re staying in this area longer than we meant to?” he sighed.

“Thanks to the cougar over there, yeah.” Ben nodded her head in a certain direction. Casey shot up his head in alarm, but was reminded the cat was long dead by now, seeing it slumped on the ground near the makeshift shelter. Still, he wondered. *Why did Jynn bring it back? To eat it? Skin it?* It was useful, sure, but it was pretty grim in his eyes. His gaze drifted to his sleeping friend. As sweet as Jynn was, it’s not like they shied away from gory subject matter. They’d studied all kinds of anatomy for their art. Something like this probably wouldn’t faze them much. It sure didn’t faze Ben either, most people from her side of the province were big on hunting. Was she? Ben seemed eager to go catch something before she tripped...

“Hey, real talk. How do you feel about this whole situation? With the cougar?” he asked.

Ben paused. “Sucks that it happened, but hey, not everyone can say they took down a mountain lion barehanded. Got a lot more meat on it than grouse, too.”

“You’re fine with eating it?”

“My dad bagged a cougar once with some buds of his, so I’ve had it before. Meat’s meat.” She continued cleaning his back.

“I thought you’d have realized that by now, you’ve been a beast longer than I have.”

“I know, I know. But I keep remembering how scared it looked while Jynn was on it. That thing was more desperate than us,” Casey said.

“It died slower than other prey, didn’t it?” Ben asked.

“..Yeah.”

“It always feels worse when something takes longer to die. You guys weren’t bad for defending yourselves, alright? Don’t sweat the ethics.” Ben gave his side a pat, making sure to avoid his injuries.

“Thanks Ben.”

“Course.”

After a little more idle talk, she finished cleaning up the cuts for the time being, and set the shirt down next to Casey. “Let me know if you need anything,” she said, before walking over to the space beneath the overhang and leaning back against the smooth rock. It must have been tiring to sit there and clean him, but making sure nothing got infected was necessary. He remembered the cut on his hand as well. When he lifted it up to look, he found it had thankfully scabbed over. *Huh, that’s odd*, he thought to himself. *It should still be open by now.*

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The cougar's subdued, porklike flavor brought Ben memories of her father. He'd come home all bundled up for winter, and ushered her into the backyard saying, *I've got something to show you*. She was young then, and the animal sprawled on the snow was huge to her. She had helped him undress game before, but the cougar was far more exciting than the usual fare.

He was selling the pelt, he'd told her, but in that moment it was soft in her hands with a smooth, shimmering underside. She had enviously wondered how warm it would be to have fur like that. While her father's back was turned, she'd draped it over her shoulders, and smiled.

For dinner that night, he'd taken some of the meat out of the freezer to make steak. Ben watched as it boiled in the pot, bubbling with a brown film on the surface of the water, before being taken out to fry in the pan. *Trust me*, he said, *you'll like this, kiddo*. It was a light meat, much like chicken, with a golden crust of seasoning and marinade on the outside. She'd been so eager to try it.

Now Ben watched Casey and Jynn as they took their first bites, and knew just how her dad had felt. The shock of such an uncommon animal tasting so average read clearly on their faces. Casey had been hesitant to try, but she reassured him it wasn't anything special. Just meat.

“It tastes like turkey...” he said, tearing off a chunk. A pensive expression reigned his face. How mundane for a creature so sharp.

Ben laughed for the first time in a while. “Yep! It does.”

Jynn continued eating quietly. They had only woken up minutes ago, eyes still half lidded. Sluggish as they were, they seemed to appreciate the meal.

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After they all finished their share of the mountain lion, Ben got to work stripping it of its pelt. It had been opened up a little already to eat from. Now the whole thing was going to be removed. The task would have been easier with a knife, but a piece of shale broken off of the rock outcrop worked well enough. She figured it would be good to wear in case it got cold, or her borrowed clothes became ruined somehow. It was surprising to her how well her muscle memory served her. Ben hadn't properly skinned anything in a long while.

Jynn watched intently from a distance, Curious about the procedure. They'd only ever dissected things in their biology classes all the way back in highschool, and getting to see a display like this was interesting. Casey was audience to it as well, trying to shake off the negative feeling he held for the animal's death. It was

useful, it would keep Ben warm, and it kept them fed. That was enough.

“Oh right, Jynn. I wanted to talk to you for a moment,” he said, the sight reminding him. He was currently laying down beside them. They lowered themselves to listen.

“Hm?” They were still a little drowsy. Casey didn’t know where to start.

“Thank you for the save, earlier.”

“Oh! Yeah, I’m glad you’re okay. That looked like it hurt...” they said as they peered at his back. Casey nodded.

“It does, but I’m glad it didn’t happen to you. I’d rather get scuffed up like this than see you like that. I can handle it.”

“Alright...thank you Case,” said Jynn. They gave the top of his head a nuzzle with their chin in a way that made him tingle. He flinched at first, smelling the blood, seeing flickers of those recent, violent events, but let it go with a breath. Leaning into it, he broke a weary smile.

“Of course, hon. Now, there’s another thing I wanted to ask,” he said. “When you were on top of the cougar...what was it like?” The phrasing was lacking but he didn’t know how else he was supposed to ask. There was a thickness in his throat as he waited for the answer.

“Ah...” Jynn recalled the feeling. *Powerful. Dominant. Safe.* They were untouchable there, harming it like it harmed their

friend. In contrast, feeling its neck break under them was relieving but...more like a chore than a victory. They just wanted it gone. There wasn't a sense of triumph in snuffing out something that was already down. It left a bad taste in Jynn's mouth. "...Like protection," they decided.

It was odd to hear Jynn be so brief in their description. Typically used to more flavorful words from his partner, Casey knew something was off.

"That's all?" he asked.

"Kind of. It was hazy," they explained. That much was true, it was like looking back on a dream you could barely remember. Staring off, they tried to run everything through their head again. The tension was opaque the longer the silence continued.

"So why did you growl at me like that?" He spoke quickly. Casey had put off asking, but the question had been hanging over his head ever since. His chest felt tight as the words slipped out.

Jynn didn't remember that happening at all. *What is he talking about?* "I growled at you?"

"Yeah, when I told you to stop. I reached out and you..." a shiver crept down his back as he spoke. The way his fur had stood on end was still fresh.

Jynn felt a hot guilt run through them like a flash. "Oh god I'm sorry, I didn't realize." Their voice cracked at the thought of threatening their partner like that.

Casey couldn't stop himself from asking "You wouldn't hurt me, right?"

"*Never.*" That was the last thing they ever wanted. Jynn's breath hitched before they added "you can be sure of that."

"I know I just needed to ask...sorry. I know you wouldn't." Casey hung his head, feeling dense. It was a selfish question. In response, Jynn did the only thing they could think to do, and pressed up against him, laying on the grass. They nestled in, minding his injuries. Once their snout was close enough to his head, they whispered "*You're safe. I promise.*"

Casey swallowed his tears with a tight blink, half relief, half worry.

*"Okay. I believe you."*

They stayed there for a while, observing Ben as she worked, and keeping themselves comfortable. She seemed concentrated, wholly dedicated to keeping the pelt intact. There was a devotion in her eyes and hands Jynn could only describe as artistry.

## 14 • first catch

That night they slept in the shallow they had made. Casey was on an outer edge, with Jynn on the other side, and Ben in the middle where the cool night air couldn't chill her. She was wrapped up in the Cougar pelt, dozing off to the idea it was her own. Casey slept well, his cuts beginning to mend, but still tender. Jynn ran wild in their dream, catching the grouse they couldn't catch in waking. They all rumbled unconsciously in their rest. It was cozy and warm.

When dawn brought its pale light to the overcast sky, the trio blinked awake one after another. They shuffled, discovering how intertwined the night's sleep had made them. Ben was found beneath both Jynn and Casey's arms, held close. As she woke, she was too comfortable to be startled by the fact she was sleeping with beasts. "Good...morning," she yawned, stretching beneath the pelt, "What time is it?"

"Best I can give you is morning." Casey gave her head a pat.

"Oh...right." *No clocks out here.* She sat up, observing her surroundings. The clouds were dark, and there was a humidity in the air she swore she could smell. "Might rain today," she noted.

"Hm...sounds nice, I like the rain," Jynn mumbled as they sleepily crept out of the hole. In contrast to Ben, they stretched like a large cat, claws splayed as their tail curled above them.

“We’re not traveling again until tomorrow, right?” Casey asked.

“Right. Today we’re staying around here. How’s your back doing?”

Casey shifted his posture back and forth, assessing it.

“Better, I’m not bleeding anymore and, it doesn’t really sting as much. I think I can do more than lie down today.” He looked at his hand again as well. The cut had sealed up completely at this point, and the scab was in the process of becoming a scar. He was surprised a gash like that could close so quickly. Tracing his fingers across it, Casey’s mouth parted slightly in disbelief. He’d been walking and running with that hand without even realizing. *How the hell isn’t it open still?*

“Good,” Ben continued, “I’d hate to make Jynn wrangle a meal for all three of us. Not that I doubt them, but it’s a lot of work.” She rubbed the back of one ear with a clawless finger. Being unable to participate made her feel useless, as if she was just coasting on Jynn and Casey’s hard work. She was the only one unscathed when they both returned from the encounter with the mountain lion, but benefited the most.

Jynn spoke up. “Practice helps it feel less daunting, so Casey, you don’t need to feel obligated to do it. It’s fine, really.” The guilty residue from yesterday’s conversation left them with the idea that Casey would be uncomfortable seeing them hunt now.

They wanted to give him space. When he shook his head, a splinter of worry ran through Jynn.

“I want to help!” he affirmed, “and Jynn, practice is only useful until you’re exhausted and foodless.”

*He makes a good point, thought Jynn. But what if he gets nervous again? They ran their tongue along their molars as they considered the situation they found themselves in. It’s not going to be that bad...Casey seems happy at least. He could just be trying to make me feel better, by pretending, but he’s not the type to...*

“Right, good idea,” Jynn said, trying their best to dismiss their worries. They were thinking too hard. Casey would be fine.

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A struggling grouse kicked and flapped clouds of dust into the face of its captor. It managed to make the beast cough and scrunch its eyes, but no matter the distraction, its large paws forced the bird down. It had seen one of these before, a predator that was just as deadly as it was rare. This was the sight only few of its kind were terribly lucky enough to meet an end with. Its odd, harsh noises were the song of death. Something that, if the grouse had a mind with which to reflect, it would have wondered the meaning of in its final moments.

Jynn cursed as the bird wiggled fruitlessly under their grip. The thing was getting dirt and feathers in their face. With a frustrated snap, the irritation ceased. “Got it!” they coughed, “finally got one!” They held it in their hands, listless and light. It felt so right to catch it. To wait for the right moment and finally crash down on the unsuspecting quarry. Casey found the look of achievement in their smile rather cute.

“Good job! You’re getting the hang of it,” he said. He felt bad for laughing, but seeing Jynn struggle to best a bird managed to tickle him. Especially after the wild takedown yesterday. The heavy feelings were slowly wearing off, and being with his partner was just enjoyable again. They even got something to keep Ben warm out of it. Why stay stuck feeling bad about something that turned out okay?

“It put up a fight,” said Jynn. They wiped their muzzle with the back of their arm. It was caked in dust. “...I need a shower.”

“Good luck with that,” Casey chuckled.

“You know what I mean! A stream or something.”

“Let’s find one then. It could help us track down the river if it’s big enough, I suggested that to Ben earlier.”

“Woah, right now? I thought we were still practicing, what’s the rush?” Jynn usually avoided eye contact, but now they were meeting his gaze. *Is he looking for an out? Was this too much?*

“Oh, uh...” he stalled, mind drawing a blank. Why *did* he feel the need to get going so soon? There was a pressure inside his chest that carried the taste of anxiety, restlessness. Impatience, that was it. “...I just can’t wait,” Casey said. The pressure was rising now, but instead of a heaviness, the need for movement built itself up. Flutters in his chest. The truth poured up and out of his mouth. “I want to go home, I want to wake up with you again. I want to braid your hair like we used to, and dance with you in the kitchen. I want you to be safe and happy.”

Jynn’s fur bristled slightly as they listened. They were surprised by such a sudden admission. “Like this?” They asked, squeezing their own shoulder.

“Like this.” Casey put a hand on their chest, fingertips sinking into their pelt. It slipped further up their shoulder, until he found himself giving them a tight hug. “God, Jynn, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“All those times I made you feel like being this way was a bad thing. You don’t deserve that. It’s been on my mind.”

“Ah, yeah...thank you for the apology Casey. Just don’t beat yourself up over it, alright? It’s water under the bridge.” They gave him a squeeze and said, “let’s move on from that.”

“Yeah, we should.”

They let go, adjusting themselves. “So, stream?” Jynn asked.

Casey smiled. “You need more practice don’t you?”

“Now you’re just teasing. Come on.” They stood, offering their partner a hand. “Let’s go look.”

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Rain pattered the leaves, leaving a mist in the air and dark puddles in the mud. Petrichor hung in the atmosphere. Robin calls rang out, responded to with a hushed, mimicking whistle. Jynn often repeated sounds they heard, whether they were aware of it or not. Hearing their odd noises was pleasant, to Casey, who appreciated their clicks, whistles, and knocks. With their mouth’s new shape, Jynn had an even broader array to choose from. They both made their way through the brush, straining to listen for moving water.

Instead, they were surprised to hear a steady beeping sound. It was almost like a recorder flute, as if someone were repeatedly puffing it at a consistent tone. Jynn imitated it a little, causing the sound to pause, before continuing. That wasn’t an animal, was it? It sounded too much like an instrument. Carefully the pair got closer.

Yellow eyes.

A pair of large, yellow eyes were looking directly at them. Casey stumbled back in surprise, barely caught by Jynn. “*Wait, look. It’s just an owl,*” they whispered.

“Oh, so it is.” Casey adjusted himself carefully, not wanting to scare it off. He knew they wanted to take a good look at the thing. It was small, with a spattering of brown amidst its pale front feathers, and a dark beak, perched at around eye level. It seemed frozen in place, attempting to remain as still as possible.

“Ben might know what kind it is...” said Jynn quietly.

“Yeah.”

“Still weird that we’re *here*, right?”

Caught off guard by the question, Casey simply nodded. It was bizarre, all of it. They had ended up hundreds of kilometers from home, after a collective dream of all things...and now this. Living, breathing proof that this wasn’t the region they came from.

“You’d think a passage like that would take us somewhere a bit less mundane, wouldn’t it?” Jynn carried on. “This is just the woods. Just us, just trees, and a long way to go.” They took a curious step forward, causing the owl to fly off.

“There it goes,” Casey said, watching it. Transient as it was, he figured he’d remember it for a while. Those vibrant eyes were burned into his eyelids. Every day now, there was some oddity, some new normal to get used to. A flash one moment, an afterimage the next. Magic. He couldn’t believe it. He’d stopped putting faith in that a long, long time ago, but here it was. Whatever hope Jynn had left was right. This couldn’t be anything else. He always thought his condition had a grounded, biological

explanation. A mutation, a reshuffling of genetic material or something. He'd always worked with computers, so to him, his body was much like a machine of flesh, and this was malware.

*But now?*

All that speculation was completely thrown out. They were in the *Skeena*, over six-hundred kilometers from home. You just couldn't explain that any other way. His justifications as to *what* he was for the past three years seemed pathetic in retrospect.

Jynn rested their hand on his back. It was cold, bringing him out of zoning out. "Hey, the rain's coming down hard. We should head back."

The downpour felt good drizzling deep into Casey's fur, down his neck, his back, his tail. He couldn't help but laugh a little, thinking further on how *weird* the circumstances were. *Magic, huh*. He couldn't wrap his head around all this. Maybe he never would.

## 15 • On the trail again

Under the dry safety of the stone overhang, they shook off the damp and rested. They learned from Ben that the owl they had seen was a saw-whet, according to the description. Ben herself had seen a few things pass through their little clearing while Jynn and Casey were gone. A deer, some squirrels, all off to do something or other in the rain. She'd counted herself lucky she hadn't seen a bear.

That night they slept again after eating, Ben tucked snugly in the middle. They were getting used to having her there, so warm and close, a perfect fit. She'd only been known a little while, but it was already starting to feel like a proper friendship was worming its way in. Despite her odd moods, she was ambitious, and always willing to lend a hand. These were admirable qualities, even if she was completely unaware of it.

Ben never thought she'd meet people like them. Her workplace and college life had been crushing, even oppressive at times. Being an clearly queer person in a completely new city hadn't helped in the slightest. Her only solace had been an old friend back from her hometown, but even then, communicating from a distance meant things could change constantly without the other even knowing. The trust and closeness drifted, as such

things do with time away and hardship, but they kept in touch. Ben had kept a lot to themselves, though. There were recent revelations she figured no one would understand, and that was *before* the beast incident.

How quickly Casey and Jynn had taken her in...she didn't know what to think. She'd been a complete stranger, bloody and misshapen, but *they were just like her*. They had the same secret. The same experience. It was such a breath of fresh air she hadn't even taken the time to notice. When she didn't have to chase after her personal problems, things just felt lighter. Good company, a comfortable couch. Maybe if she knew them well enough once they all made their way back, she'd pay them more visits.

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With a new morning, it was time to get a move on. It was sunny that day, the grass still wet. The trees cast long shadows, keeping the ground dark as the sun still made its climb. Mist trailed off the tops of the cedars, the spruce, the pines. Ben had tied the pelt around their shoulders, and with nothing else to carry along, the trio set out once more into the vastness of the woods.

They walked in the direction of the mountains ahead, but kept in mind the goal of finding moving water. They encountered several rivulets that led to nowhere, and more devil's club patches,

but stayed determined. In the dawn's shadow, they saw plenty of crepuscular animals as they traveled. A good many of them made for excellent trail snacks, easy to catch. Smaller meals in exchange for quantity. They didn't have to worry about foraging when so much was available.

Eventually, the gurgling of a current grabbed the trio's attention. A creek, flowing in the exact direction they'd been heading as well, following a downwards slope. Exactly what they'd been after. They all took a moment to drink, clean up, and try their hand at snagging fish. They were slippery things, but the beasts' claws hooked in well if they were lucky. They had been juvenile trout, about the length of one hand. Typically it was looked down on to catch such young fish, but they reasoned fishing etiquette didn't apply to animals like them for the time being.

“Way back when I was small, we had these field trips to salmon hatcheries,” Ben said, removing the pin-bones of the fish with her teeth and spitting them to the side. “They gave us these little orange and teal stickers of the life cycle, and showed us how they fertilize the eggs and stuff. Best part was that at the end of this one tour, they gave us these small chunks of salmon to snack on.” She made a rectangular shape with her fingers, holding the trout she'd caught in her mouth before returning it to her hands. Where Ben was from, salmon were a huge part of the culture, as a

food source, and an important resource. She told them how salmon fishing was integral to indigenous communities of past and present, and her aunt even made special beaded hooks.

“Sounds fun,” said Casey, gulping down more fish.

“It was! I miss it.” Ben wondered if there was anything like that in the Cariboo region, where the couple was from. Moving to Prince George, one of its main cities, was hard on her. It was solely for college, since it wasn’t as expensive, and had some programs she was interested in. Otherwise, it was a louder, drier environment than she would have preferred.

Jynn was laying on the creek’s edge with the end of their tail adrift in the water. It felt nice, and they discovered that keeping it still meant fish would come and mouth at the fur out of curiosity, thinking it was algae. Unfortunately it didn’t do much to make *actually catching them* any easier. Jynn kept at it anyway, determined. They were listening to the conversation as well, thinking of the times their family would put together traditional Chinese seafood when most other kids were busy with western holidays. Their grandmother had handed down recipes that left them with a lasting appreciation for nautical cuisine. Attempting to recreate them from memory for Casey didn’t go so well.

The talk continued, sharing regional differences and fond memories back and forth as they ate. Once they were satisfied, the trio were once again on their way, following the creek. Aside from

the occasional patch of spiky plants, they navigated it well. Ben was still in lead, eager to guide the journey through these woods she treasured dearly. The familiar cool air around the creek was like really being *back*. Maybe they could all visit her family once they reached her hometown.

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“Well, this might be a problem.” Jynn peered over the edge of a steep, rocky hill they found themselves standing on. The creek had led to a sudden drop, where it became a thin waterfall and continued below as brief rapids. Getting down would be a challenge.

“Any ideas?” asked Casey.

“We could just jump,” Ben joked, pointing with a thumb.

“You first, kid.”

Jynn spoke up. “Wait, I think I see a part we could try scaling! It juts out more. Look down there, that ledge.” Sure enough, there was a ledge with enough space for one person to shimmy along. Below it was a drop, about ten feet, but if they were careful they could probably make it just by jumping.

“I don’t know about that... It looks sketchy,” Ben observed. Casey nodded in agreement. “We could try finding another way, it would just take longer.”

They stared at the ledge for a moment, brows furrowed. It wasn't so bad, they could make it down if they took it slowly. It would still be a lot faster than backtracking, even if it cost a little extra exertion. Already moving, Jynn said "I'm gonna give it a go."

"Wait, are you sure?" Casey had always loved Jynn's eagerness, but now it was starting to get them in danger. "That might not be a very good idea, 'specially if you're still getting used to being-"

"I can handle it," they said, lowering themselves with a grunt. The surface they tentatively stood on seemed stable enough. Nothing shifted or cracked, and the stone was firm beneath their feet. "Good so far!" they called up, releasing their grip. Ben and Casey watched with concern.

"*They're actually doing it. Crazy,*" Ben muttered. It struck them that this might come across as rude, so they kneeled down and asked Jynn "Uh, need any help?"

"I'm fine, I just gotta make this landing!" they replied. Standing at a midway point between the ground and the top of the hill, it didn't feel that high at all. Even Casey, with his fear of heights, would probably find this easy. After contemplating the view, they gave the rock face they held onto one last good-luck pat.

Then, Jynn jumped.

## 16 • A break

With their arms wrapped around his neck, Casey carried Jynn on his back. They were surprisingly light despite their size. Hot tears sank into his pelt as they rested their face against his shoulder. Jynn curled the fur around their fingers again and again, a stim to keep themselves distracted. It was mildly irritating, but he let them. Their pain tolerance was low enough to make their sprained leg feel like a fracture, and he was willing to carry them until they could walk again. Still, it slowed down their movement considerably.

Jynn had rolled their ankle trying to jump off of the ledge. A combination of misjudging distance and being heavier than they were used to made for a painful landing. Crumpled in the grass, Jynn could only wait as Ben and Casey made their way around. Ben chided them for the decision, but softened up on them once she realized they couldn't even walk. For Casey it was almost an expected accident. His anxiety was never kind to him, especially when it was right. He'd seen about a thousand ways Jynn's idea could have gone wrong, but held himself back anyway. He felt wrong telling his partner what they could and couldn't do. He'd

rather let them make their own decisions, like any adult. But...situations like this made Casey reflect on Jynn's maturity.

As they followed the creek's edge, it became apparent no one had spoken a word in quite a while. They'd all been in their own heads, thinking to themselves. There were plenty of sounds to fill the silence anyway, from the churn of their watery guide to the rattling knock of woodpeckers looking for insects. Squirrels chattered loudly as they passed, territorial and curious. Dragonflies whirred to and fro in blurry buzzes of color. Then, like a breeze, the sound of humming leaked into the ambience. It was Ben, surprisingly enough.

Her humming was reserved and quiet, so as not to draw attention, but her companions had much better hearing than she bargained for. Still, no one said a word, not wanting to interrupt the nice little melody. It only made sense for someone interested in sound engineering to know their way around pitch. Music was a breath of its own to her, to take in and expire in slow swells or rapid beats. Working in mediums like voice overs and podcasts was nice, but music is what Ben was *really* after.

Distracted from their injury, Jynn caught onto the tune and hummed along. Ben flinched at first, aware now that they could hear, but settled into it. These people; she trusted them more than she'd trusted anyone since she moved. It had been such a short period of time since they met, but they just let her into their lives.

No question, no cost. Singing in front of others made her paranoid, a remnant of her younger days around bad folks, but she could lean into it with this company. She could relax.

And so, bit by bit, the humming turned to singing, to spoken words and lyrics. To collaboration. It was a chorus, with Casey's rough voice filling in the deeper harmony, clumsy as it was, Jynn fulfilling the tenor, and Ben leading with her high trills. They traveled in good spirits that way, singing and smiling to drown out their troubles. An unspoken agreement to create something meaningful, *together*.

Seeing Ben happy like this was beautiful, to Casey and Jynn. She had a huge grin, despite the missing teeth. Nose scrunched, eyes half squinted, hands loose. *Radiant*. It was easy to fall in love with that smile. The couple had never been romantic, instead reveling in something deeply platonic. They *loved* that they could be close, in their own revolutionary way, without the mainstays the world deemed necessary. Affectionate and intimate, defying what was expected out of a relationship. The more they saw Ben shine, the more they wondered if she might want to join them. As a friend, as a partner, even. It was odd to feel that way so soon, but these wild and extraordinary circumstances had brought them close.

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A lake. The creek fed into a massive lake, bordered by tall mountains and trees. It was gorgeous, with shimmering waters and a cool, refreshing breeze. There was sand, mud, and large smooth rocks where the water met the shore. Moss was plentiful around here due to the humidity. The trio was thankful to have somewhere to wash up that wasn't ice-cold, or running a strong current.

The clothing and cougar pelt Ben wore were left aside as the three beasts took a dip. They helped each other remove natural debris, tend to wounds, and bathe. It was a touch awkward with Ben's lack of fur, due to her half-transformation, but she didn't seem to care. Casey thought back to her casually using her shirt as a cleaning rag instead of wearing it. He had the idea she didn't have much of a problem with nudity out here. It made sense, there wasn't anyone else in these woods as far as they knew.

The cool temperature of the water was very soothing for Jynn's leg, which was already easing up. They hardly felt any pain as they paddled and waded in the lake. What they did notice was the lack of it. A number of smaller injuries had healed up rather quickly, and they weren't sure why. Was it a beast thing, or just skewed perception? Jynn figured they would wait before bringing it up.

Accidentally thrashing his tail out of the water, Casey splashed Ben across the face. Her eyes were scrunched shut, an arm raised all too late. Casey started to apologize, before being hit with a volley of water. She'd splashed back full force, a wicked smile spreading across her muzzle.

The game was on.

Jynn spectated as the splashing intensified, both challengers playing offense and defense in equal measure. Casey had the advantage of heft, while Ben was agile. She could splash him twice in the time it took for Casey to pummel her with one large wave. Neither of them could get a word in, their gargled yelling constantly interrupted by their aquatic attacks. Then, out of nowhere, the two of them were hit from behind. They turned to face Jynn, who was already readying for another splash.

"I want in," they said.

"Well I'm not going to go easy on you Jy-ghgh!" Casey said as he was hit yet again by Ben, who wasn't going to give up any chances. "You just don't quit do you?" he asked her.

"Nope! This is the most fun I've had in months!" she grinned.

"Wait, really? Splashing around in a lake?" asked Jynn.

Ben's smile faltered for a moment. "Yeah, life uh...*sucks* back home. I'd rather have childish fun than sit alone in my apartment, you know?"

“I understand,” Casey said. “It’s nice to cut loose like this. God, I’m missing a lot of work right now, but I couldn’t care less.”

Jynn spoke quietly. “Pfft, it’s almost like...”

“Like what?” said Casey.

They sank into the water a little, reluctant. “Like it would be better if we...stayed?”

A heavy silence went around the group. Jynn sank further down as the other two ruminated on the idea.

“We have to be realistic...” Casey started. “Our house, our *everything*...we can’t just...” he trailed off.

“No, no I have to go home and fix whatever this is.” Ben gestured at her body.

Jynn nodded weakly, feeling a little rejected. They thought their companions might be a little more into the idea.

Casey piped up quickly. “This is fun, though, right? Getting away from it all for a little while, exploring...that’s good at least.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” Ben added. “Feels like getting to breathe for once.”

Catching onto a little hope, Jynn said “maybe you’ll stop being stuck once you get to your hometown?”

“Maybe...” Ben considered it. There wasn’t a whole lot to prove the concept, but there wasn’t much to disprove it either. It could be a nice little goal for the time being. “I hope you’re right,” she added.

“And Casey, our house is lovely, but you spend so much time working yourself sick to sustain it. To sustain us.” Jynn continued. They had a point -- it was hard to work towards paying off a mortgage. He wasn’t sure just how many years were left before they were even close to the finish line. He was young, now. Saving freedom for later would be something to regret. With new aspects to consider, Casey and Ben went quiet yet again. Jynn hoped they hadn’t overstepped.

“We can talk about this later, okay?” Casey finally said, cutting the tension. “For now...” he gave Jynn a hearty splash, knocking them back in surprise.

“AH!” They raised both hands to shield. He chuckled, glad he could bring back the playful energy.

They resumed fooling around in the lake, coming up with new ways to bother each other with water, and putting their worries aside. After a while of playing around, they paused to take a breather and look at the scenery. The mountains were close. They could see now they were in a valley, spanning a long stretch of woodland. Ben stared long and hard at the range, trying to figure out their bearings. She figured now that they were closer, she could have a better go at guessing where they were.

Then, it hit her.

Ben had been to this lake before.

## 17 • Stranger yet

“Rosswood. It’s Rosswood,” Ben said, wading towards shore in a hurry.

“What’s Rosswood?” Jynn asked, following behind.

“It’s a ‘town’ nearby, if my hunch is correct,” she huffed.

“You know this lake?”

“Yeah, Kitsumkalum lake. We visited this place every summer, I’d recognize those mountains anywhere. If we’re here, then there should be a town...” Ben thought about where they entered from. If the creek was over there, they should have seen the highway already. Did they miss it somehow? Usually you could hear vehicles pretty clearly...

“Oh that’s great!” Casey said. “...But what do we do when we get there? I mean, we’re still *like this*.”

Ben smacked her forehead. “Fuck! We still look like animals!”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” said Jynn. “We can still talk, so we could just explain?”

“Go ahead, tell me how you’d explain.” Ben was lightly frustrated. She sighed as she took the first few steps onto the

muddy incline, a mixture of silt and debris clouding around her feet.

Jynn paused to hold their breath as they ducked under and walked onto shore on all fours. They were soaked, and shook like a dog, sending water everywhere.

“I don’t know. Maybe if we try not to scare them...”

“That would be difficult,” Ben said flatly. She couldn’t bear to think about being seen in this half-state.

“Hey, it’ll be okay. We still have plenty of time to figure it out,” Casey spoke up. “In the meantime, let’s find a way to dry off.”

“Oh, yeah.” She reached up, squeezing some water out of a lock of hair. The trickle ran down her face, regrettably into one of her eyes. With a forearm just as soaked as the rest of her, she tried wiping it off unsuccessfully. Ben flicked down her arm in irritation. Casey gave her a soggy pat on the shoulder, and stepped past, motioning for her to follow along.

A warm patch of sun was all they needed to doze off, worn out from walking and swimming. They’d been making idle conversation until the warmth got to them. It seeped down into their fur, their skin, until they succumbed entirely. For a few hours they slept, side by side. When they woke, they discovered they had unconsciously shuffled into a pile. It looked to be about late afternoon.

Out of all of them, Casey was the hardest to wake. Ben, who's leg was pinned by his body, shook his shoulder. He only grunted unconsciously and rolled further onto it. Jynn was extra cozy as well, but was a far lighter sleeper than their friend. They helped her attempt to shove him off. Eventually he rolled the other way after being disturbed enough by their efforts. With a clear view of his back now, Ben noticed something odd.

The cuts she'd been cleaning the other day weren't there. Only scars had been left in their place. They were supposed to be scabs, at this point, but these were...

“...Fully healed.” she whispered.

“What?” Jynn yawned, drowsily.

“Oh, it's just...his cuts...” Why did they patch so fast? She thought back to a small nick she got that morning from one of the branches they'd run past. Checking her arm, it had vanished entirely. *What? How?*

“Did they tear open again?”

“No, they're gone. Look.”

Jynn peered at Casey's back, just as shocked. “Oh...wow.”

“Wait, your ankle. How's your ankle doing?” Ben was piecing together a realization. Awkwardly Jynn oriented themselves in a way that allowed them to prod at their sprained ankle. Before it had been full of a throbbing ache, tender to the touch. Now it was just fine.

“Oh my god.” they said. “You...you don't think...?”

“Listen, I know it sounds stupid but I think something about us is making us *heal faster?*”

“I had a suspicion but I was convinced it wasn’t actually real.”

“No, same.”

Again, they turned their gaze back on Casey. From the way he was rolling in his rest, he seemed to be in no pain at all. Jynn gave Ben a quick glance before attempting to wake him up again. They leaned in close to his ear, and whispered “Hey, it’s time to get up honey. We need to talk.” His ear flicked, and he raised his head with a breathy chuff. *Still asleep?* They squeezed his shoulder. “C’mon Case.” He opened his eyes, half lidded, then leaned his head back to rub it against Jynn’s chest. They laughed a little. “What are you doing?”

“*Mrrrf,*” he replied. He sounded like a big cat. It was cute, but Jynn was definitely confused.

“Uhh is that normal?” Ben asked.

“Nope.”

“...He hasn’t done this before?”

“Not that I know of?” said Jynn. “Casey, are you okay?”

The beast continued to nuzzle, seemingly unaware of being spoken to. Then, he rolled so that he was facing Jynn, wrapping his paws around their torso and nestling his snout into their stomach.

Taken by surprise Jynn let out an *oh!* and attempted to wriggle away. “Ah, help, I don’t know what’s gotten into him,” they said.

“God, dude, that’s weird.” Trying to pry his arms off of Jynn, she shook Casey. He was rumbling, deeply comfortable. She flicked his nose. “Hey, big guy, snap out of it.”

He snuffled and scrunched his eyes. It hurt.

“Ben!”

“What am I supposed to do??”

“*Not that!*”

Pushing him didn’t seem to work, but feeling his fur all dry and warm gave her an idea. “Hold on, I’ll be back.” Ben ran to the water’s edge nearby, and cupped water in her hands. It wasn’t too cold, but it was enough.

Before Jynn could tell what Ben was doing, she splashed water all over Casey’s face. He shook his head in surprise. His displeasure came out in a gurgled “rreh” as he let go of Jynn and wiped his face with his hands. Then, he straightened up from his relaxed pose and said “*Pteh...wh...what?*”

“Oh thank god,” Jynn said, “you were acting really strangely.”

“Hmf...I don’t know what...” he trailed off, collecting himself. The last thing he knew, he was extremely cozy, and the next, he was cold and wet.

“I think you were trying to snuggle. Were you still asleep?”

“No...? I was awake but...hmm. Fuzzy.”

“Odd...”

Ben dried her hands off on the grass. “Maybe it’s part of the, y’know, whole thing? You said you’ve been a beast for what, three years?”

“Yeah,” Casey said.

“Maybe it just has more side effects the longer it goes or something.” Ben suggested.

“I don’t think so...otherwise I’d be a lot different than Jynn.” The idea of becoming more bestial without realizing was upsetting. *I don’t want to lose myself to some eventual...animal state.* He thought quietly. It wasn’t a large concern, he’d always just been himself, but that haze? That comfort? That was something new.

“Whatever the reason,” Jynn said, “we do have something else to discuss.”

The group went over their various injuries, comparing the severity and the time it took to recover. They came to realize their individual suspicions were mutual. It was bizarre to be mauled by a cougar two days ago, and be just fine. To sprain a leg, then walk on only hours later like nothing had happened at all. They weren’t complaining. Though, like any oddity, it was worth questioning. This wasn’t this first impossibility they’d faced, and it likely wouldn’t be the last. The inexplicable was as drawn to Casey, Ben, and Jynn as much as they were drawn to *it*.

## 18 • Mouths of the River

Back on the trek, they followed Ben's directions around the lake's perimeter, making their way towards the supposed Rosswood. It was easy following the shore. There was little to obstruct their movement or slow them down. In a short amount of time they'd come back around, passed the creek, and began traversing the opposite side. It didn't take long until they reached a point where they saw something unexpected, leaving them standing in awe.

A river with two mouths greeted them, feeding into the lake. It was a massive natural structure, lacking trees to cover its maw and instead fit with sand, dirt, and all manner of rich watery sediment. The two mouths split further back into thinner halves of the river, but there was only so much to see from the trio's vantage. It was large, but thankfully flat. There were parts of it that seemed traversable enough, with a walkable incline both in and out the water, but the current would prove to be an obstacle if not swam *around*.

They shivered, despite their warmth.

Deciding against making such a journey while tired and hungry, they worked at foraging and hunting before reconvening and laying down to rest once more beneath the boughs of a

generously hefty spruce. They spoke of little things; more history, more connections. Casey was grateful to have his faculties with him now as he slipped into sleep. Jynn had assured him as best as they could, before. Ben was curled up in the cougar pelt again, that subconscious envy still in bloom as she pulled it tighter.

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Another morning, another moment to untangle themselves from the puzzle they'd nestled into. Thankfully all easy to wake, they shuffled about and shuddered off the drowsiness. The challenge of the rivermouth intimidated them. It was important to work out a plan, and execute it well, otherwise things could go very wrong very quickly. Recklessly diving in and making the journey by sheer force alone would be hazardous.

Ben was antsy to get across. Everything lined up, this was the place she remembered, and she was sure that once they crossed the river mouth, they had only a little walking to do before finding themselves by the highway, and right near Rosswood.

"We can walk on the sandbar, then kinda swim around the river part?" she suggested. They were all discussing their strategy before venturing out.

"That sounds reasonable," said Jynn.

“What about just swimming across instead of walking? Then we wouldn’t have to worry about the outflow,” said Casey.

“I don’t think I have that much endurance, man.”

“Me neither, that’s pretty far..”

They looked out over it again. It would take a lot of energy either way. Waiting any longer would just be stalling, at this point.

Most of the sand was wet, either submerged in a large, thin amount of water, or mingling with dirt to make a muddy slurry. It was arduous to walk through. Traversing something so slippery only made Casey’s proposal more and more enticing. Ben bunched the pelt up around her neck and shoulders, not wanting to get it wet. She knew she’d have to eventually, but for now she wanted to minimize its contact with mud.

They made it to the first outflow of the river after nearly twenty minutes of stepping through silt. The current wasn’t *too* strong, but it would be better not to risk swimming through directly. Casey was the first to dive into the lake, and led the others around the dispersing river. He let Ben cling on, since the pelt made it rather awkward and heavy for her to swim properly. All she could offer in return was to kick her legs and hope for the best. They made it around the first with little issue.

It was, however, exhausting. Not one of them was proficient in swimming, so with every sandbank they took an opportunity to rest and catch their breath. There was one

rivermouth left that split into two, then three distinct channels the further from the lake it went. The mouth itself was far wider than the first. More minutes of terrestrial struggle later, they all began the terrible task of clearing the final obstacle. They had a choice; either give it a wide berth and cut through part of the lake itself to reach land, or take a shorter, more risky path to a sandbar in the middle, bordered by the two converging channels of the same rivermouth.

“Okay,” Casey panted, “how are we doing energy-wise? Think we can skip across or..?”

Jynn indecisively stared at their hands, which had sunk half an inch into the silt.

“Let’s take the sandbar route, then we can catch a quick breather before getting through the last one and just be done with it,” Ben said. Casey nodded, and they started in that direction.

The waters before the sandbar were much stronger than the first hurdle. It was manageable to swim through, but loose tails and locks of fur were tugged by the current. While kicking their way through, Jynn, who was in the lead now, felt something brush against their foot. They looked down for a moment, spotting a submerged, broken tree that had been swept along in the river. Its largest boughs barely peeked out of the water’s surface.

Casey and Ben were following close behind, and before Jynn could warn them, there was a snag. It was the cougar pelt.

Each tug, only emphasized by the river's movement, nearly made Ben choke. The pelt was tied around her throat. The unexpected catch had them stuck.

"Ah fuck," she said. "Hold on. Let me get it." She reached for the pelt and pulled on it, yanking side to side in an attempt to remove it from the branch. It didn't give.

"Just take it off, Ben!" Casey said. He could only idle in this spot so long.

"Just wait!" Ben tugged harder. Her knuckles were a stark white where she gripped the cougar's skin, bunched up and taut. It took all her might, but finally there was a *rrrip* and the pelt came loose. Casey surged forward, no longer bound by the tether. They reached the small bit of land and sat down to breathe.

Ben looked at the pelt with disdain. It was now torn in two, like a set of coattails that reached too far. It didn't wrap the same way it used to. The edge where it ripped was jagged too, and formed an asymmetrical tear. "Fuck, *fuck*."

"You okay? Nothin' hurt?" asked Casey.

"I'm fine, it's just, this thing's all ripped."

"Oh damn. Sorry...that sucks"

She clenched it in her hands. "I just didn't realize how attached I was to it already. I got this thing in the first place because of you guys, and...well it reminded me of my dad. In the better days, before everything went to shit." Decidedly she avoided

mentioning the small euphoria it gave her to wear. The amount of times she'd stroked the fur and felt convinced that, for just a brief moment, it wasn't just a garment...That was the part Ben didn't want to think about.

Jynn surveyed the damage, peering over her shoulder. "Maybe we can fix it up when we get home? I know a little sewing," they offered.

"I don't wanna burden you with it, it's not like I can do much with it when I get back. I think I'd need a license or something anyway. They regulate that kinda stuff."

"Hmm, fair enough," said Casey. "At least you didn't get strangled back there."

"Felt like it." Ben rubbed her neck. She slung the pelt around her shoulders again and stood up, hands on her hips. "Let's get a move on, though. There's just one last obstacle until we're done here."

"Alright, this way," Casey said. He and Jynn got up as well, and the three of them took on the last outflow of the river.

In the last mouth, there were no branches within reach to snag on. The current was still just as strong, and though not getting swept out into the lake was challenging, it wasn't, by any means, a battle. Ben clung onto Casey once more, with Jynn wading along beside them, until the sand was again beneath their

feet and the watery toil was over. They emerged triumphant, but tired. The three soggy beasts dragged their feet, walking until they hit the grass at the treeline, then flopped down to rest.

All the energy spent swimming and tugging slowly restored over the course of a collective nap, though Ben woke sporadically throughout it. Being cold and wet didn't lend well to sleep. Even while drenched, it seemed her companions were more insulated, or otherwise didn't mind. The pelt was less comfortable too; heavy, torn, and soaked through.

She hadn't really taken the time to question it, but even as half destroyed as the pelt was, it was *large*. Cougars were typically smaller than what Jynn had dragged back. Its fur had fit Ben entirely, like a long, thick shawl. *Maybe it's just a lucky catch...?* She thought. The longer she questioned it, the odder it seemed, a lot like everything else these days. The novelty of the transportation and transformation was a lot to take in. It took attention away from the more *deceptively mundane* details of their situation.

Exactly what it was they were all dealing with here was one hell of a mystery. It was easier to roll with little oddities than getting hung up on inspecting *everything*. Yet...that curiosity kept returning. She was certain that the nagging, biting stir in her chest was one the others felt too. Awake again, she swallowed down a heavy weight in her throat. They were so *close*. Almost to civilization, a way home, but as anxious as Ben was to get going,

she simply put her palm to her forehead. Fingers curled in a half fist against her head, a long haggard sigh slithered out of her lungs. *Who am I kidding? That isn't home. It's never been.*

A response wriggled in from the dreaded part of her brain that fed her intrusions and worries. *What is home, then? I have nowhere else to go. I can't even afford the place I live in.* She clutched the soggy cougar skin close with her free hand. *I'm not selfish enough of a bastard to ask to live with these two. God, I just met them. What am I doing?* She was biting the back of her thumb now, peeling at the skin. Another kick in her heart. Another coil of the intestines. Her conscious thoughts were loud, but behind it all a presence demanded attention. A droplet of blood pooled and ran down her thumb as she failed to distract herself, gnawing at the skin won calloused from spirals past. She didn't want to acknowledge the pull. The thing that kept her from looking towards Rosswood. Denial, denial *denial*. *"I don't,"* she whispered against the weight of it all. *"I'm not, I can't."*

The pull didn't care. *This is home. You want this. **You want this.*** It was starting to hurt now, her hand slick with more than just riverwater. It wasn't working. Ben shoved the thought down deep. Being a beast wasn't compatible with her hectic, modern life, no matter how strong the allure. It was hard enough tucking her tail behind a belt, shaving the backs of her hands, her face, taking care not to open her mouth too wide or do anything out of line. To blend in, to be invisibly agender and invisibly animal. The thought

of how much worse it could be if she couldn't hide it at *all* made her shiver.

The river gurgled. This place didn't feel as safe as it did when Ben was little. There were adults around who knew better, that told her where she could wander and what was next. She caught minnows in plastic nets and styrofoam cups. She ate hot dogs in the back of her mom's truck-bed with the cousins that lived here. Now it was just a lake.

Ben let go of the clench in her stomach and laid back down. The grass was cold, so she pressed up against her companions. It was humid and uncomfortable, but it was better than staying awake like this. As she closed her eyes, Ben hoped that when she next awoke, she'd finally make up her mind.

## 19 • Gone

You've likely lost a toy, or a piece of jewelry, maybe even a book, at some point in your life. You search and search, *sure* you must have left it here, there, somewhere. You tear apart your room looking for the damn thing, the false hope of victory spiking with every familiar shape spotted. You wear yourself out for something that might as well have never existed, probably feeling a little cheated for all your effort.

But I'm sure you haven't lost a whole town.

Rosswood was nowhere. *Nowhere*. Endless trees took its place, tall and skinny and gray-barked just like they ought to have been in the area. It was as untouched as the woods could be: no buildings, no cars, no highways or roads. Barren of any human activity whatsoever. It would have been silent, if not for Ben, who could barely breathe between cursing and running around desperately for any sign at all that another person had ever set foot in this place. Too many details were clicking now: the lack of sawed trees, the absence of trash, of man-made trails. An anger seethed through her. How did they not realize sooner that there was *never* going to be a town on the other side of that lake?

“Where the fuck are we?!” she shouted into the air. Ben was standing a good few feet away from Jynn and Casey, who’s disappointment was a lot quieter. They had both never been to the area anyway; there was no comparison to be made for them. They trusted Ben’s sanity, of course. Making up an entire settlement not only sounded exhausting, it didn’t sound like Ben at all. Unsure what to say in a situation like this, a hesitant silence was all that met the panic. A hair-pulling, seething panic.

This was all so *wrong*. All the traveling they’d done until now, it was all through *real* places, *recognizable* places...but there wasn’t a single touch of human presence anywhere. It unsettled Ben deeply. That path beyond the stream, that pulled them through the path of leaves and into the world once more...*did it take us somewhere else?* She was far from the kind of person to believe in parallel worlds and other ‘sci-fi fantasy bullshit’, yet the only other explanations were just as bizarre.

While Ben grappled with the reality of the situation, Jynn spoke up to Casey. “Should we do something?”

“Give her a minute,” he replied.

“You don’t think she mistook this place for another?”

“I thought of that,” he said, “but she too familiar with this place for that to make sense.”

Jynn hummed a conflicted note. “What’s the deal then?”

“I...I really don’t know.” He sighed. “God, it’s weird.”

They tapped their foot, staring off in thought. Then, when Ben started walking back in their direction, they asked “Alright so, no Rosswood, what now?”

Arms loose at her sides and feet shuffling languidly, Ben shrugged. “I give up.”

“You...what?”

“I give up! It’s gone, or, maybe it was never here in the first place. We’re not going home.”

A guilty, fleeting thought of satisfaction crossed the back of Jynn’s mind before a more present concern took hold. They shook off the former. “You can’t give up that easily, Ben, maybe there’s still a way?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I thought you wanted to stay.”

“Not every desire is practical...”

“I mean if we’re stuck here, it’s pretty fuckin’ practical to like it.” Jynn went quiet, and turned their head downwards.

“Ah...sorry. I didn’t mean...” Ben rubbed the back of her neck, twisting the curls around her fingers. *This is what happens when you don’t talk to people for a while.* She told herself.

“No it’s okay, you’ve got a lot on your plate...” Jynn’s voice was soft, as if it was downtrodden. They only wanted to help, but it was turned around on them.

“Well, yeah, but that’s no excuse to take it out on you.”

Casey nodded, “good on you for recognizing that, Ben. And Jynn, it’s okay. We’ll all figure out how this works together. I don’t

resent you for wanting to stay, just like I don't resent you for *any* of your preferences." Jynn recognized that sentiment. It was just like back when they'd told him they were asexual. He took it well; it was just another fact about Jynn to him. He didn't contest it, like other partners of past, he had simply nodded and discussed boundaries. When it came to respecting their wants and needs, they trusted him wholly.

He continued, "now, let's work things out."

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They spent a while speculating the nature of their situation, sharing ideas and dismissing others. They still couldn't be sure no matter what they thought of, and settled on leaving it for later. Naturally, though, that curiosity wasn't easy to dismiss, and their minds wandered back to it when there was nothing else of interest. Whether they knew it or not, their perceptions of reality had been altered. Being a werebeast was already *weird*. Now a town goes missing? Ridiculous, impossible, *interesting*.

Casey and Jynn coupled off to hunt for food to refuel after the ordeal of traversing the rivermouth, while Ben tried their best to put together a lean-to shelter. With her hands busier than her mind, the lingering wonder caught up with her again. *I can't believe this...where did we end up?* Ben thought as she set a large stick in the

notch of a tree. So far the shelter was nothing more than a wooden skeleton: a rough outline of branches making up a tent like shape. She held the poles in place by packing clay and mud over them.

As she worked, Ben couldn't stop overthinking. A troubling concept streaked across her mind, of becoming a full beast again, the *relief* of finally letting out the bottled up inhumanity and renewing all the strength owed to her. She tried to push it down, like other thoughts of that kind, but it persisted as a familiar feeling stirred in her chest: the steady pounding of a *beat*. A heartbeat, keeping pace with something more intense. Her vision was dim around the edges now, a vignette that only grew darker with each pulse. It was that *pull* again, the same as within the dream.

Then, the heavy feeling in her chest began to feel more like a *presence* than an ache. Like rising smoke, its voice—*voice?*—drifted into her head. It was both deep, and melodic, a dual tone that reverberated like thunder. Whatever this was, it was colossal, bigger than anything Ben had ever known.

*"This is no place for suppression."*

Ben flung a stick into the air in startled shock. "HUH?" All her hair and fur was standing on end. Someone spoke. Inside her skull. *I've finally gone crazy*. She thought.

Again, the presence spoke in that endlessly vast voice.

“Calm yourself little one-“

“Little one?? Wait don't talk to the hallucination that's a bad idea...”

“You must have many questions.”

“Yeah! Wait. Fuck.”

“It is okay. Your imagination did not conjure me.”

“That's exactly what a delusion would want me to think.....I think?” Ben pointed the accusation at a tree, deciding it would make for a decent stand-in for the voice. Its gentle laugh sent shivers down her body as it continued. “You amuse me, 'Ben'. You are an interesting creature, despite your inner conflicts.”

“Creature...what are you? Why are you talking to me?” A deluge of confused emotion run through her heart. Being addressed as a creature...it was both validating yet uncomfortable.

“Because you need talking-to.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You need to reconcile with your nature.”

Ben froze. She knew exactly what that meant. “No way. No. A nameless voice in my head isn't going to change my mind.”

“I am the **Thrumm**. That's a name to you, isn't it?”

An ice cold surge sliced through Ben. In sensation only, river water rose up her throat, leaves brushed against her lungs, the clack of bone and whirr of feathers rang within her ears. She gripped at imaginary branches and brambles weeping from her

skin. That name was the echo of everything alive. The atmosphere. The pull itself. She couldn't breathe. It was so *heavy*.

*"You are familiar with me. You have called me by other names, yes?"*

"God?" she choked. The ground wouldn't stop spinning.

*"No. Though some have misinterpreted me as such."*

"Wait, is there a God?"

*"I would not know. I was made by you."*

"Me?"

It paused a moment. *"Beings like you. Who yearn."*

"This is really confusing, I think I'm gonna pass out." Ben leaned her arm against a tree. The bark felt like it was moving. "So, what are you? What do you want?"

*"I am the keeper of this place, and I want to fulfill your desires."*

"What is this place?"

*"The In-Between."*

"Between...what?"

*"Between the unreal and the real. Between the leaves. Home."*

"I don't get why I'm here," Ben said. She stood a little straighter, but was too disoriented to keep it up for long. It felt like the cavity of her chest was full of fire. The presence of the Thrumm washed over her in waves, only stoking it.

*"To find yourself. To face what you reject. You have lied to yourself for a long time. It is time to lay down the burden of it all,"* it replied.

"Listen, I just want to go home. I don't want this."

*“You are home.”*

“No, this isn’t right, there’s no one here! There’s nothing. This...Between thing isn’t where I’m from.”

*“Did you truly enjoy where you came from? Is ‘work’ your life’s purpose? You deny the true self in favor of toil. Being human is not what you want.”*

“Fuck off.”

“Well?”

“Just stop. All of this is your fault.” Ben waved her arm, trying to dispel the entity. She was bitter. The truth stung.

*“We will speak to each other soon, then.”* The Thrumm sounded patient, like it knew she’d be back. She hated that.

Her vision focused back into place, the presence leaving her alone once again. It hollowed her out when it left, the weight of everything turned light as a feather. The skin stretched over her sternum was hot to the touch, despite the deep chill she felt. She took deep breaths. There wasn’t enough air in the world to keep her steady. The absurdity of what took place slowly settled in. She was shaken by it.

Whatever the Thrumm was, it knew her too well for comfort. The things it said weren’t lies, but they burned just as painfully. That scared Ben. She wasn’t used to having those terrible secrets turned back on her. Confrontation was something she

avoided as much as she could...but running from herself would only last so long.

Eventually she'd crack.

## 20 • Repair

Four rabbits lay slumped over each other on the grass. One was torn open, its light pink flesh glistening against the overcast glow. It tasted of chicken, gamey, but watery. It was slippery, and slid down the throat easily.

“Thanks for bringing me food again,” said Ben. She hadn’t mentioned her talk with the entity to Jynn or Casey. It was too personal. She wondered if it had spoken to them.

“Of course, Ben. Thank you for building the shelter,” Jynn responded. In the time it took for the couple to return, Ben had been hard at work finishing the lean-to. The slant that served as the roof was all complete; all it needed was to be dug out properly. A sturdy array of sticks packed with mud and boughs made for the perfect cover. She’d built ones like it before.

“How was hunting this time?”

“Good, both of us are gettin’ a lot better at it,” said Casey. “We found out how to corner prey instead of having to just give chase each time.”

“Oh, nice.” Ben swallowed a chunk of rabbit. Her mind was still snagged on that strange interaction despite wanting otherwise. Feeling a little isolated, she asked “Hey ah, next time can you take me with you? I’ll be quiet.”

“Oh! Sure, will you be able to keep up okay?”

“I think so.” She ran a her hand over her shin.  
Disproportionate...but serviceable. If she had to run, she could just go on twos.

Jynn was conflicted. On one hand, it'd be nice to have Ben tag along; she had experience and knowledge they didn't. On the other hand, Jynn still had residual discomfort from her accumulated outbursts. It seemed like she wanted to fix the damage she'd done, with the apology and all, but they still had to shake off the sting. They didn't want to be mad at Ben. They *liked* Ben...they just needed to have a conversation with her. Fix those stragglng feelings. *Maybe now's the time?* They thought.

“Hey Ben?” Jynn walked up to her, and tapped her shoulder with their palm.

“Hm? What's up?”

“I'd like to have a one-on-one, if you don't mind.” They kept their voice calm. Getting nervous wouldn't do them any good.

“Oh, uh, sure,” she said. Ben wasn't expecting another today, but at least this time it wasn't some omniscient fuck. She followed Jynn to a secluded spot, and sat down against a tree beside Jynn. It was peaceful here. The tree was broad, and a patch of moss growing at its base made it comfortable to lean against. Once settled, Jynn took a deep breath, then began.

“Alright so, I want to make sure we’re on good terms,” said Jynn.

“Ahh...yeah. Sorry.” Ben scratched at her chin, looking downwards. “I’ve been kinda shitty to you lately.”

“Yes, but, I know you’ve also been under extraordinary stress...”

“That’s no excuse!”

“Of course. That’s no excuse. But I wanted to mention it anyway.”

“Hmph. Fair enough I guess,” she said.

“I do forgive you, I just want you to make sure you channel your...frustrations somewhere else.”

“Yeah...”

The two of them spoke for a short while further, mending hurts and reassuring one another. Jynn already knew Ben didn’t mean any real harm, but the conversation lifted a weight off of both of their chests. Afterwards, Jynn offered their hand, this time with a gentle smile. “Thank you for talking with me.”

Ben took it, giving their hand a squeeze. It was a little awkward, but felt right at the moment. “Yeah, uh, it cleared up some guilt I was feeling.”

Jynn didn’t let go, lingering over the feel of Ben’s palm. It was softer than expected, not quite as wiry as their own, but far less stocky than Casey’s. Warm.

“Good, I’m glad,” they said.

“Thanks. Uh. Do you...usually...?” Ben broke their gaze.

“Usually what?” asked Jynn.

“Hold on this long?”

They blinked in embarrassment. “Oh! Ah—sorry. I’m a...tactile kind of person.” Attempting to remove their hand, Ben laced her fingers instead. “Wait, wait. I’m not uncomfortable, you can hold it as long as you want, I just need to get used to it.”

“Oh um. Are you sure?”

“Yeah, uh, no one’s held my hand in years. I want to get to know what it’s like again.”

Jynn was surprised. Ben was once again painfully blunt.

“In that case ah, you can ask for contact whenever you’d like.”

Ben raised her eyebrows slightly. “Really?”

This was an unexpected turn of events, but a welcome one. Jynn had always been one for physical intimacy. Why not share?

“Yes, it’s fine by me. Just ask if you need it.”

“Still, after all that?” She stroked her index finger across Jynn’s knuckle. Their hand was long like this, covered in a silky coat of fur. It was pleasant to the touch.

“You’re not a sinner, Ben. Wounds heal.” Absent-mindedly, Jynn slipped another paw into her other hand. Now they were turned to face each other, Ben still looking down. They were a bit flustered, unable to meet the beast’s eyes.

“Thank you. You guys have been really kind to me,” she said.

“Everyone deserves kindness.”

“For a while it felt like I didn’t, so, again, thanks.”

“No worries. It’s a struggle to learn to forgive yourself isn’t it?” Jynn asked.

“God, like you wouldn’t believe. I still feel kind of broken I guess. Nothing is easy,” she sighed.

“I know how that feels. You’ve got us, though.”

“I do?” Ben’s grip tightened a sliver.

“You do! We’re friends, by this point.” Jynn was fond of that notion; making a friend.

“Oh. I didn’t know.” Ben had only thought of herself as an unexpected guest. They were convinced gaining friendship required more hoops to jump through, like being more appealing or impressive or something. *This* was relieving.

“Now you do. Would you like to meet back up with Casey?” said Jynn.

“Sure, thanks.” Ben was a little hesitant to let go. Holding on felt good.

Jynn, intuiting she wanted to continue, left one hand in Ben’s grasp. “That one can stay,” they offered.

Embarrassed, Ben simply nodded.

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It was uncertain where they were supposed to go now. This entire journey had led to nothing but a town-barren copse of trees. It was monumentally disappointing, even if it did reveal the truth of this place. *The In-Between*, that's what that voice had called it. It seemed to correspond with the normal world at least. That was good. Maybe it meant an escape could be found if they reached that stream they entered from.

But a journey like that could take months. Maybe even a *year*. It sounded like a long shot to survive a venture like that in the harsh throes of a pacific northwestern winter. Instead, Ben considered the familiar. The original plan. The Skeena river.

Ben wanted to see it again. Even if the city was gone too, or any number of settlements along its winding edge. Even if it was just those mountains and the cascade of endless woodlands. To be near that place of origin again would be worth something, at least. The Thrumm was right about one thing, no matter how much she wanted to deny it. That river's valley was *home*.

It was going to hurt to say goodbye again.

## 21 • A Riverside Encounter

They were all getting the hang of this odd lifestyle. Migrating from place to place, hunting, resting, and passing the time talking. Three days since the Rosswood revelation, and they were already past the opposite end of Kalum lake. They had reached the two smaller lakes, first Redsand lake, then Treston lake. Now, they only had to follow the Kalum river until they reached their destination.

More of those strange moments, like when Casey had seemingly become a little *too* comfortable, had begun to pop up. The three found themselves slipping briefly into more instinctual behaviors. It wasn't concerning, as it was infrequent enough to be brushed off, and only really happened in times of deep comfort or heightened urges. The first time Ben had joined them for hunting, she would have broken out into chase if not for her legs being unsuited for sprinting in their current state. It truly bothered Ben the most. Casey had mixed feelings on it, and didn't seem to like talking about it. Jynn reveled in the sensation of being more animal when the opportunity arose.

Jynn's optimism kept it feeling normal enough, and eventually the three figured out ways to cope with the sudden sinkings into animal mindsets. Ben still kept everything about the Thrumm to herself, but she figured it was behind all of this.

With the smoothing over of Jynn and Ben's issues, they found themselves talking far more often. As a result, Casey even joined in as well, and the uneasy quiet of the past week or so had become a friendly rapport between the trio. After some working on it, outbursts were directed at the problems themselves rather than Ben's companions, until eventually there were few outbursts at all. Things were straying in a healthier direction, and it felt *great*.

Relapse wasn't impossible, of course, but now Ben felt like she had proper support.

A lot can change in just a few days, for better or worse.

Trekking along the side of Kalum river, Jynn, Ben, and Casey made lighthearted conversation as they passed ferns and patches of red clover. The knobble of woodpecker drumming and screech of steller's jays filled the canopies around them as they walked.

"Honestly, I never really liked horror," said Ben, replying to yet another icebreaker question. It was Casey's idea, to fire off queries until something interesting really stuck. There wasn't much else to do.

She continued, fiddling with a paw of the pelt she was wearing. "It's usually not good for my anxiety, but it really

depends on the medium y'know? A movie is different from a book or a podcast. Written horror's a lot easier for me."

"I get you, yeah. I'm more of a reader too," said Casey.

"What about you?" He turned his head towards Jynn.

"Same boat really! Although I like comics better for that genre. Totally different experience." They were distracted, focused more on what they were saying than their steps. A bush was in their way, but rather than side-stepping it, they attempted to cut through part of it. Jynn flinched as they put their weight down on a soft, furry thing. An animal screeched and darted out of the bush. It was smaller than the cougar had been, but it was bulky, and with its bright teeth bared, it cut an intimidating figure. Its fur was dark around the face and legs, with a rusty brown color on its back.

"What is that?!" Jynn shouted, practically leaping back in terror.

"It...kind of looks like us," said Casey, moving away from it.

Ben's eyes were wide. All they saw at first was a flash of white, red, and the bristled outline of something dangerous. They stayed frozen, staring at the animal, barely able to mutter its name. *Wolverine*. They knew they needed to get away from it, but their legs were heavy. Immobile. Ben tried to say something, to warn the others, but their lips only parted in a fearful whine.

Jynn didn't move fast enough. The wolverine slashed at their legs, snagged on the skin, took a bite, then backed away. It circled around, forcing Casey to back up, but Ben wouldn't budge. She was *terrified* of wolverines. Her dad used to tell her all kinds of stories about them. They were rare, but deadly if you didn't respect their boundaries.

It went to take a swipe at her as well, but her body suddenly lurched forward. She clamped down on the scruff of its neck, and barely tossed it aside. The adrenaline left her high strung and shaking, but now that paralysis was gone. She backed away.

If there's one thing you should know about wolverines, it's that *that* was a bad idea. They're animals with remarkable strength and temper, and if you manage to bother one enough, a brief encounter becomes a *duel*. Ben was too overtaken by panic instinct to remember that.

The wolverine doubled down, now actively targeting Ben. It almost looked like a dance: the lumbering yet agile animal charging to attack her feet, and Ben taking pains to avoid it. Jynn was having trouble standing, their new lacerations nearly causing them to scream.

Casey didn't want to end up with another angered animal on his back, but the other two were struggling. He figured if he wanted it to stop bothering Ben, he'd have to distract it. Quickly Casey made his way around, almost flanking the wolverine. Then,

he picked up a rock and tossed it, clocking it in the back of the head. The animal whipped around and snarled. It lunged toward Casey to intimidate him, but Ben was quick to attack from behind.

The wolverine was a twisty creature, like its weasel relatives, and attempted to roll away from the beast. Instead Casey and Ben pressed down, pinning it, and forcing it to remain on the grass. It left several slashes in them before it was wrestled flat. It made guttural huffing sounds to voice its displeasure, snapping at anything that got close to its mouth.

“I don’t wanna kill the thing,” said Casey, keeping his hands on its shoulders. Ben nodded in agreement as she snapped out of her trance.

“What should we do?” he asked.

“River,” Ben panted. “Throw it in the damn river.”

“Wouldn’t that..?”

“No...this is a thin stretch. It’ll be fine. Wolverines can swim.”

Casey opened and closed his mouth for a second, now fully aware how dangerous the animal beneath him was. “Oh...that’s what this is.”

“What did you think it was??”

“A badger?”

“We don’t have badgers--ah nevermind. Just keep your hand right there. We’re gonna lift it up, then toss,” Ben instructed. Carefully, but quickly as possible, they lifted up the wolverine and

hurled it into the river. It kicked and growled through the air before it made a large *splash*, and resurfaced to paddle to the opposite shore.

Then, Casey and Ben checked up on Jynn, who was having a hard time keeping themselves composed. Their hands were pressed firmly over their injuries, trying to minimize blood loss. Short and huffy breaths were all they could muster through the sting. They all knew it could heal relatively soon, but they had to halt their journey in the meantime.

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With Ben's shirt tied tightly around their bitten leg, Jynn reclined against a tree. They picked at the fur around the shallower cuts on their other leg. They felt injury-prone, these days.

"I'm sorry I keep slowing us down..." they said. Casey and Ben were working to make another quick shelter for the night. Casey paused his task.

"That wasn't your fault hon," he said.

"Yeah," Ben chimed in, "it's fine. Being injured isn't something to apologize for right?"

"Right," Casey agreed. "So just rest, we'll take care of ya."

"Alright. Thank you." A little more at ease, Jynn tried to relax. Their injuries throbbed uncomfortably, but at least they had

stopped bleeding enough to make Jynn dizzy. Exhaustion started to seep in, and as time passed, they slowly fell asleep.

The shelter was complete by the time it started to get dark. Thick, gray clouds congregated above, threatening a downpour. Jynn was still asleep, so Casey hoisted them up in his arms and gingerly set them down in the hollow he'd dug. They purred as he tousled their hair, still unconscious, but content. Ben sat with her arms crossed over her knees, huddled under yet another slant. Quietly, the three got situated, curled up to rest.

"Hey," Ben whispered, tapping Casey.

"Hm?" he hummed.

"*Can I hold your arm? I'm cold.*"

"*I'll do you one better, just let me know if it's too much.*" Casey rolled her over so that she was nestled against his chest, and held her with his arms. It was shockingly warm, and soft.

"*Comfortable?*"

"*Ah,,,.very. Thanks.*" She didn't expect that, or for him to be so casual about it. Maybe being partners with someone like Jynn meant he was used to intimacy. It was overwhelming, being pressed like that on all sides, but she wanted to get used to it.

"*Goodnight Ben,*" he said, "*Sleep well.*" That last bit, it was a sendoff he usually reserved for Jynn. Ben noticed, and replied,

“You too, goodnight.” While it was true Ben had asked for more touch over the past couple days, she didn’t expect it from Casey.

Casey closed his eyes. With Jynn lying next to him, and Ben in his arms, he was very snug. He worried his advances might have been too sudden, but the way she held his forearm close as she drifted off suggested otherwise. Romance just wasn’t his thing, and he was glad their budding friendship could develop into something close like this, without all the hallmarks of *that* kind of love. Soon he was lulled to sleep as well, wondering about the future.

The clouds rumbled in the sky outside the shelter. At first only a drizzle, the rain came quickly. Leaves buckled under progressively heavier droplets. The nearby river was at a point close to the shore, not as deep as it was further ahead of the group’s site. The threshold was shallow.

Now, it began to rise.

## 22 • Submersion

Mud. The world smelled like mud. A darkly-pelted beast blinked awake to a wet slurry leaking into its den. Their legs hurt, one seemingly cut, and the other wrapped tightly in some kind of cloth. Beside them another beast coughed, unconscious and half submerged. She was mostly hairless, humanlike even, held snugly within the arms of a larger, brown-furred beast. The first beast pawed at the other two, attempting to rouse them. Something was terribly wrong, and they needed to wake them up.

The rain outside was unrelenting, agitating the already dense floodwater. The smallest beast heaved, coughing up what she'd swallowed in their sleep. The larger of the three quickly sat up and released the other. He swung his head around frantically, assessing the danger, before pushing away the slant above them and standing at full height. He picked up the smallest, hoisted her onto his shoulders, and extended a hand to the darker beast.

It did not understand.

The black beast stood on all fours, and shook the mud off. The ground was hard to stand on, water trickling into the dirt shallow and forming a large puddle. A large cougar pelt sat drenched below the surface, abandoned. Afraid, the beast stuck by

the larger one's side with their tail tucked between their legs. They trusted him, *knew* him, they just couldn't quite put it all together at the moment.

"Jynn?" The largest made a sound. A familiar sound. It was *about them*, somehow...a name? It was comforting, so the darker beast tried to imitate. It came out *wrong*.

He spoke again, with different sounds, ones the beast did not comprehend. The one on his shoulders did the same. The two exchanged sounds for a moment before the big one put a hand on the dark one's back and motioned to continue. They tried to remember what the connection was through the overwhelming brain fog.

The water was at the dark beast's elbows now, and steadily rising. The current tugged at the thing tied to their leg, which ached beneath. Ignoring that, they pressed on forwards, beside the other two beasts. *Cold*. They shivered from more than just the temperature. Yet another familiar sound was heard, this time within their own head. *Cold?* That was important, the beast knew it. They repeated that again and again until *sounds* became *words*.

*I am cold.*

Branches and debris floated past on the water's surface. It seemed the flood would only rise so high, stopping around the beast's shoulders. The current was the worst part; it was difficult

to walk against, and made the beast's feet lose traction with the grass at times. Fear bubbled up like a bile in their throat, and they let out a pained noise. It was halfway between a cry for help and a purge of compressed air.

"Jynn, please, hold on." His hand was held out again as they approached a rough patch. That's when something clicked. Finally, in understanding, the beast reached up one of its *hands* and held tight. They stood from their quadrupedal gait, much taller than the water. *Jynn. Name. I am Jynn.* That was enough. They would figure out the rest when they were out of danger.

An old tree was in the way, floating along. Past it was an incline that led up and out of the flooded shallow in the landscape. All the group had to do was get around it. It seemed to be drifting straight towards them, limbs slicing through the cloudy water. The largest member of the trio trudged forward, and used both hands to shove it. Working against the current was clearly putting a strain on him.

"Can...help," Jynn croaked. Words felt out of practice in their mouth, but the more of them they held onto, the easier it was getting to pull themselves out of their mental haze. They too put their palms against the slippery bark, and *pushed*. Stronger than they felt, their assistance managed to successfully move the tree aside. As it passed it scraped Jynn's side, but they shrugged it off for the sake of escape.

Soon, they all managed to crawl onto higher ground. The flash-flood raged on behind them, sweeping loose debris along with it. They took a moment to breathe.

“That sure was one hell of a rude awakening,” said the small beast, still coughing. Jynn’s ears perked, in full understanding of what was being said. They decided talking more was a good idea.

“Still...foggy.”

“What happened to you back there?” asked Casey. He laid on his back, head turned towards them. *Casey!* Jynn thought. *How could I forget?*

They collected their thoughts, and said “I think...I...slipped too far.”

“Oh, ah, in the animal way?” he said. They nodded.

“Nothing made sense at first...”

“I’m sorry, that must’ve been scary. Is there anything I can do to help, hon?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying to remember everything.”

Jynn took a long, deep breath. Their legs stung. They were chilled to the bone. At least they were themselves again. As they thought aloud, they said “it’s not like...amnesia, I just couldn’t get a grasp on language itself? My own name sounded so alien at first...” They recalled how it felt being around Casey. That trustworthy, warm, familiar presence.

“Glad to know it’s all coming back to you,” he said.

“Yeah,” agreed Ben, “that’s weird, good thing it’s wearing off.”

“Hmm.” Jynn wasn’t sure why they felt conflicted about that. It was inconvenient and confusing. Yet...something about the submersion itself wasn’t strictly negative. The past few days, having that slip happen to them was only ever comfortable. Safe. Maybe it was just the wrong place at the wrong time.

After recovering from the exhausting emergency, the three were on their way again. It was still a bit dark out, but the night was fading away.

“You know,” Ben said, “If not for that fucken’ wolverine we would have been far past that flood by now.”

“I’m sorry-” Jynn started, before getting interrupted.

“Not your fault! Relax. *God I’m shivering...*” She held her hands firmly over herself. Her cougar pelt was missing, left behind in the commotion. Ben looked miserable about losing it.

“She’s right, it’s okay,” said Casey, “there was no way to know it was going to flood there.”

Jynn closed their eyes for a moment. “Right. Sorry.”

“No sorries, remember?”

“Alright...”

Casey looked up at the mountains, silhouetted against the still-brightening early morning sky. For him, the destination

wasn't really important anymore. Leaving home behind was beyond tough but, all that mattered now was the safety of the people he cared about. He missed his bed, the assuredness of a house, and his computer, even. But knowing he might never see those things again...maybe it was time to get used to this.

That's what it had all been anyway, for the past week or so. Just *getting used to* things the three of them wouldn't have even dreamt of. Adjusting, learning, and working around an increasing array of problems. Frustrating and painful as it was, though, Casey found himself also lingering on the positives. Despite some of the more troubling encounters...they'd all at least had some fun and comfort so far. He wanted to make more of that happen.

He was shocked by the contrast of his old outlook on his condition. Lifting up one of his hands, he gazed long and hard at the new shape, the fur, the roughness of his palm. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before but it just felt so *different* this time. He wasn't disgusted now. This was a hand that could gently hold, and be held, as opposed to the dirty *tool* he always saw it as. Jynn had flipped his perspective on its head. They'd changed how he saw himself, for the better. He knew now that Ben's self loathing, which he saw himself in, wasn't doing her any good. *If only I'd figured that out three years ago*, he thought to himself.

The valley opened up ahead of them as they traveled south. Ben knew that if they kept with the river, they'd make it to the Skeena in three, maybe four days. Already the biome was changing again, the trees gradually changing out from thin and gray to brown, broad conifers. From there, they'd probably figure out what to do afterwards. That hunger for *home* weighed down on her.

She thought about what the Thrumm said. About what home was really supposed to mean. She knew she was in denial, so she gave up on justifying apartment living as something that meant any amount of comfort to her. It was uncomfortably small. Barebones. *Tolerable*.

The more she reflected on it, the sounds and smells of the endless woods were more reassuring than anywhere she'd been in Prince George, the city she couldn't stand anymore. The roots of her hometown pulled taught every moment she was away. The craving for that damp, cool air always came crawling back out of her lungs. Maybe the Thrumm was...right? *Fuck, it was right*.

Jynn held Ben's hand as they walked along. They were tired and needy, still feeling the discomfort from the flood situation. It wasn't their fault they'd stayed behind, it wasn't their fault it rained. It was fine. Even though it felt like wet concrete was slithering down their throat every time they closed their eyes, it

was *fine*. They squeezed Ben's hand a little too hard, lost in thought.

"Ow--hey, you good?" she asked.

"Oh um, no." Jynn fidgeted with Ben's knuckles. "No I'm not okay I think."

"Still having trouble with..?"

"Yes." Jynn could tell she was referring to their altered state of mind. The animalistic fuzziness of it still tingled anxiously in the back of their head, like a startled cat. The flood was terrifying. They could still taste the scent of that mud.

"Uh, how can I help?"

"I don't know."

Ben stopped walking for a moment, making Jynn do the same, and Casey followed suit. Ben turned Jynn to face her, and hesitantly held out her arms. "I may be short, and bony, and inexperienced," she said, "but you could use a hug."

Jynn formed half a smile, and leaned down to hug her. It was calming. They held on for a good while, before Casey joined in, embracing them both. Eventually, after a long group-hug, Jynn said "thank you. That helped."

"Anytime," Ben replied. She meant it. This whole physical contact thing was really growing on her.

The river's gurgle was joined by the trill of morning birds as the sun made its arrival behind the mountains. The dark, heavy

clouds had passed on, leaving a light drizzle in their wake. More walking, more rest, more reassurance as their journey went on. The world didn't wait for them, but they carried on the best they could.

## 23 • Wants and needs

Leaves and underbrush rustled beneath careful steps. With Casey in the lead, the trio quietly stalked a rabbit. Jynn's wrapped leg still gave them some trouble, and it had become infected after all the dirty water had gotten to it. The other cuts had managed to scab without issue.

Ben's body had acclimated to the additional practice of walking on all fours, and it became a smoother action than it once was. She still had trouble running, but she could live with it. What was important was assisting her companions, not her pride.

The rabbit loped along slowly, pausing occasionally to sniff for something to eat. Its belly was white, and the rest of its fur was a saturated blonde. Ben found herself staring at what she could make out of its vulnerable underside. She pictured tearing into it, its soft, lean flesh coming apart under her teeth. *Not yet!* She told herself. *Wait for the right time.* Despite her restraint, she felt ravenous.

Casey gave Jynn and Ben a quiet signal, telling them to start splitting up. The strategy of encircling prey from a distance and cornering it once closed in had worked well for them, as long as they kept coordinated. It was vital to move stealthily, in tandem with each other. Unfortunately for Ben, her body wanted otherwise.

She tried to hold in her hunger's urges. Biting the inside of her cheek, digging her fingers into the dirt...it felt like she was struggling against a demon in her stomach. An effectively rude and pushy demon. *All I have to do is cross over to the other side.* Ben reminded herself. *Just walk over, keep it cornered, and wait. I can do that right?* Eyes a bit dry, she blinked, and realized she hadn't done so for a couple minutes. That snowy belly just looked so easy to bite...

The rabbit perked up, having heard a twig snap under Ben's hand. The sudden twitch compelled her to rocket forward, startling the animal and causing it to leap in the other direction. She spat out a mouthful of dirt. What little fur she had was bristled from the excitement. Thankfully Jynn had been waiting in the wings, and caught the hapless creature with little effort.

Realizing she'd messed up, Ben flopped over in frustration. "Fuuuuuck. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, we got it," said Casey. "Looks like *someone's* hungry, though." He smiled.

"Mrrf!" Jynn nodded, mouth full of rabbit. They dropped it into their hands, and said "We've all done it before, it's fine. Did I tell you about when Casey had to pull me off of a tree?"

"No, uh, how'd that happen?" Ben was used to getting yelled at for mistakes. At work, her boss held her to strict standards. She was still adjusting to her friend's forgiveness.

They told her about the scenario for a little while, reassuring her, before moving onto finding more prey. They let

Ben have the first rabbit due to her hunger. She didn't need to eat as much as them, with her smaller size. Soon she was rid of that distraction of a growling stomach, able to help out less...impulsively.

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“Careful, it might hear you if you shuffle too much.”

“Okay.” Ben crouched low behind the blackberry bush, carefully picking a few as she peeked at the deer in the clearing. She was eight years old, with a mop of curly hair hanging all the way down to her lower back. She hadn't seen her father hunt before, and wanted to learn everything she could. He held his rifle low, waiting for his chance.

The buck swiveled its head around, and looked for any signs of danger, before bending down. It felt safe enough to start grazing, but it kept its ears perked high.

Quietly, Ben's father lifted his rifle, and pulled his set of earmuffs over his ears. Ben copied him, making sure the hearing protection was in place for what was about to happen next. He had the aim lined up well, and slid his finger onto the trigger.

“*Steady, steady,*” he whispered under his breath.

Ben, seeing his mouth move, wondered what he said. “What?” she asked, the lack of hearing causing herself to speak a lot louder than she thought she had.

The deer bolted upright, and almost managed to spring away before the rifle rang out and dispatched the poor thing through the neck. The father panted, shocked he'd managed to snag it in time. He pulled down his muffs, and gently removed his daughter's as well.

"You spooked it, try to be a little more quiet next time, okay?"

"Ah! Sorry dad..." A guilt sat on her little shoulders. *Is he mad? Mom always gets mad...*

He gave her a comforting pat on the head. "It's alright kiddo, but we have to go make sure it isn't suffering now. C'mon." He helped her up, and walked over to the wounded animal. It was laying on its side, kicking its legs, trying and failing to get back up. From its neck poured a steady stream of red. Something about the sight made Ben shiver in a way that wasn't just fear.

"Ah, damn, hold on. You might not wanna watch this...I'm gonna make sure it stops hurting" He picked up his gun, and aimed directly for the buck's head. Ben turned around, and pulled her ear protection back up. Curious though, she turned around and peeked through her fingers.

That was the first time she'd seen an animal die.

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Ben woke up in a cold sweat with the reverberation of her dream's gunshot echoing through her mind. The complicated feelings she couldn't process back then had left her adult brain with some uncomfortable realizations to make. Again, she had let Casey hold her, keeping her warm. It had become the nightly routine. He was sound asleep, but her stirring roused an unconscious rumble in him.

Jynn was sleeping too, apparently deep in a dream. Seeing them kick like a dozing dog was cute. Ben figured they were chasing imaginary grouse, or something. With how well they fit into the role of a beast, she'd have figured they'd been one their whole life. Jynn was so comfortable, so agile, so...enviable? A jolt ran through her. Ben didn't want to admit that jealousy.

*"You want what they have, do you not?"*

The Thrumm's booming voice was startling. Ben nearly punched Casey in the jaw from her nerves being shot, but thankfully his arms were positioned in such a way that she was partially pinned, and could only manage a victimless flail. Once her heart stopped racing, Ben closed her eyes. *"Don't. Fucking. Do. That."* she hissed. *Why is it back? What does it want?* She thought.

*"You are safe. What I want is to talk with you again."*

*Wait...Ben kept her mouth closed. Did it just answer...?*

*"I did. The streams of speech and thought are not so divergent, to me."*

She was equally disturbed, fascinated, and glad she didn't have to keep whispering.

*So...here to tell me to reflect or some shit?* Ben thought towards the Thrumm.

*"I noticed you getting close to doing so."*

*Are you...always watching my brain? That's creepy.*

*"I am not a perfect being. Before you came **here**, it was only moments of yearning that stood out to me,"* it said.

*Embarrassing, she thought.*

*"Not to me. And not to them."* Somehow, Ben got the feeling it was talking about Jynn and Casey. Almost as if it was gesturing with nothing but its voice. That beautiful, otherworldly, rippling voice...

*I don't get it. Why are you trying so hard? I already made up my mind.*

*"You have not. All you have done is run away from it,"* replied the Thrumm.

*Listen. You're really starting to annoy me.*

*"I am sure that dysphoria of yours is, as well."*

Ben went rigid. "Don't go there..." they said, aloud. They covered Their mouth. Casey mumbled something, but didn't wake.

*"Why do you fear it?"* asked the Thrumm.

*Because it just...fuck, it can't work. I can't keep my job like that, I can't-*

It spoke over their excuses, calmly, but with purpose. “Do not think about work. What do you **want**?”

She paused. *Honestly I want to quit.*

“What is stopping you, then?”

*Well...I can't. I need the money.*

“And what, Ben, do you need money for?” it pressed.

*Food, rent...wait. I know what you're getting at. No.*

“Here, both your basic and spiritual needs are met. The woods are bountiful. Your wounds close. The demands of your crushing, modern life lay far behind you.”

Ben grimaced. *Somehow you always find the most infuriating things to say to me, you know that?*

“It won't hurt,” it said, apparently letting her words slide.

“Listen to what you actually feel, not your shame, or learned resentment. Forgive your desires”

*Sure, sure, she thought. I'm gonna go ahead and not do that.*

“Then we will meet again. Again and again, until you can face yourself, Ben.”

She felt the presence leave again, lighter this time. She wanted to object, but it was simply gone. Ben didn't even know if it *had* somewhere to go. Maybe it was just observing quietly.

Her companions slept well, and the lull of their breath pulled her into a doze. In the last few moments before she succumbed completely, Ben wondered if her next dream would be just as weirdly sentimental.

## 24 • An appearance

“How close are we getting?” Jynn asked Ben. They stood in between her and Casey, walking alongside the river yet again under the morning sun. A nice cool breeze cut through the humid warmth.

“Hard to tell, but maybe a few more days,” she replied.

“How’s your leg?”

“Doesn’t hurt as much! Tried cleaning it out again...sorry about your shirt,” they said. What was once a white tee had become a bloodied, dirty rag, wrapped around Jynn’s leg. It was starting to look crusty, and had essentially been rendered unwearable.

“You can keep it. *Please*,” she insisted.

“You sure you don’t mind being..?” Casey trailed off, unsure how to word his question without sounding awkward. *Is Ben comfortable being shirtless?* He wondered. *It’s been a few days...*

“What, my chest? I could care less.” It wasn’t like there was much there. Ben casually poked a boob. “It’s just meat, dude.”

“Oh, uh, good. Was just worried you-”

“It’s fine, pfft.” She had never had an excuse to go without, before, and decided to take the opportunity while it lasted. Especially in warmer weather, it was nice to ditch excess clothing. It was cute watching Casey fumble around his words as well.

A strong, pungent smell emerged from ahead as the three progressed onwards. The scent brought to mind rotten eggs. Ben quickly put a hand over her nose, stifling a gag. Soon, a cluster of strange plants growing in the shade came into view. They had large green leaves, and a round, yellow hood surrounding a bumpy rod in the center. The stink was definitely coming from *those*.

“What are they?” Casey asked.

“Skunk cabbage,” answered Ben, “smells bad, but it’s harmless.” For her, the plant was a common encounter. She was accustomed to the presence of it on long hikes through damp areas, but she hadn’t smelled it in years. Especially not with her keener nose, which filled the scent with even more pungency.

Casey and Jynn were curious about the skunk cabbage plants, and despite the smell, Jynn walked up to touch one. It had a waxy feel to it. Unfortunately, when the leaf they were examining bruised under their touch, the unpleasant smell only got worse.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” chuckled Ben. “You’ll get the smell on your hands. Let’s keep going.”

“Ah...I see.” Jynn wiped their hand off on their leg and rejoined the group. It was easy to forget, with distance, that the Skeena region’s woodlands were temperate rainforests; wet and verdant and wild. Almost a whole different planet compared to the thin woods they were accustomed to. They wondered how much knowledge of their own environment had seeped into their brain.

Ben seemed so casual about the bizarre plants, as if they were just yet another mundane thing she'd grown up with.

Casey was even more silent than usual as they traveled. Quietly, he'd been thinking hard about the logistics of living out in the woods like they had been so far. Would it be better to settle down? Roam from area to area? He wasn't sure. Every avenue of thought would go on a massive tangent before he could really remember what he was trying to determine in the first place. Mental images of life in their house drifted through his head. Sharing kisses on the porch, dismantling the smoke alarm in the kitchen after a cooking disaster, laughing about it later in bed, distracting each other from sleeping with tickles and pokes...Casey hoped there would be something close, at least. He already missed it sorely.

Casey decided thinking about it alone wasn't going to land anywhere concrete, so he spoke up.

"Hey, so...Ben," he said, "I've got something to ask."

*This won't be as awkward as the other question, will it?* She thought, before turning to say "oh sure, what's up?"

"Well I was thinkin', if we're stuck here, we should figure out what to do about it. Y'know, like our living situation and all that. Is there somewhere by the Skeena river you might want to...stay?" Having heard this, Jynn perked up a little.

“Ah, fuck. I was hoping we could leave that for later...” Ben quieted in tone.

“Better to be prepared early, looks like this might be our new home and all,” Casey said.

She sighed. “Look, I don’t care what that thing says this place is like, we’re gonna find a way out. We don’t have to be stuck, alright?”

“Who?” He paused his steps, confused.

Ben froze, realizing what she had let slip. An “Uh...” escaped her mouth as she stalled to correct her mistake. Letting them know about the Thrumm was more of an eventual thing. Now, there was no time at all. “...Nevermind,” she blurted. *Real smooth.*

“No, really, what are you talking about?” said Casey. Something was off, she’d brushed it off too quickly. The way her eyes darted to the side was a clear marker of discomfort.

The ground seemed to disappear beneath Ben. She was standing rock rigid, yet the world was spinning. As if kicked out of her own body and taking a freefall, all she could muster was half a choke. She didn’t want to lie to these people. It was easy to lie to her boss, strangers, relatives, but Ben actually *cared* about Jynn and Casey.

“Uh, well...” *What am I doing?* “There’s this...voice...”

The other two both had a different flavor of concern on their faces. Ben flinched. *Shit, that sounds like I’m losing my mind.*

“Wait! Wait. Let me rephrase, uh-”

“Take your time.” Casey said. He sat down, so he wouldn’t loom over her, and made sure Jynn did the same.

“This is gonna sound so weird,” said Ben, “but there is this thing that won’t stop bothering me called the *Thrumm*. It knows more about this place than we do. Keeps trying to tell me to stay.” *Here we go, she thought, might as well tell them everything. Fuck.*

Hearing the name of the entity put a visible shiver through Casey and Jynn. There was a deeper recognition they couldn’t quite place.

“The *Thrumm*..?” Jynn asked. They hadn’t heard that name, but the familiarity went past the title. Whatever it represented was known to them.

“Yeah. That’s what it called itself,” she said.

“When has it spoken to you?”

“Usually when I’m alone?”

Jynn looked up at the swaying tips of the conifer trees. They were trying their best to grab a flicker of something important. A faint glimmer of an idea that undulated through the current of their mind.

“How does it *feel*? When it speaks to you?”

Ben scrunched her nose, considering. “Uh, big. It feels like the sky is talking to me.” *That doesn’t make sense, does it...*

“Hmm...what does it say?” they said.

That was the part Ben was trying her hardest to avoid. She worried they would side with the Thrumm's ideas, and try to convince her to stay. If they could just understand she still had things to get done, to work towards, maybe this wouldn't be an issue at all. Begrudgingly, she answered.

"Says that I need to accept myself, or something. But I don't care about that, I care about getting home and--and that's another thing!" Ben huffed as she started to get worked up. "It keeps saying *this* is home, but it's wrong. People can't live like this, I can't live like this, I just want to get back to where we came from!" She was on the verge of yelling, which caused Casey to recede a little.

Before she could spiral further, the wind was knocked out of Ben from the inside. That overwhelming, humbling presence was back, and it was only going to complicate things. The timing was more than inconvenient, barely bridging over into comical.

The others winced as the Thrumm spoke, not used to the immensity of its voice. It was, to all present, both familiar and unknown, a combination that quickened the heart with fear *and* excitement. Jynn could hardly contain herself.

"*I am here to assure,*" It said, "*that I am both real, and your Ben is not ready to leave.*"

"I am!" she protested, throat creaky. *Great, another argument.*

Casey couldn't believe it. This thing, the Thrumm, whatever it was made of tasted like all the light he'd ever seen the moon cast down. It was the tinge on the edge of his transformations, the urges that sang to him in his most indulgent nightmares. Yet, with all that baggage, it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever witnessed.

There's a force, within those who ache for the impossible, that crashes against the walls of the heart and pulls on the cords of *need* like chains. There's a shimmering hope everywhere they look, that compensates for a craving deeper than any canyon. For those who can't live without change. For those who need it like air.

In little ways, in big ways, the Thrumm stokes this force. *Yearning* is its primary language. To Jynn, who was now sprawled on the grass, it was like they had come face to face with the embodiment of that grand desire. They didn't know how to process the weight of it.

The Thrumm noticed this, and turned its attention from Ben.

*“Jynn’ and ‘Casey,’ how wonderful it is to finally reach you. Do not be startled.”*

Casey swallowed. It sounded like it had been waiting a long time. He glanced at Jynn. A lifetime, for them. They were enraptured by every note of its voice. Though his situation and,

well, *denial* had been more recent, relatively...the awe was just contagious.

“H...hello,” he managed to peep.

Jynn was too stunned to talk.

“Hello! You have both been due for a visit, have you not?”

“Think so, yeah...”

“Do not worry, I am glad you came around to it.”

Casey leaned back, and breathed in deep. Something about those words... What a weight it was off his shoulders to know it was finally okay. He wasn't going to hurt over himself anymore.

Finally having mustered the presence of mind to say something, Jynn sat up. “So you're part of all this?” they asked. “The magic?”

“I *am* the magic, little one. Your changes stem from me, the ground you walk on and the air you breathe is where I dwell.

“I have so many questions...”

“Ask away.”

Casey spoke up. “Why bites? Why did this only happen to us after we all got bit by someone else..?” He'd been wondering that for years, and now the opportunity to put that curiosity to rest was staring him in the face.

“It is not the only way, but it is...intimate. On the other side, my influence depends more on the physical, to get where it needs to be.”

“The other side?” said Jynn.

“Where we’re actually from,” Ben interjected, “stuff’s different here. It’s its own thing, apparently.” All she could think about was getting out. Watching the wonder on Jynn’s face, the relief on Casey’s...it scared her how badly she wanted it, too. It was starting to pull her in.

“Oh...I see. Also, what exactly are we?” they asked.

*“Whatever you decide to call yourselves. The first of the changed, they looked as you do. It was what they wanted most.”*

Jynn was a little surprised there were more like them, despite having known of it before. It was different to have it stated outright by the Thrumm.

They, and Casey, asked more and more. They wanted to learn everything they possibly could. About themselves, the world, the entity, *everything*. It was a great relief to know the way of things. But, so wrapped up in having their curiosities finally answered, the two beasts didn’t notice Ben slip away.

## 25 • A disappearance

She was already gone by the time the Thrumm had made its departure. Silently, and without conflict, Ben had disappeared from the riverside. They thought she needed time to cool off somewhere else for a bit, but as the minutes turned to hours, it became apparent she was headed *away* from them.

For one, it hurt. There was no goodbye. They weren't even sure where to start looking. Maybe the Thrumm knew, but it wasn't something to call on like a dog. It appeared when it decided to, not when it was most convenient. Casey and Jynn were stuck with a decent guess, at best, and a lost member of their group at worst.

“Well, where do you think she ran off to?” Casey asked his partner. They had stayed in the same location for the rest of the day, waiting to see if Ben would return. Jynn ran their hand across his back, already nestled into him. They'd been worried about Ben, and asked for comfort.

“Towards the mountains maybe..? I think she still wanted to reach the other river, just...not with us, for some reason.” They said.

“That's what I was thinkin', yeah. Talkin' to that thing must have upset her.”

“Huff...why would she just leave?”

“Same reason I always left home. I didn’t want you to see me, and there were too many things I wanted to keep to myself. Self loathing, conflict...nothing you should have been exposed to, I thought.” Casey stroked the back of their head. In retrospect, Jynn could have helped him sooner.

“She doesn’t deserve to feel that way,” they said.

“No one does, I just hope it doesn’t get worse out there.” After a long, considerate pause, Jynn looked Casey in the eyes. “Tomorrow morning, let’s start searching.” They didn’t want to leave it up to chance. Jynn was determined.

He nodded in agreement. It was a bit past the sunset already, so if they wanted to set out, it would be better after some rest.

There was no shelter that night, and instead they settled for the cover beneath the boughs of a wide tree. The two of them had trouble falling asleep, tossing and turning, dozing off only to be roused by another worry. They held reassuring conversations until the need for rest finally took them, and they were sure of their goal. They were going to find Ben.

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There was one thing worse than stumbling through the dark, and that was stumbling through the dark *without a plan*.

Countless brambles and thorns scraped at Ben's legs, scuffing her up as she marched onwards. She wasn't sure where she was headed, just as far from the trap of desire as she could get. The pull, the itch that dug at her while she watched the conversation with the Thrumm play out, she didn't feel comfortable with how it tickled her stomach. She wasn't going to let it.

Every pang of denial pushed her one step further. Being around Casey and Jynn right now would only end up with more weird feelings she wasn't prepared for, so she shambled on. The foliage was thick, but almost invisible beneath the canopy, like an amorphous obstacle fraught with sharp ends and dewy spiderwebs. Traveling at night wasn't ideal, but what other choice did she leave herself? Wait until the morning? She couldn't just *say* she was leaving.

*God I'm stupid*, she thought.

Every snap and ruffle around Ben set her on edge. The shuffling of a mouse below the undergrowth was as eerie as a stalking tiger. Distant calls and treetop echoes were monsters that only grew more frightening the longer they bloomed in Ben's head. The fear kept her sparse fur on end. "*I'm fine...*" she muttered, "*nothing's following me...*"

The words were hardly comforting. If something was tailing Ben through the shadows, it would be a fight she'd lose. She saw encounters flit through her head: a bear tearing her to pieces,

a cougar peeling her skin, a wolf dragging her by the leg. She shivered. At least if something was close enough to attack, she'd smell it first, right?

The memory of late night walks with her father came to mind. During visitation every two weeks, when she was around fourteen, he'd take her out into the neck of the woods he lived by. They'd walk, quietly, until they reached a spot where the leaves above were more open and the sky shone through. The two of them would listen to the nocturnal world in silence.

With her dad, it wasn't scary. He'd point out bats and the moths they fed on, night birds, bugs; it was all fascinating to her. Now the movements in the corner of her vision and the faintest of sounds kept her wary. It wasn't quite so fascinating alone.

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It was Casey's idea to track Ben by her scent. After all, they still had her shirt, which despite the mud and blood and water, still carried some of it. Jynn had unwrapped it from their leg and took in the smell. Grassy, a hint of the body wash they'd let her borrow, and sweat. It wasn't pleasant, but it was enough. They let Casey inspect it as well, then wrapped it back around their leg before the smell of their own healing wounds disturbed them further.

The sun had only risen enough to shed a herald of light, leaving the sky a dim blue. The first clue they found was a trampled patch of grass, leading southeast deeper into the trees. As they thought, it was essentially a path opposite the Kalum river that still angled towards the Skeena river.

As they headed away from their watery guide, there was an uneasy feeling they could get lost. Without the river beside them, the dense forests were a disorienting place. Under all the trees, even the mountains were hard to make out. It made them wonder if Ben had lost track of her own course by now.

It didn't strike either of them as odd that they had started their search this way until a particular moment snagged them. Jynn had leaned down by Casey to trace more of the scent they were after. As they happened to glance at their friend, they noticed his posture, and in turn their own posture, was a lot like a bloodhound sniffing for quarry. Large and martenesque, but still conveying that same flavor of *tracking animal*. When Casey caught them looking, he shifted back upright in embarrassed realization.

Casey was adjusting to the way of things, but there was still a lot to unlearn and unpack after three years. He'd eased himself out of the disgust and guilt for the most part, especially for Jynn's sake. Complicating things, it was still difficult grappling with the

mental changes. Certain actions and reactions were new, confusing, feral.

Jynn had slipped into it easier than he had. Happily they took to sinking in during the calmer moments, becoming a purring mess whenever they received a stroke on the head or a scratch on the back. It was something Casey would have considered degrading if not for his partner's joy in it. Maybe leaning into it wasn't so bad.

So, when he realized he had been sniffing Ben's trail like a hound, he shrugged off the awkward feeling and kept working at the search.

"Still can't get my mind off of it..." Jynn said, "...all those things the Thrumm told us, I mean."

"Oh, yeah. A lot to take in."

"Isn't it nice, though? There's no hiding here. We can just...*be*."

Casey smiled. He'd always been a little shy, and the idea of living free of expectations *did* sound calm. Even so, losing the conveniences their old home afforded them did sting. He tried not to let it show too much.

"Yeah, I like that," he said. "How are you feelin' about everything else?"

"Hm...It's odd that it didn't even know what to call us."

“You’d think it would know, huh? Especially considering it’s responsible for all this. I guess it’s right, we can call ourselves whatever works for us.”

“Yes! Whatever we’d like. Although I’m fond of ‘beasts’, still.”

Casey chuckled, amused the name had stuck so well. He thought of what it’d be like to be perceived as one, known by that description. *A beast. A beast and the beasts he loves.* There was a sweetness to the idea of sharing that common ground with what now felt like the only other people in the world. “It’s growing on me.”

## **26 • Murder**

Ben kicked himself awake when the sun shone down on their eyelids. *How long have I been asleep?* They peeled themselves off of the grass. The last thing they remembered was walking. As they shifted a leg to stand, they noticed a large bruise on their knee. It seemed to click. “Ah,” they realized, *I passed out while walking.*

Other than that minor injury, some soreness, and fatigue, Ben was relatively alright. They stood up, gave themselves a stretch, and turned to keep going.

Then they turned again.

They were lost.

“*Fuck.*” There was no way to see the landmarks they needed from where they were, and they could only hear the rumble of the

river if they strained to listen. They dug their fingers into their tawny mop of hair in frustration, then slowly pulled their hands down over their face. *Okay. What do I do? What do they say about getting lost?*

Ben wracked their brain for answers. Staying calm was important, for one. A few deep breaths kept their head clear to keep thinking. They wished they could ask their dad, who was well-versed in these things, but he'd already found his way out of the forest of life.

One thing Ben did recall from a long time ago was being told to wait for others to find her, but that would defeat the purpose of the *whole reason* she was in this situation in the first place - to avoid confrontation. What would she even say if Casey and Jynn found her? *Oh I passed out while running from you guys, no hard feelings!*

That was another wrench in her machine of issues, the two of them were, without a doubt, already looking for her. People like that don't move on. They try their damndest to search. They'd kept Ben around this long, and it didn't seem like there was reason to stop now. Even if she felt useless, clumsy, and like another mouth to feed.

On that note, she felt her stomach grumble. She had to eat, a facet of her plan she'd entirely forgotten to account for. To be fair, she didn't have time to *account* for anything. Instead of beating herself up about it, Ben thought of what options she had.

Anything aside from fish was off the table, leaving her with berries, mushrooms if she was bold, and dandelion greens if she was desperate. Not very fulfilling for her needs. It would have to do, anyway.

Ben got started on foraging, crouching by the dirt to look for anything in the small area. As she prodded for edibles, she noticed the wriggling of an earthworm. It was one of the heftier ones, well fed and a healthy shade of pink. It was in her mouth before she could even decide what to do with it. Normally that would have made her a little unnerved, but protein was protein. Bugs were part of the menu for the time being.

By the time she'd accumulated enough greens to qualify for a disappointing salad, the hunger pangs were reaching fever pitch. Without Jynn and Casey to help hunt, she might as well have just pried bark off the trees to chew on before slowly starving. Painful as it was, Ben decided to keep moving until she found something better. *Plentiful woods my ass, she thought. I'm one of the broken ones that can't catch anything. Ever think of that, you incorporeal bastard?*

She never heard a reply, but got the barest sensation the Thrumm had heard anyway.

At the very least, Ben managed to scrape up enough to keep her going. Her plan for now was to plow forward. Up ahead she saw a large clearing: what looked to be a small lake. She didn't recognize it, but as she approached, the mountains came into view. *Oh great, I'm on the right track*, she thought. Pushing through branches to get a better look, she noticed a bird's nest constructed rather low on the crook of a tree.

It was a bit late for eggs to be in season, but Ben wasn't complaining. She looked around for any watchful parents before plucking the speckled, greenish eggs out of the nest. With no way to cook them, she settled for whatever risks they'd bring and cracked them open to drink, one by one. They were bitter and earthy, with a slight peppery taste. The texture was abysmally slimy and thick, but she had more to worry about than her palate.

A loud, startling caw erupted behind her. *A crow*. It had swooped in and landed on one of the branches that supported the now empty nest. The eggshells in Ben's hands was enough evidence to begin shrieking at her. It dawned on Ben she'd nabbed—and eaten—crow's eggs. She felt a small twist of disgust. Crows were one of her favorite birds; Ravens' clever cousins, little cheeky birds she could watch endlessly. Now, she'd done the unthinkable.

The bird began to advance aggressively. In an animal sense, Ben hadn't done anything wrong. She was a large opportunistic omnivore, and a hungry one at that, so eating the eggs was the

best choice, but on a personal level it cut deep. Out of anything her father shot on his trips, crows and ravens were off limits. The one time he'd found a dead one on the property, she'd been too young to remember her age, and they held a little backyard funeral. He told her it was what other crows did, too.

Ironic that the gathering was known as a murder.

Ben backed away from the grieving creature. She had nothing to fend it off with, and genuinely didn't want to cause it any more harm than she already had. If only she still had her shirt, she could try to scare away the crow. It hit her that she had one more thing to use. Deftly, Ben slid her legs out of her pants and waved them like a banner. The crow hopped back with a flap and a squawk.

“Listen, it was an accident!” Ben said in earnest.

Something about those birds made them feel like they could absorb words, even if Ben knew it couldn't understand a damn thing. She felt the guilt of that long gone deer come crawling.

Undeterred by the waving clothing, the crow leaped forward and raked Ben's right shoulder. She gasped and clutched at it, feeling the wetness of the wound start to seep out. The crow, meanwhile, was circling to swoop again, calling out an angry and ragged call. Quickly Ben realized more crows would be after her if she didn't do something. With a sense of dread she readied her makeshift tool.

At least she'd have something else to eat.

With the next swoop, Ben attempted to catch the crow with the clothing instead. It was a difficult thing, but it was worth a try. With the second swoop, it scratched her face, the third, it left her scalp bleeding. The fourth was when she finally managed to ensnare it, but its flapping and shrieking made it near impossible to keep a hold on. It almost escaped, but Ben tightened her grip. She couldn't afford to hesitate. She couldn't handle a whole forest's worth of crows aware of her sins, and she was so unbearably *hungry*.

A firm grip around the neck and a quick wrist movement was all it took before the crow's fighting spirit was gone. Now it was little more than a dark heap of feathers swaddled in a black pair of pants. Holding such a horribly limp thing would have made her lose her appetite, but her stomach didn't mind.

The taste didn't stick in Ben's memory. There had never been a time where eating felt like such a *task* before, and she didn't want to linger on it. It was distressing enough picking apart something that had just been in mourning, even worse when it reminded her so much of losing the man she'd always looked up to. This wasn't the kind of closure she wanted.

After she finished her fill, Ben realized why the crow had taken her by surprise. She was congested, her nose too blocked to smell the bird coming. How long had she had a cold? Maybe a little

after the loss of the cougar pelt. It was easy to miss being a little stuffy. Again, she chided herself for her impulsive actions, but it was too late to turn back now.

Though quietly, in the recesses of her head, the regret sounded a lot more like *please, I hope they find me*. She grimaced. *Coward's thinking like that isn't gonna get me anywhere, ben thought. I'll be back when I'm ready.*

## 27 • Leaning into it

Afternoon settled in with Casey and Jynn at rest. They had been walking for a long while, focused on tracking Ben, as well as prey. It was exhausting work. They allowed themselves time to relax their sore bodies against one another. It was remarkable how much endurance they'd been able to build over the past week. An undertaking like their current search would have tired them out a lot quicker, back when they'd first ventured across the stream.

If this place, the *In-Between*, was just for people like them, maybe entering it had somehow bolstered their physical health. That at least was evidenced by the speed at which their bodies repaired themselves.

*What an odd choice of name for a world like this anyway*, Jynn thought. It reminded them of the idea that if there was more to the mundane, it would be invisible, beyond some barrier, *hidden*. In truth, it was, but Jynn had never expected they'd be right about something so strange. It was still a guilty pleasure to think back on the vindication of it all.

Casey rested his head on top of Jynn's. His worries were centered on their missing friend, and whether she was getting along well without them. Ben had an advantage with her knowledge of the region, or, at least the region this was the mirror of. He didn't like getting caught up in philosophizing the nature of

the realm's existence, and reigned his thoughts back towards the runaway.

Ben lacked a lot of the tools afforded to Jynn and Casey. Size, the utility of being sharp in tooth and claw, consistent warmth...those were crucial. He thought about how her appearance straddled the line between human and inhuman. How the pause in transformation left gaps in her teeth and bareness on her skin. Ben's face, now that he thought about it, had never been seen either fully human or fully bestial. What did she really look like?

Thinking further, Ben had never really seen his human face either. Or Jynn's, for that matter. It was odd. As he carried on, he didn't care all that much if he never wore his old face again. He'd adjusted to living with his muzzle, his fuzzy face, and his odd ears. In fact, he was beginning to *like it!* The details of what he used to look like were fading, which would scare anyone, but there was a warm sense that it was *completely okay that way.*

Aside from himself, Casey also pondered about Jynn. A new brightness colored their joy, since their change. They found themselves beautiful and correct in shape. After absorbing the shock of it and seeing what it led to, Casey was *glad* they'd become a beast. It was nice falling in love--their special kind of love--all over again.

Casey shifted his posture, so that his cheek was nuzzled into the side of Jynn's face. "Hey," he said. There was something overdue he needed to tell them.

"What?"

"You're pretty, like this, you know that?"

Jynn pulled away, placing a hand over their nose. They were deeply flustered and surprised by the remark. Casey chuckled. "It's true."

Muffled, Jynn said "thank you...I wasn't expecting that..." Behind them, their tail lashed in a wide, rhythmic arc.

"I've just been thinkin' about everything. There's a lot that's new, which means there's a lot to enjoy, right?" said Casey.

"You really don't mind?" Jynn peeked between their fingers.

"Of course I don't mind. You're happy. That makes *me* happy."

"Well, you look...*nice*...too," said Jynn, still entrenched in embarrassment. "Honestly, ah, I can't pretend I don't have certain tastes..."

"I figured, hah. You've looked at me a lil' different after I became like this, and knowing your interests..."

"Hey!"

"It's alright!" Casey responded. "I get it now." He put on a goofy grin, partly to make sure Jynn didn't dip into being hard on himself.

"*What* is that supposed to mean?" they giggled.

“You! You’re a tall, hairy *creature*, and I like that. It's weird, yeah, like everythin' else, but it's you. And I love you.”

Jynn buried their face in their hands. “I..love you too.” After a moment of consideration, they added “it’s nice seeing you enjoy yourself. You deserve it after all that time.”

“Ah, thanks hon. You make it easier.” He pulled them closer, an arm wrapped around their shoulder. They were warm, soft.

It wasn't long before they were on the move again. A gentle moment to lay and some kind words was enough to keep their morale at ease while they continued the search. The trail of trampled grass and scent was easy to follow, at first sticking to a straight line, then curving further on. It seemed like something had gradually made Ben go slightly off-course.

The scent itself was faint and barely noticeable, but in combination with the other clues of Ben's passage, it was a reliable path to follow. It seemed Ben hadn't stopped to rest along the way, only moving forward. However, since she was so slow, the route was easier to trace. It even seemed like some plants had not only rubbed against her legs, but actively scraped them. The dull smell of blood was in the leaves.

There were other smells as well. Many of them were distracting, and pulled the pair's attention away at times. Flowers, smaller creatures...even unseen markers of territory, like the acrid

stench of urine and musk left behind on trees. It was a lot to take in at once, several signals that ushered them to both get moving, but linger and investigate at the same time. It was an unspoken language so simple, Jynn and Casey hadn't even noticed they were fluent.

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The little lake was left behind quickly. Staying in the spot didn't sit right with Ben after her conflict with the crow, and she had wanted to get going. As she pushed through bushes and low-hanging conifer boughs, she became aware of an almost ticklish soreness in her throat.

She coughed into her arm, and felt a wetness spatter onto it. The phlegm was a dark red. For a moment Ben panicked and wondered if it was really just a cold, but the realization dawned on her that it wasn't her own blood. Just the bird's. Still upset, she wiped it off on one pant-leg.

A squirrel chattered at her as she passed beneath its tree. Squeaking with every flick of its bushy tail, the thing looked halfway pissed, and halfway ridiculous. Ben glared up at it with such disdain and hunger it was a wonder it didn't drop dead. Ignoring the contempt it just *wouldn't shut up*. Having almost

walked away entirely, but snagged by irritation, Ben turned for a moment.

It stared at her from its perch, its annoying chirp continuous. It wasn't until she flashed her teeth and let out a guttural noise that the rodent erupted in chatter and scurried off to farther trees. Ben carried on, glad it was gone. Unfortunately, the first few throbs of a headache rose in her skull. *Damn squirrels*, she thought, *reminds me of my boss*.

He'd been one of those scumbags with tall expectations and a short temper. Always looming over his employees shoulders as if he was anticipating them to slip up in some small way. Minor infractions were always treated like a big deal and he just *waited* to get on someone's case about it. Much like the screeching of a squirrel. Ben hated him, she knew it was just his excuse to pick on the workers he deemed abnormal.

As much as she wanted to crush her manager beneath her teeth, the squirrel was long gone, and she had better things to do than bark up a tree. As Ben moved on, though, the hook of bad memories was latched through her brain-meat. *I'm glad I don't have to work there anymore*, she thought. Something about that was off. *...Anymore? It's not like I quit*.

But she thought back to that conversation with the Thrumm. *I do want to quit...but...* Was that experience worth it? Was it worth being talked down to and yelled at like that? Ben seethed,

reminded of her mother. She left town to escape that, and landed right back in the company of a toxic asshole. After all this she couldn't just get back to her job. It would kill her from the inside out.

*Eating dirt and dandelions for the rest of my life would be better than a hundred meals bought with that douche's money.* The thought was indulgent, angry, but there was truth to it. She was never going to set foot in that building again. She was sure.

More trees crossed her vision as she fantasized the things she wouldn't have to put up with anymore. No need to bring headphones to drown out the yelling, no need to recover at home, no need to tuck her weird little tail behind her belt and feel the sprain later.

Then it hit her, she'd started thinking of how nice it would be not to restrict her tail. To just have it loose, rather than *gone*. Wasn't it *weird*...to want it? Not the usual frustrated ideas of cutting it off, curing her condition somehow, Ben had felt a genuine ache to let it be. She'd always spent so long convincing herself that feeling wasn't real. Here, out in the middle of nowhere, she couldn't distract or deny.

Ben didn't even know what to do with herself. She almost tripped as the train of thought barrelled through her skull. She couldn't stop now, no matter how hard denial poked and prodded and bashed its head against the walls. It wasn't just the tail. She

was tired of shaving the nape of her neck, her hands, her face. Exhausted, *sick* of performing humanity and gender in a way that was sanitized and professional enough to pander to the world. That world of concrete and plaster.

Not only was she tired, she was hungry for more. It was an avalanche now. It wasn't just the lack of ability. Ben wanted claws because they belonged in her fingers. Ben ached for a pelt, *fur*, a warmth owed to her. No amount of self sabotage could make that go away. All the other times she'd felt like this, the small, easy to brush off thoughts, came flooding back. God, she'd been starving. "Fuck," she whispered.

The shade was pleasant, keeping away the hot glare of the sun. The trees swayed, and the sound of the leaves rolling and clashing was an ocean. Birds flitted by, disrupting the stillness and busying themselves with catching insects and chirruping their intricate songs. Ben hadn't taken a step in several minutes.

She looked at her hand. Curled hair carpeted the back of it, soft and thin. It wasn't enough. None of this was enough. How had she deluded herself into thinking it was too far?

There was a lifetime the industrial world had stolen from her. She could have enjoyed this. She could have been healthier. The answer wasn't to pile on more hurt and self-regulation. The

injustice of it all was colossal. Now there was an anger boiling inside Ben, a mourning for everything that could of been.

And would be, if she had something to do about it.

## 28 • Following in the footsteps

Jynn rinsed out their leg wound in the small lake. It was getting better, still sore to the touch, but the infection seemed to have passed without too much trouble. They tried their best to wash the shirt as well, but at this point it was a lost cause. Its life as anything more than a glorified rag was over.

They had reached the body of water after a few more hours of searching, and along the way, had found a strong clue. There was a spot where the grass was pressed down, as if something had slept there. From a distance it looked like a bear had come through and slumped on the ground. With closer inspection, the smell was unmistakably Ben's. Why had she slept out in the open?

From there, they followed the path all the way to the shore of the small lake. That's where things got interesting. Iridescent, black feathers were scattered all over the ground amongst a few greenish eggshells. Most of them were broken, chewed, or saturated with dried blood. Near that all was what was left of a crow. The head was left intact, but severed with an unclean tear. Its wings were splayed open, much like its beak, where the bird's tongue lolled out like a slug. Looking up at the beasts, the crow's clouded eyes were like two wet stones.

Nothing was left in the body cavity, as if whatever ate the poor thing was indiscriminate with its meal. Even the heart,

which was usually a lump of unappetizing gristle in creatures like it, was missing. It twisted something deep in Jynn's stomach when they had looked at it. If Ben was down to hunting crows, she must have been desperate.

Now, as the two paused their journey to rest, Jynn wrung out the shirt and elected to tie it around their arm. It had no more use as a bandage, and it would be better to just let the cut breathe and scab over on its own. Thankfully the rank smell was gone, along with the pus.

Both of them were glad to see the mountains ahead. It meant Ben had at least *some* guidance before continuing her march, and would be moving in a predictable direction. It also meant the area to search was narrowing. This was enough to spark a hope in them. They would find her, they were sure of it.

Casey, who had been preoccupied with examining the area, sat beside Jynn on the sand. He peeked at the spot below their knee, content to see it was healing nicely.

"Convenient," he stated. Without thinking about it, he was running his thumb along the scar of his palm—the injury he earned from nearly falling off of a log.

"Oh, yeah," replied Jynn, "do you think there's a limit?"

"Limit..?"

“To how much we can sustain. I shouldn’t have been able to shake off an infection like this so easily,” Jynn said. “What else are we resilient against?”

Casey noted he hadn’t felt sick in a while, especially not since crossing into the *In-Between*. He was sure there weren’t serious diseases lurking in these woods. It wasn’t nearly humid enough to breed more fatal illnesses.

“I have no idea,” he answered, “I hope we don’t have to find out.”

“Me too,” said Jynn.

There was a bit of an awkward lull between them. Thinking about becoming sick without access to modern healthcare wasn’t pleasant, and only exacerbated their worries about Ben. Instead, intent to change up the mood, Jynn leaned over onto Casey’s shoulder, and wrapped an arm around his back.

“It’ll be okay,” they said.

He leaned in. “We’ll make sure of it, yeah.”

“Before we get going again, would you like to have some fun?” Jynn tousled his hair, moving their hand from his back to the base of his neck. The sensation made him melt.

“What do you have in mind?” he asked.

“Nothing too much, just craving intimacy.”

“We can’t stay too long...” Casey glanced at the sky. It was already afternoon.

Jynn's fingers traveled upwards, stroking the back of his head. "It's fine, we'll get going soon enough," they said. Casey almost automatically leaned into their touch. It was so soft...

"Alright," he purred, "be quick."

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The sun was on the last stretch of its journey across the sky, painting the atmosphere in soft oranges and pinks, fading out into a dusty blue. Jynn rubbed the corners of their eyes. They were tangled with Casey, who was dozing. *When did we fall asleep?* They thought as they freed themselves from the embrace and sat up. The last thing Jynn remembered was cuddling, then warmth...

"Case," Jynn said, shaking him. "We fell asleep, the afternoon is over. Come on."

He rumbled in his sleep, and Jynn realized he had sunk. At least this time he wasn't wrapped around them. Gently, they placed a finger on one of his eyelids, and opened his eye. Casey blinked, and with a yawn, lifted his head.

"Mrrr?"

"Oh good, that was easy." Usually he was harder to wake. Jynn put their hands under his fuzzy chin and tilted it up, so that he met their eyes. "Time to get up, darling," they said.

Casey made a sound like a chuff, and moved out of their hands. He tucked his head in by his chest, and covered it with an arm.

“No, no, *don't go back to sleep!*” Jynn said. They tried moving his arm, but he had other plans. To Casey, if the sun was going down, and he was drowsy, and that meant it was *time to sleep*. There wasn't a thought in his head aside from that one goal. As Jynn bothered him, he grumbled and pawed at them, leaving them no choice but to back up. Jynn knew what to do, but he wasn't going to like it...

Casey stared at Jynn with a face full of lakewater. He looked far from amused after being roused from his nap, and shook his head, sending droplets all over Jynn.

“Ready to go now?” they asked, patting down the water in their fur. They were a little concerned this had to be done a second time. Casey laid his cheek against the grass, and huffed. He didn't seem very talkative, or cooperative. He was definitely still sunken into his animal tendencies.

Unsure what to do, Jynn tried a different method. They stood up, walked until they were out of his line of sight, behind some trees, and began calling out his name. Sure enough, he straightened up and swiveled his head around, looking for the source of the sound. Noticing it couldn't be found, he got up,

stretched, and began sniffing around for Jynn. It wasn't long until he located them.

He stared at their face, eyes dilated and clearly expectant. *God...that's adorable...* thought Jynn. It really did them in when he tilted his head.

“Hi, Casey.” They ruffled his fur. It was hard not to smile, even though the situation was frustrating. “We need to go. Soon we’re not going to have enough light. Come on.”

Thankfully, he seemed intent to follow Jynn now that he was no longer drowsy. They kept a hand on his head as they walked, giving him encouragement in the form of gentle strokes. They had learned, in their experience of dipping into the animal mindset, that there was no greater motivator than physical contact. Keeping him content while on the move was a breeze.

Eventually, with all the walking, Casey began to come-to, and unsink. Jynn explained the situation again, and reassured him that he didn't need to feel embarrassed about acting the way he did. It was only natural, and they would be resting again soon anyway. Just a little bit farther for the night.

Ben's scent was fresh on the trail. They were starting to catch up with her, confident they would be able to find her and reunite soon, possibly even by the next day.

That is, until the path suddenly veered to the left. They double-checked, making sure they had tracked correctly. It was headed directly for the mountains, which were now close enough to peek over the conifers. What was Ben doing?

“You think she might’ve lost her way?” asked Casey. It only seemed logical to find high ground if the river was unavailable.

“I think so, yeah. Probably a good idea for her to head that way, right?” said Jynn.

“I think so, I just hope she’s decent at climbing.”

“We should catch up before she has to be,” said Jynn. They made a good point.

The two beasts decided to push on for a bit farther before finding somewhere to rest for the night. The sky dimmed quickly, and the light from the sunset dissipated until the blue hour came and went, and all that was left was the humbling shade of the evening. It was small progress, but it could be just enough of an advantage to catch up to Ben fully. When they finally did stop until morning, they slept with her in mind.

It was a little colder without her in the middle.

## 29 • The climb

Ben underestimated how exhausting it was to hike up a mountain. At first the incline was fine; just slightly tilted upwards, mostly even woodland. Then there was a point where it became even steeper, and Ben started to see more rock jut out of the landscape. Pushed out of the dirt as if grown, covered in moss and lichens.

As she caught her breath, and watched the sun go down, she ran her hand across the surface of a large stone. It wasn't smooth, rather, its face was pockmarked and roughly textured, a perfect home for all the things that grew on it. Feeling her fingers trace across the edge of the lichen, Ben recalled being told it was edible. Hesitantly she tore part of it off, holding a thin strip of the teal and white, bumpy fungus.

The taste was terrible, slightly bitter and more like mud than what she was expecting. Even so, that lingering need to eat sat in Ben's stomach like a ball of lead. She stood up from her current rock, and sought out more lichens to fulfill her emptiness.

Picking out pieces of lichen from between her teeth with a claw, Ben mulled over what she was doing. The reflex that shunned her thoughts from drifting towards inhumanity kept firing, triggering doubt alongside it. She tried her best to ignore the

cascade of negative feelings and focus on her mission. *Get to a vantage point, and find Jynn and Casey again.* It was simple, but a little terrifying. Ben was worried that leaving so suddenly had put a massive strain on things. Even after only two days or so, she missed their touch, and both their physical and emotional warmth. She had become a lot more attached than she'd ever been aware of.

At least with their help, she could stop eating *weird shit*. Ben didn't want to reflect on everything she'd consumed since she split off. There are only so many earthworms you can put in your mouth before you know something is wrong.

Ben also wondered how they were doing without her. With Jynn's luck they could have run into another wily animal, or wound up hurt somehow. She hoped they wouldn't have left her behind for more exciting things...right? *No, No, they aren't like that.*

She shoved herself off of the rock and stretched her arms behind her back. Then, she set off to continue her hike up the mountain again. The ground wasn't as soft up here, giving way to stones and packed dirt. The trees were plentiful as always, broad and ancient, with gnarled bark. The mountain landscape was always so beautiful, too bad it was getting dimmer by the second.

There was an outcrop Ben spotted up high, with not much in the way of trees. Flat, and easy to access after some climbing. It would be the perfect lookout point, and it would make it easier for

Jynn and Casey to spot *her* if they passed by. Her voice would carry for a while up there. It was perfect.

Ben swatted at buzzing mosquitoes. They seemed to only get worse at night, landing on her exposed arms, back, and neck. She muttered curses as she shooed them off. Soon enough, she wasn't able to reliably see the trail. A quick stumble over a root that summoned harrowing thoughts of death and falling was enough to convince her to stop for the night. Without much shelter, she settled on squeezing herself under a low tree. The mosquitoes didn't seem to appreciate her leafy cover, and though enough of them to be irritating stayed behind, most of them left.

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In her dream, Ben was with her father again. This time she wasn't a child, just herself. He looked the same as he always did before he passed: scruffy and pale like her, but with a frame that could haul and storm-gray eyes she couldn't look at without tearing up. They were sitting on a rock together, by a stream.

He raised a hand to her face, and wiped away a salty droplet from her cheek. The action only caused more to roll down her face. "Hey, kiddo," he said, "how are ya?"

Ben coughed. "Tired...so tired." There was a deep exhaustion within her core. She leaned on her father's chest,

letting him wrap her in a hug. It was something she missed severely, enough to make her throat jump. He gently patted her head like always, and said. "Take a breather."

"*I miss you,,,*" she hiccuped into the folds of his flannel. It smelled like a campfire.

"You've been through a lot lately, haven't you?" His voice was soft.

"*It's hard without you,*" said Ben. "*It's so fucking hard.*"

"I know, I know. Let it all out."

"It feels impossible living anywhere, living at all, it always costs too much, burns me out..."

"Look around you Ben, there's none of that here," he said. Ben lifted her head from his shirt, still teary. He gestured to the stream they sat beside and the surrounding area. It was serene, beautiful, it felt like the only place they needed to be. She took a deep breath. Her father gave her shoulder a squeeze.

"Oh right...there isn't," she said. "The Thrumm said that too."

"There you go. Don't you worry about all that old stuff." He gave her hair a ruffle. "Speakin' of old stuff, look at you! You're all grown up! I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks dad..."

"You've got a little more growing to do, still. You'll make it there, I know it," he said. He had that warm smile on again, one that never failed to make Ben feel at ease. She leaned into him

again, closing her eyes and feeling the glow of his temperature. For a dead man, he really felt alive.

“I love you,” he said, stroking her hair. “Just remember to keep your chin up without me, alright?”

She let him raise her chin. Each touch was like a hearth that didn't burn. When she opened her eyes again, she realized her face had become a snout: fuzzy and sandy brown, shaped just like her friends'. Despite her surprise, she didn't move, and just let him hold her a little longer. “I will,” she said. She trusted him more than anything. It was strange, to be a beast in front of her father, even if he didn't seem to mind. Normally she would have been full of anxiety and dread, being seen like this, but he just kept stroking her like a warm breeze.

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When Ben woke up, the sky was light enough to call a morning. She was curled in a ball beneath the tree, and had somehow nestled into a position with her hand resting beneath her chin. The itch of mosquito bites ran down her back, reminding her she was really awake. Her head was still a little clouded with the residue of the dream. Recalling it bit by bit, she quickly put a hand over her face. *Oh, my nose is the same.* She didn't know whether it was fear or hope that drove her hand to check.

There was still a ways to climb, so Ben sated their hunger with more lichens. The taste was still terrible, like aspirin, and it caused an awful stomach ache, but that was better than nothing. There wasn't much to eat, this far up, so they took what they could get. Hopefully they would stumble upon something better, soon.

With the sun still rising on the other side of the mountain, Ben's trail was thankfully soaked in a cool shade. They tried to keep their mind busy by identifying familiar plants and thinking about old hiking experiences. School field trips had occasionally gone up mountain trails, to new and captivating places. Deep in the skeena wilderness, there was always something to discover that would leave you full of wonder and wanderlust. Seas of emerald leaves, tall trees standing like pillars on hills so steep, looking down felt like standing on top of the world.

The memories were soothing. Ben realized now that the feeling lingering in those awe inspiring sights was the Thrumm, or at least something like it. It colored those recollections in a strange new light. Maybe it wasn't so hard to believe it was there all along.

The Thrumm was an odd thing. Not quite a person, but able to speak and communicate. It wasn't a god or a spirit, it was its own kind of presence. Ben didn't know what they could call it, aside from its name. *It...* was it even an *it*? The distinction didn't matter, really. If hurricanes could have names, then something as

talkative as the Thrumm had well earned the right to be called whatever it wanted.

Titles aside, another thing they couldn't get their mind off of was that it was *right*. Ben felt a pang of guilt as they remembered how they had pushed it away.

It wasn't a vindictive thing, and Ben didn't fear some kind of shame or pettiness, but they wished they had been a little more receptive. It hurt to consider how monstrously they thought of themselves when they first met Jynn and Casey. Those people, this place...it took a little while, but they finally cracked the shell Ben formed over their heart.

As they hiked on, they were greatly relieved to see a patch of blueberry bushes growing on an elevated chunk of ground. With only the smallest pause to check the leaves and confirm, Ben quickly gathered as many berries as they could, popping them into her mouth by the handful. They were perfectly in season, sweet and full. It was way better than lichens or raw eggs, and even if it exacerbated their stomach pain to eat so quickly, it was too good to stop.

When Ben couldn't eat any more, they kept collecting blueberries, and shoving them into their pockets. Now, at least for a little while, they wouldn't starve.

In a far better mood than before, Ben continued to hike. Their destination was getting closer, and the sun touched the view surrounding them in the valley, illuminating the area's beauty. Not only did Ben feel like they could tackle the journey: a long-open wound had finally sealed in their soul. The dream of their father was a haze, now, but at least it had somehow given them the closure they needed.

And, even if it wasn't a real goodbye, it was enough.

### 30 • Catching up

Once again, Casey and Jynn had slept in. Wearing themselves out that night had led to a deep sleep. They'd been kept unconscious long enough that the sun was already going through its late morning ascent. Now, in waking, they got each other to stand up and get moving. Luckily neither of them had slipped into ferality during their rest, and were able to travel onwards towards the mountains without issue.

They had, so far, been taking turns hunting prey so that they wouldn't lose the trail. Now with an easier destination to work towards, they were afforded the luxury of hunting together again. Things were much easier that way, cornering and flanking, and there was a lot more to gain from the teamwork. Jynn had really picked up on skillful hunting, assisting Casey well. Before, they were almost a hindrance.

Hunting down grouse and rabbits was second nature now, to them both. As the beasts improved, they wondered if it was time to try for something more filling. Venison would make for a good meal, and would require a lot less work. They were big enough to take down a deer, weren't they?

But the question would have to wait. They had something more important to track, and it was likely she was already on the move. With a bit of effort they were able to find the scent trail

again, and started hiking up the incline that marked the bottom of the mountain.

While walking alongside Jynn, Casey noticed a burr stuck in their fur. His hands were occupied with quadrupedal steps, and he wasn't really thinking about what he was doing, so he leaned over and pulled at the spiny seed with his teeth. It wouldn't give, stuck. Jynn noticed the tug, and asked "what are you doing?"

"Stop walking for a sec, you got something on your shoulder."

"What is it??" they asked, concerned it was some kind of insect. Casey fiddled with the burr, still only using his teeth, and eventually managed to get it free.

"Just a burr," he said as he tossed it with a flick of his head, "looked uncomfortable."

Jynn's face softened. "I didn't feel a thing, but thank you for removing it." They rubbed the spot on their shoulder where it had been stuck. Watching Jynn's hand, Casey realized he could have just as easily used his fingers to pry off the burr instead.

Grooming with his teeth felt so natural already, though. It was like *being* a comb, running through and removing debris. With the sensation came a rather abrupt urge, and before Casey knew it, he had leaned in close to the site on their shoulder. They were confused, and even moreso once he licked their fur, much like a large cat.

“Ah...Casey?”

Instantly he backed off of Jynn and rubbed his tongue to get rid of the fur-taste. It was acutely humiliating to think of what he'd just done.

“Wow, god, sorry. I didn't mean to, it just kinda...”

“Happened?” asked Jynn. It was sweet, to think that he'd groom them like that. They didn't even feel very weird about the action, as if they were predisposed to enjoying it. It wasn't unpleasant by a long shot.

“Yeah...sorry,” Casey couldn't meet their eyes.

“Hey it's okay! I don't mind, honest. It was an instinct, right?” they asked. He nodded. If Jynn didn't mind, he figured he didn't really have a reason to feel bad, but the white hot embarrassment felt like it was burning his insides.

Then, there was a soft pull on his fur on the top of his head. Jynn had returned the gesture in an attempt to ease his shame, but ended up flustering him further. Now that he experienced it for himself, he understood why Jynn was so calm about it. It felt like trust. Vulnerability.

“There,” they said, “now we're even.”

“Hff...*is that okay?*”

“What do you mean?”

“You know...*licking*...” the word was like a coal in his mouth he wanted to talk around. Of course, it was a normal activity in the

animal sense, but to Casey's brain full of human hangups, it had certain connotations.

"When you put it like that it sounds a little odd, but I'm fine with it!" they said. "If it's a natural inclination, why not follow it?"

Having nothing to respond with, Casey shrugged, and said "Can we keep going?" His face was warm, and he was sure if he didn't have a layer of fur, he would be nearly glowing red.

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The wind arrived swiftly, nipping at the heels of midday. Casey and Jynn had begun to encounter the same rocks and lichens Ben had, noticing several had been torn at or removed. There were pale spots on the stone where the fungi had previously grown. Her lingering scent made it evident she was here for a while, painting a cloud of her presence. Jynn's hunch was right, Ben was desperate.

"I think we should bring her something to eat," said Jynn.

"Agreed, here's hopin' there's enough to hunt up here for all of us..." said Casey.

A root of dread sprouted in the pit of Jynn's stomach. Ben was all alone, probably *starving*...and as far as they knew, running from herself. They had been trying not to let it get to them, but there was only so much they could keep quiet about. Soon enough,

their face was wet, and their breaths came in sharp inhales and shakes.

Casey squeezed them tight. “Need a minute, hon?”

“I’m worried...” Jynn sniffled.

“Me too, it wasn’t her brightest idea to run off like this but, she has a lot to work through.”

They rubbed their eyes on the corner of their palm. “I know...but she won’t be able to work through anything if she...”

“Ben isn’t going to die. We’re gonna find her, okay?”

“I hope so-”

“We *will*. C’mon.” Casey gave Jynn a pat, signaling them to break from the embrace. Instead, they clung to him. He spent a few minutes more comforting them, letting the tears run their course. It was bizarre that a little while ago they were the one comforting *him*. They unintentionally changed those roles a lot, something that kept their relationship flexible. The cycle of vulnerability and patience had carried them through their hardest ordeals.

Eventually, Jynn pulled herself off of Casey, nodded, and followed him further down the invisible path Ben had forged in her wake.

### 31 • Crumbling

A hand landed firmly on the rim of a stone ledge. Ben grunted with effort, pulling herself up. After shoving her torso onto the natural platform, she swung her legs onto it as well. She panted from the exertion, both excited and relieved. She made it.

The platform had been a little harder to reach than she thought. It was around ten feet higher from the surrounding ground than she had anticipated. It had probably shifted and split off from its original spot a long time ago. Thankfully, with enough attempts, Ben was finally able to reach it. She stood on the ledge with a triumphant feeling. It represented more than just a challenging climb; it was a display of what she could accomplish when there was nothing to stop her. She was ready to accept the freedom she'd been offered.

With her arms raised over her head, Ben shouted across the valley. Whoops and laughter echoed out, spreading over the sea of trees. In all her excitement, one cheer extended into something resembling a howl, but she didn't care. She hadn't accomplished this much in a *while*.

There was a confidence that came with knowing she could be heard for miles. Normally, that would have been mortifying, but she felt like she was on top of the world. Nothing could touch her.

The afternoon sky had clouded as she clambered up to the small area, and was now a carpet of gray overcast. There was no rain, just a congregation of thick clouds that painted everything in a soft overhead light. The sun, which barely shone through, was nothing more than a dim circle. It had passed the halfway point in its march across the sky, and was now making its way west. Ben could have sworn she felt a small tremble beneath her feet, but she brushed it off as adrenaline.

She fished some blueberries out of her pocket and ate a few while she considered what to do next. Ben needed to get the attention of Casey and Jynn, then wait. Depending on where they were, she might have had to keep it up for a while. Knowing she could make it up here, she could always go look for more blueberries if she got hungry again. It seemed like she was set.

“Alright,” she said to herself, “they might be mad at you, but it’ll be fine.” She put her hands on her knees, then raised them to either side of her mouth. She hesitated for only the barest moment before letting the call erupt.

“CA-SEY! JYNN!” she hollered. She heard the sky repeat it back twice. Then, before the sound could reflect a third time, a shout rose up from somewhere on the very mountain she stood on.

“BEN?” It was unmistakable, that was Casey’s voice. Shocked, she called out “YEAH!”

“KEEP YELLING!” he replied.

“OKAY!”

Ben couldn't believe her luck. They *had* been looking for her! How close had they been tailing behind? After a brief moment to celebrate the fact she wasn't going to die alone, she raised her hands to shout again.

“I'M UP HERE-!”

The ground trembled again, now stronger in its intensity. It wasn't just her nerves, the whole platform--and the mountain with it--was shaking. The stone and dirt making up the outcrop Ben stood on cracked, beginning to tear itself away from its base. Trees shuddered below, and Ben could hear one of her friends scream.

This was an earthquake.

British Columbia, the province that includes the Skeena, the Caribou, and other assorted regions, has a coast that rests within the Ring of Fire. This is an earthquake prone zone that lines the land around the perimeter of the Pacific Ocean. The mountain's ledge had likely shifted during an earlier quake, leaving it unstable enough to collapse now.

Ben stumbled onto all fours, rocked by the tremors. The clash of rocks and trees tumbling down from above was deafening. No amount of earthquake drills or safety pamphlets from her childhood could prepare her for this situation. Without

anywhere to turn, she looked down at the area to the side of the outcrop. It was low, a dangerous jump, but with the ground sliding away beneath her, Ben made her decision.

The landing knocked all the wind out of her. Pushing herself off of the ground, she noticed a sharp pain in her knees and wrists, which had taken the brunt of the impact. Fresh blood wept from her left shin, wet and tingly. Ben collapsed before she could raise herself onto her feet. Her head throbbed. It was a struggle to stay oriented with all the noise and shaking.

She tried to crawl away, shuffling along the ground, but a large section of dirt broke off of the terrain above and landed on one of her legs. It was heavy enough to twist her ankle, but just barely spongy enough not to snap it. She cried out in pain, pinned. No matter how hard she tugged, the obstacle kept her left foot stuck.

Wrought with pain, Ben could only scream out for help. The quake was dying down, lessening into a small tremble once more. She hoped Casey and Jynn hadn't come by any harm during it. She couldn't hear them anymore, and didn't want to imagine why.

*I'm trapped*, Ben thought, pressing her hands on either side of her head, *what can I do?* She writhed again, trying to release her ankle, but only managed to send a sharp current of pain up her

leg. With a gasp, she stopped, and clutched her head tighter. She let herself give up for the time being, since she was starting to do more harm than good. A thousand different worries flashed through her head. *Will they come help? Is my leg going to be okay?* Ben grimaced as the idea of chewing it off or bashing it with part of the mountain debris crossed her mind.

Struck with another idea, she curled in to face the mound crushing her leg, and started digging at it with her hands. This also proved ineffective. After several minutes of desperate digging, she was still *stuck*, and now there was dirt beneath her claws and her fingers were sore. In her hopelessness, she bashed at the dirt with her fists in a useless thud.

Exhausted, Ben resigned to her fate. She shifted onto her side, wrapped her arms around herself, and tucked in her head. *This is it. They probably fell down a cliff or something and I'm never getting out of here. I'm dead.* She didn't bother stifling the tears. There were a lot of regrets she wished she'd been able to work through. It was a terrible legacy to live out her last moments as a runaway. If only she could just apologize, make it up to them one last time...

*"Way to go, asshole,"* she whispered.

The air around Ben cooled, making her hair stand on end. She opened her eyes as a pale glow illuminated the area. It was the middle of the day...but moonlight had found its way down on her.

As she lifted herself onto her elbows, she came to understand exactly why she *wasn't* going to die.

### **32 • Aftershock**

The sudden earthquake had felled a few trees, one of which nearly crushed Jynn and Casey. Having heard Ben, they were running up to her location as fast as they could, when the earth began to dance, and pitched them back and forth before it threw them to the ground. Jynn was pinned beneath conifer boughs, and Casey had managed to stay free, but smashed his head against a rock. He was disoriented, and even when the quake settled, the world was still spinning.

Somehow he stumbled over to Jynn, falling into a crawl rather than walking. Dizzily he grasped for their hand, glad to see them alive.

“Thank...god...you’re...okay,” he panted.

Jynn coughed. “You too, how’s your head?”

“Uh...” Casey reached a hand up to the back of his skull.

“...Wet.”

“You’re bleeding?”

“Yeah...think so. What about...you?”

“Everything hurts, but nothing is broken, I think.” Jynn shuffled a bit. A searing heat flew through their right shoulder. They hissed out a breath. Something was definitely wrong with it.

They realized that it was snagged on something, one of the fallen tree's branches was embedded in them.

"Hollon, I'll help..." said Casey. He dragged himself towards the boughs. After a little searching with his hands, he managed to find the one stuck in Jynn's shoulder. In his haze he didn't consider a warning, and abruptly pulled at the branch. Jynn yelped. It stung to have it torn out. When the air found its way to the bare wound, it bit. They dug their claws into the ground as the tingle of blood flow met the burn of their injury.

"Th...thanks," they said, trying not to scream.

"I'm gonna try liftin' the rest off of you, alright?" Casey said. The foggy feeling in his head was beginning to clear a little, but still throbbed with ache. Jynn nodded, and braced themself.

Casey stood, with difficulty, and grabbed the tree's main trunk. He groaned as he tried to lift it, and Jynn felt the branches pressing down on them lighten. The pressure from raising something so heavy quickly built up, and made Casey's head pound. Without meaning to, he dropped the tree. "Too heavy," he said, "we'll have to try something else."

They both took a moment to recover from the events of the earthquake, before moving onto escape again. They shared concerns and comforts, until Casey's head wasn't wreathed in thudding fire, and Jynn had more energy to push themself up. The boughs were thick, but Casey was able to begin snapping the ones

he could manage, and tossed them aside. Eventually enough branches were discarded that Jynn was able to slowly--and carefully--wriggle out of the conifer's grasp.

They leaned on each other in a weary heap, out of breath and sore. As Jynn nestled by Casey, they felt the wetness of his blood on their cheek. Something in the back of their mind stirred.

"Lean down," they asked him.

Too tired to question it, he lowered himself a little. Driven by an unbidden urge, Jynn began to groom his head injury. It was tender and careful, almost carried out on autopilot. The sensation of their tongue brushing on his bruises stung slightly, but Casey knew it was fine. It was still a bit embarrassing, but there was a sturdy comfort in knowing that Jynn cared enough to clean the blood off him, even at a time like this. They kept at it, letting him rest against them. The gentle pull was almost enough to lull him to sleep.

When Jynn had finished, they tucked their own head in beneath Casey's chin. Their breathing slowed down. The panic was dissolving, and with it went their energy. Casey took his turn to clean their shoulder, careful not to hurt them. They both wanted to check on Ben, but were too weighed down by exhaustion to get up. All they could do was hope, and let themselves recover enough to find out.

The two friends kept each other awake with distracting talk and small comforts. They spoke of whatever crossed their minds, anything to keep them going just a little longer. All the while, the buzz of their injuries died down, and the dread of losing Ben transformed into hope. If she made it all the way up there, *alone*, she probably could have survived the quake, right?

The only thing was, they couldn't hear anything. No shouting, cries for help, nothing. That could either mean she wasn't hurt, and was making her way down, or something terrible had happened. They tried not to linger on the latter, and stopped their minds from wandering there with more conversation.

The more they looked around their surroundings, the more evidence they noticed of previous earthquakes. Long-felled trees, rock faces jutting in strange places; nothing too severe, but telling, in retrospect. Jynn and Casey had never experienced an earthquake in their lives, having grown up inland. It was the kind of thing you saw in the news and ogled at for a bit with a small curiosity, before moving on with your day. It was easy to forget the ground could really shudder and thrash like that.

They wondered how many Ben had lived through. Someone from the region like her would be better equipped to handle quakes, wouldn't they? Maybe she knew safety measures they weren't aware of. No matter what they tried, their thoughts always circled back to her well being.

They decided then, that if they didn't hear or see Ben within the next half-hour, they'd drag themselves up to go look for her. As much as they needed rest, they needed to find her, more.

### 33 • Phoenix

The Thrumm's face was the moon. Light and song poured from it in rivers, in icy breezes and hot wet breaths. Around the blazing white circle it had two caribou antlers, floating like a frame. Its neck ended where a head would have been, and extended down into a body of various shifting furs. Never the same, each pelt was washed over in a new, earthy color, endlessly shifting. The entity's build was predatory, echoing the appearance of cougar, wolf, and the barest suggestion of something stranger. At the end of its arms were pawlike hands, each digit with another shape of claw than the last. From its back fanned the wings of a bird of prey, changing in shape and color like the pelt beneath. Its tail lashed behind it all, amorphous.

Ben couldn't keep herself up in its presence. She felt like the air was pressurized: thick and humming with an energy she didn't have a name for. It hadn't even spoken yet, and already her head was reeling to keep up with the power that radiated off of the cryptic being looming over her. Sprawled on the dirt, she could hardly crane her neck up to look.

Something deep down needed to see it. Ben had always been one to stare at the moon when it crossed her window, and now she was face to face with something that wore it. It was easy

to imagine this is what she'd really been looking for. In a way, it was.

With one of its hands, the Thrumm cupped the side of Ben's face. Its massive palm was soft, and seeped a soothing warmth into her skin. With its touch, she found the energy to raise herself into a sitting position, and miraculously slip her trapped leg from the grip of the earthquake's debris. Her pain was still present, but almost sweet, like the sensation of pressing on a bruise. It didn't *hurt* anymore, it was just...there.

"*Hello again,*" the Thrumm said. Its words were Ben's world. Doting, calm, fulfilling like a good meal and a life's worth of safety and pleasure. Its cadence alone meant *I love you*.

There was nothing she could say.

"*Are you ready?*" it asked patiently.

Ben looked down for a moment. Pulling her eyes away from its face made her shudder. She had argued, berated it, outright rejected the help it offered and herself. Now it gave her another chance, from a sea of chances that wouldn't run dry. After everything, is this what she deserved?

Everything she'd ever quietly wished for. Home, people like her, to be *animal* and *free*. It was too good to be true. Her inner defenses clamored for her to throw it all away. Her old lonely life was routine. Safe. Predictable. *Normal*.

But in the Thrumm's light, it was crystal clear how much Ben *didn't care*. The risk was worth it. Jynn, Casey, a body she actually *wanted*...no danger or threat in the world could make it any less important. She was done lying to herself. She'd needed this for longer than she could imagine.

She returned her gaze to the moon between the antlers. The glint reflected in her eyes, now full of assurance, despite the tears forming.

"Yeah," Ben nodded, "I'm ready."

It was explosive within her. The change began with a trickle of fire in her blood, searing out from the heart's rampant pulse into even the smallest corners of her frame. It was like the circulation had even carbonated, each beat more fiercely *euphoric* than the last. The upheaval crossed from relief to rapture as the shift took hold of Ben's outsides.

The pain screamed, not in suffering, but electric joy as her bones and muscles reorganized themselves. She dug her fingers into the ground, both to endure the process, and keep herself from cracking out of her shell and soaring into the atmosphere like a comet. The fur grew in fast, covering her and filling in the sparse patches across her body. She'd never been happier to see that shade of driftwood brown. Her tail wagged fervently as it grew into its proper length, nearly shearing the grass behind her.

*This is me!* She grinned through rows of fresh, carnivorous teeth. Her snout had grown in full, nose pink and lips curled in the scorching heat of happiness. Little streams ran down her cheeks, reminders of how much she'd *really* missed this shape.

The transformation slowed to a stop, leaving Ben breathless and shaky on her hands and knees. In the distraction of the change, the Thrumm had disappeared, leaving her alone on the mountainside. Despite its apparent absence, some of it surged on inside her. In her clarity, Ben realized she'd been crying. She held onto her shoulders, now properly coated in a pelt that was *her own*, and tilted her head up to the overcast sky.

She broke the silence with a howl. Long and clear, from the very depths of her lungs. It was a sound she didn't yet know marked the happiest moments of her kind, but felt compelled to make. It lasted as long as her breath could sustain, until it broke off into laughter. She didn't sound human, and she *loved it*.

Swept up in euphoria, Ben almost didn't catch the sound of Jynn and Casey's voices call up from below. She couldn't tell if they were closer now, or if her ears had improved with everything else. Either way, she pushed herself off of the ground, ignoring her bodywide ache, and began running. Ben hadn't even noticed she was on all fours until the speed and wind hit her. She almost tripped as she careened down the many paths, weaving through

trees. She could *smell* them, ever nearer. There wasn't a single obstacle that could deter her from sprinting to reunion.

Casey and Jynn had barely started walking, when a beast plowed towards them. They were startled at first, but the scent was powerfully familiar. Jynn noticed the large bite mark on her left shoulder, and the three dark spots on her face. *Ben*. She stopped just in time to avoid tackling them, and after a moment to breathe, stood, and gripped the two in a crushing hug.

"Ben!" Jynn said as she squeezed her arms around them.

"Yeah!" she replied, still beaming. She released them from the hug.

"What happened up there?" Casey asked, now able to look her in the eye. He only had to tilt his head down a little. Ben was a lot taller now than she was, around seven feet.

"The Thrumm! I saw the Thrumm, it was *really weird*," she said. She spoke quickly, excited.

"No kidding," said Casey. He decided to let her finish before commenting more on her appearance. She was strangely beautiful this way.

"I got caught in the earthquake, and then it showed up, and it was...god it's hard to explain. It's face looked like the moon, and it had these huge fuckin' wings...oh and it's fur was like, *changing non-stop*."

The others glanced at each other in disbelief. It almost sounded like Ben had seen an angel.

“Then what?” asked Jynn.

“Then it did this,” Ben put her hand up to their cheek, “and asked if I was ready. When I said yeah, it...well, it made me like you.”

“You’re okay with that?” asked Casey. He remembered her discomfort with the idea before. She chuckled.

“I wasn’t, until yesterday. I realized I had a lot of baggage or something.”

“I’m proud of you!” said Jynn, “...but you have some explaining to do. It hurt when you ran off like that.”

“Right, sorry. I fucked up there.” Quietly, she thought *but I’m glad it led to this.*

The trio, whole again, started making their way down the mountain as they continued the conversation. A lot of the path had been shuffled in the earthquake, but for the most part, it remained navigable. There was an eager tinge to Ben, who pointed out the blueberry patch, rocks, and other landmarks she’d seen on her lone journey. It was odd, but sweet seeing such a broad smile on her face.

Despite the apology that had to be made, and the aftermath of the whole ordeal, they were in high spirits. Casey explained that, like Ben, he’d also made the decision to stay. It led

to an entire tangent of reassurance and shared experience as they all bonded over what was better, now.

The sky darkened, slightly, as they descended. At first just an occasional patter on the leaves, then a drizzle, the clouds opened up into a long and heavy rain. The grass felt spongy between puddles, and though the downpour left everyone soaked, they let it pour over them. It was a renewal; washing away all the heaviness and struggle. There was nothing to fight over, anymore. They could talk honestly and freely with each other, without hesitation or doubt. They could confide, and trust.

Ben would never have to feel the bite of prejudice and isolation again. Casey could find love, for himself, and pay it forward. Jynn could finally live the way they'd always hungered to. Despite everything, the *in between* had gone from a grueling trial to a beautiful reward; somewhere they could just have each other, no matter what.

They were *home*.

## 34 • Looking forward

A FEW DAYS LATER

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“This is it, the Skeena river,” said Ben. Her, Jynn, and Casey were standing on top of a hill that stood right above the waters, showcasing a generous view of what, in a parallel world, would have been Ben’s hometown: Terrace. Here, it was all dense woodland, thick with trees and gorgeous green that went for miles and miles. The river itself was broad, larger than any the others had ever seen. Its current formed small whirlpools and legions of white bubbles, and it was all framed with shores of smooth rocks and tree-filled banks.

“Wow...it's *beautiful...*” said Casey. All he had known was the Frazer river, and that wasn’t much compared to the Skeena’s majesty.

“And full of salmon,” Ben added. “That’s the best part.”

“I can’t wait to catch some,” said Jynn with a smile.

“Let’s find somewhere shallow and try it, then!”

Ben ran off, playfully racing her companions down the hill. She was restless to show them the area. Though the city itself was gone, the nostalgia of the environment was strong. She wanted to introduce them to it all, and maybe even build something

permanent there. This was the place her soul was tethered to, a wonderful bountiful place for them all.

In the time it took to reach the Skeena, the group had done a *lot* of talking. They discussed plans for the future, and each other. The nature of their shared relationship had begun to lean into something more intimate, and, a bit awkwardly, Casey had asked Ben if she wanted to join him and Jynn. She'd hesitated, still harboring a little worry that she was imposing, but accepted. It had only been a little while, but the fondness they had grown for her was warm like a hearth.

They all met down by the riverside, at a section of the water with a calmer current than the main body. The effects of overfishing were absent here, and as a result, there were many fish making their way through, and resting in the shade cast by the plants on the shore. They spent some time watching the salmon, resting by each other as they peered into the water.

The silvery glint of salmon was a sight Ben missed, and a new spectacle for Casey and Jynn. Though they all had an appetite, it was nice to relax together that way before attempting to catch.

“What kind is that?” asked Jynn, leaning on Ben's left.

“Chinook,” she answered. “There's other kinds but they're around later. We'll get to see some in August.” She couldn't wait to show them the bold, red sockeye, which would be making a return

trip from the ocean to spawn. Out in the Pacific, they looked a lot like the chinook, sleek and gray, but by the time they hit the Skeena, the salmon would become humpbacked and scarlet, with hooked green faces and white chins. Ben always thought it was silly how those fish became unrecognizable, only days before passing away.

“Might be a lil’ hard to keep track of the date,” said Casey.

“I guess that’s how we’ll know then, when the other salmon arrive.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice...” said Jynn, gazing wistfully at the ripples, “...making a calendar of our own.”

They thought about it. Individual days would be almost impossible to keep consistent without modern tools, and the best they could do was the coming and going of things with the seasons and the phases of the moon. A year could very well become just one winter to the next. That was fine, they didn’t particularly care. Jynn just enjoyed the thought of assigning their own meanings to the various ways time could pass.

“That does sound nice, yeah...”

“Wait,” said Casey, “did you hear that?” He had heard something shuffle a ways off along the bank. There was also a faint smell in the air, almost recognizable. It drifted along the breeze towards the three. The scent was musky and pleasant.

With their nose in the air, Jynn said, “I don’t know what that is.”

“What should we do then?” asked Ben. “Wait and see if it comes out?” After the wolverine encounter, she wasn’t so sure if getting involved with another animal was a good idea.

“I’m gonna go look.” Casey stood, and slowly made his way towards the mysterious creature with ginger steps. He wasn’t sure why, but an odd reaction ran through his body. It gave him a shiver, but not out of chill. Anxiety? Maybe, the anticipation and curiosity was killing him, but it wasn’t a bad feeling. He’d experienced an inkling of it when Ben had returned, back on the mountain, but now it was entwined with an aura of enigma.

As he got closer, the shuffling returned. Whatever the thing was, it had run off a distance. He almost gave up, until he saw it emerge farther off, on a tall rock. From what he could tell, it was large, dark, and...

“...*Just like us,*” he whispered. It was a beast, which explained the smell. He could tell the stranger was watching him, too.

Ben yelled from behind him, huddled beside Jynn. “Did you find it yet??”

“I think it found us,” he called back.

The *In Between* was vast, and the three of them had only seen a small part of it. There was a near impossible amount of places to explore, things to learn, sights and smells and experiences to last a lifetime. Ben, Casey, and Jynn were almost

convinced they were alone, left to wander and seek it all out together. Like a trio of stars in an empty galaxy, or fish in a sea of their own.

But there were more beasts out there. Beings of *their kind*.

And they couldn't wait to meet them.

Three young adults find themselves  
lost in the wilderness after  
feeling a strange, ethereal pull, with nothing  
to rely on but each other.

They've all gone through a  
metamorphosis that's harder  
to adjust to for some than others.

But something calls, deep within  
the woods, and their hearts.