

Getting Lost

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Part I

Chapter One

“Alright, everyone, it’s midnight, time to start packing up,” Johansson called. “Ross, we’re short one, can you start pulling together all of the mics? RJ will help you get them sorted.”

“Mmm,” RJ offered through the sound system. He was busy putting the theater to bed, and couldn’t spare more than a meager few syllables to the rest of the cast and crew, though he knew that he’d need to help Ross out. “Get a headset, Ross, so I don’t have to talk through the speakers.”

The theater purred quietly to him, relaxing and unwinding around him after the tenseness of running rehearsal. RJ and the room let out a soft, long-held breath together, feeling muscles and wires relax, nerves and current disentangle themselves from the task at hand. Speakers signed off and went to bed one by one through RJ’s gentle attentions, as the virtual board set about the task of returning to neutral, all of the gain knobs orienting themselves, then all of the monitor knobs, the sliders, the whole system ticking as it cooled down, minus the channel he’d need to keep open to Ross.

“Hey boss, got a headset. Where do you want me to start?”

“Grab the lead, first,” RJ murmured through the open channel. “Then Sarah and Catherine, they’ve got the nice mics. They should have a tiny number painted on the costume side that matches up with their box. All of the boxes are stacked in the pit, by the front wall, you should be able to get them out in one load, though be careful taking them back.”

“Got it, heading down to the pit now.”

RJ left the channel on just in case, though the soft sounds of breathing and the occasional curse as Ross bumped his head on the pit cover were distracting, while he set about going through his notes with the sleepy theater for the next night’s rehearsal, the last one before they went live. He knew the show better than most of the cast, since he had to learn everyone’s lines, plus a few cues when he’d have to take care not to pick up any of the sound effects. Gun-shots and the like.

The theater’s job was to simply work with RJ and the lighting crew, responding to their knowledge of what was going on in the play, while RJ and Caitlin’s job, as sound and lights, was to respond to the stage manager’s near encyclopedic knowledge of the play as well as of the house. All sound was under RJ’s jurisdiction, including managing communication between the hands, the manager, and himself and Caitlin.

They were all as ghosts in this, even the theater. Their job was one that should be totally invisible to the audience, because it would only become visible if they fucked up. No one wanted to fuck up. Even the theater seemed to feel a sense of pride in doing its job and doing it well.

RJ soothed the room with a gentle cooing and reluctantly started the process of pulling back, closing the channel with Ross and putting all of the headsets to bed last of all, before he slipped back from the interface, blinking as he adjusted to seeing the cavernous hall with his own eyes once more as his fingers slipped from the contact points and he leaned back from the headrest.

He shook his head to clear it and stood up, stretching, before ambling from the tech booth down the stairs towards the stage, letting gravity carry his lanky form down two steps at a time.

Ross was down there standing still and staring at the floor, muttering agitated questions into the headset.

“Hey bud, I’m here. The house is sleeping now. I’ll help get the rest of the mics and the headsets.”

Ross jumped, then looked embarrassed as he tugged the headset off his head, “Sorry, was wondering where you’d gone. I just heard a beep.”

“Yep, signing off from above. Did you get all the mics gathered up?”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s what I was trying to tell you. I wasn’t sure what to do next.”

It only took about ten minutes for RJ and Ross to get the last of the sound gear settled, gathering the headsets from all of the hands and socketing them into numbered chargers against the wall. Everything would sleep tight until the next night on sound’s end.

Caitlin and Sarai, the stage manager, joined them and the rest of the hands, sitting on the edge of the pit cover as they unwound from the tenseness of rehearsal. The actors slowly getting out of their dress to clump together on the stage, unwilling to leave their beloved platform just yet.

“Gather ‘round, children”, a voice boomed from out in the darkened audience, lights still hovering around one quarter until the troupe left for the night.

“Yes, Mister Johansson”, one of the actors recited back, getting a tired laugh out of everyone.

“Good job, I think we’re nearly there. Still, we need a bit more polish. No flubbed lines, and mostly relaxed, but Sarah, you gotta loosen up. It’s not Shakespeare, it’s a modern play, you can chill out. Crew, you guys got a little sluggish toward the end. I know it’s late, but so are our shows. Don’t work yourselves too hard, but keep on top of things, okay?”

RJ, Sarai, and Caitlin murmured their assent while the rest of the hands nodded, one or two looking sheepish.

“Tomorrow night, back here at five.”

“Aw, come on, that early?” RJ asked,

“Yep, five.” Johansson grinned wryly. “There’s a school production that winds up around then and I want you all back here to make sure we still have a theater around then, okay?”

There was a bit more grumbling, but RJ knew they'd be there on time – it wasn't too much of a stretch.

“Back to base, then. Go get some rest tonight, and I'll catch you all tomorrow. Remember, you can drink tonight, but tomorrow night, *Das is streng verboten*.”

The company laughed and started to disperse, the tech leads lingering on the pit cover for a little while longer as they worked on reorienting themselves to the real world, limited by two eyes, two ears, two hands.

Eventually, RJ made his way out onto the chill of the street, pulling his thin water proof gloves on to keep the contacts on the middle joints of his fingers dry and clean.

At midnight on a week day, there wasn't too much going on outside of those visiting the pubs to catch up with their friends after work, though by the time that midnight had rolled around, those who were left were the harder drinkers. The idea of a warm pub and one quick pint before heading home tugged at him, but the pull of home was much stronger tonight than that of beer.

He trudged instead up to the northwest corner of Soho to Oxford Circus, where he could catch the Central line up to Benthall Green, and walk the few blocks from there to his flat, stopping only to pick up a take-away carton of curry and rice from one of the more trustworthy shops along the way.

Once home, he slipped out of his jacket and welcomed the warmth of his little flat after the damp chill of London outside. His cat trotted up to him eagerly, twining around his feet. A little ginger thing of a few years that he had rescued from a friend who was moving deeper into the city, she was the only one to share his space with him after his last flatmate had left for somewhere cheaper.

“Hey Prisca, let me set my shit down before I get you food.”

An eager meow followed him to the kitchen, where he set down his take-away and scooped a cup of dry food into a fresh dish, setting it down for the delicate cat.

He thumbed his phone with the contacts on the thumb-pads of his glove to start music playing, some of the stuff that reminded him of his dad, to go along with the curry that reminded him of his mom.

Dinner was no more or less exciting than usual, RJ eating alone at the kitchen table with the carton spread out before him to reveal the orange curry and soggy samosa that had come with it. He left his gloves on just to be sure – no sense in having to clean his contacts more than he'd already need to after a long day's rehearsal.

The draw of his workstation was a lingering presence in a corner of his mind, tugging at him, inviting him on toward where he knew he could finally relax for the day, but he knew that he probably ought to finish all of his routine before he delved back in.

He scooped the last of the curry into a little plastic container for the next day's lunch, promising

himself that he'd cook an additional pot of rice before heading out in the afternoon so he'd have more calories to keep himself running. Clean up was as easy as tossing the container into the compost bin along with all of the others. Cooking much more than rice was for times other than crunch time.

He finally allowed himself to sit down at his workstation, relaxing into the familiar curves of the chair, peeling his gloves off one by one. Even with the draw so close to him, he took his time. First, he picked up Priscilla and stroked her smoothly from ears to tail a few times until she started purring up a storm, informing her that, in fact, she was the prettiest kitty.

Once the cat had settled into his lap and curled into a small crescent, he set about cleaning the contacts on his hands with lint-free paper and rubbing alcohol. Those done, he wiped down the headset as well, removing the negligible residue of sweat and skin oils that had collected on the soft, padded headrest where his forehead would lay, held inches away from the miniscule cameras that would track his face.

His gear was more elaborate than the stuff in the tech booth at work that he shared with Sarai and Caitlin, and he had paid dearly for it, as well as for the contacts on his fingers, and the countless other tiny gizmos placed throughout his body – the small interferites that took over his optic and auditory nerves when he was connected, the NFC connections implanted just under his hairline and their ramifying tendrils that tied him into his work, all of the painful work down his spine that helped him more fully experience the connection.

With all of his connections and gear cleaned, RJ finally felt at ease enough to pop open the lid on his workstation. The screen, nearly vestigial when he was inside, served as an interface to boot or, if needed, to troubleshoot problems with the rig. He quickly keyed in his passphrase and then rested his right hand on the curved pad, feeling his fingers find the subtle grooves that would hold his hand in place, the connection from his contacts was the other half of his two factors of authentication, and the system signed him on, displaying the spinning earth surrounded by a jauntily tilted ring that was the omnipresent logo of the 'net.

"Gonna head in, Prisca," he spoke to his cat, stroking the fingers of his left hand over her ears, fingering the soft, velveteen folds for a moment. "I'll be back in a bit."

With that, he brought his left hand up and set it into the cradle of the pad designed especially for it. Tilting his head against the headrest, feeling the comforting touch of cool plastic against his forehead and the little twinge of recognition from the NFC controllers, he nudged the button beneath his right thumb. The workstation went into immersive mode as RJ delved in, a soft hum of a cooling fan picking up to handle the waste heat of his rig.

He could no longer hear it.

Chapter Two

AwDae sat up from bed and moved to the edge of the mattress, stretching languidly and letting their fur bristle from tip to tail, the latter bottle-brushing out in the process. They shook themselves to settle their fur back down and yawned widely, slender pink tongue curling and just shy of sharp incisors.

Brushing their fur down, they stood languidly and ambled over to the dresser in the corner of the room, pulling out a thin white cotton shirt with laces up the front and a simple navy sarong, which they tied around their waist. They'd spent countless hours examining some of the highest fashions out there on the net and come to the conclusion that, in these times, understated clothing was actually best. It interfered with the fur least, it worked well with a tail – a simple slit cut down the length of the sarong let that slip free, and anyone who might want to peek at a fox's backside would find only soft white fur there – and it was cheap. There was no shortage of ways to spend money, here, and AwDae had better things to do than worry about that.

They set their paw down on the dresser and swiped it from left to right, revealing a dimly glowing arsenal of personal belongings. They wound up equipping only the simple things: set of vcards, a limited credit chip (no worries about overspending that way, though they doubted he'd shop any), and a simple canvas pouch attached to a belt, more an affectation than anything, which they equipped rather than putting on by hand because they hadn't bothered to make it anything other than an accessory.

They made their way to the eye-rollingly named tport pad in the alcove just off of the main room. It was considered fairly gauche to appear or disappear in the middle of some room, so most homes or venues had them sequestered off to the side, a sort of digital foyer. They faced the black screen on the far wall in the alcove and brushed their paw from left to right once more, bringing up a list of recently used commands. There were a few that stood out, but right at the top of the list was the one they wanted. If they left fingerprints online, there'd be a clear smudge over the entry: they rarely did anything else.

'tport: The Crown Pub'

A tap and an the obligatory click that went along with the change of scenery brought them to an alcove paneled in oak, lit by green-shaded lights hanging pendulously from a cord directly above

the pad. They blinked to adjust to the comparatively dim light. The pub, which largely followed the circadian rhythm of the British isles, was just as dark as it was for RJ, back in London-as-it-was.

They turned and stepped away from the pad, narrowly avoiding a weasel stumbling towards the alcove.

“See ya, Debarre,” AwDae offered, though it came out more like ‘Çeeya, Demaw’ coming from the fox’s narrow muzzle. They got a curt wave from the slender weasel done up in all black.

The fox shrugged and headed into the pub proper, their nose twitching about at the scents of the room which told them more of those present than simply scanning the crowd. One or two gawking entities with no scent property set – some tourists – and the usual crowd of scents. Their ears perked at the distinct whiff of dandelions, something leftover from their youth, and they made a beeline towards one of the window tables, where the scent seemed to originate, skirting around one or two bodies of diverse shape.

“Çaxa.”

“Come on, AwDae, loosen your filters, won’t you?” Sasha laughed, scooting her chair back so that she could stand up and fling her arms around AwDae’s shoulders, giving the fox a tight hug. They slipped their arms around the skunk’s waist in turn and gave a squeeze, tail flicking about excitedly.

“Lame,” they drawled, but dialed back the output filters on their speech, letting something more closely resembling English pass. “How you been, skunk?”

“Oh, you know, same old crap.” Sasha settling back down into her chair and fiddling with a stack of vcards on the table and gave an outsized shrug. “Been kind of boring in here over the last few days, so it’s good to see you, even if it’s getting super late for you.”

The fox nodded, tugging their shirt straight and moving over to the chair opposite the skunk, sliding into it easily and resting against the back. “Not too late. One something. Made good time home at least. Rehearsal ran late.”

Sasha laughed, “You know, every time you talk about rehearsal and such, I keep thinking back to high school and school productions. It’s hard for me to picture you as having grown up and taken that up as a job.”

AwDae adopted a look of mock despair, “And went to school for it and everything. But hey, London ain’t bad, I can’t complain any.”

The skunk rolled her eyes and leaned forward onto her elbows bringing her paws up to rest her muzzle on them. “Tell me about it. You’re missing out big time here in the burbs, dear. You could be teaching high school theater in any town along the central corridor, doing the same plays once every five years so no students repeat them. Truly a life of glamor.”

The fox groaned and buried their face in their paws, Sasha laughing at the reaction. She continued, “Seriously though, you just remind me a lot of school. Maybe it’s ‘cause of all of the ways

you haven't quite grown up."

AwDae stuck their tongue out at their friend briefly and crossed their arms. "You're not going to bring up dating again, are you?"

"Hey, sorry, just looking out for you, fox."

"I'm plenty happy not dating, I can promise you that," they countered.

"No, I get that," Sasha admitted, lowering her gaze. "Not all it's turned out to be, even for someone who wants to date."

"Oh no, struck out again?"

Sasha nodded and shrugged once more.

AwDae reached their paws out to take one of her own, cupping black fur in black fur. Both had opted for mostly hand-like paws, but where Sasha's fur was an even black marked by white stripes that were a little too sharp, a little too exact, AwDae had gone all out and constructed a version of themselves as a cross fox to exacting detail, down to the point where their muzzle couldn't even form the two letters that made up their name offline.

"I'm sorry, Sasha. . ."

Sasha shrugged it off once more, giving the fox's paws a squeeze in her own briefly, "Men are dicks, I promise you. I'd take a neutrois fox over any dickhead guy any day."

The fox smiled bashfully and returned the squeeze to their paws, "Sasha, you know it wouldn't—"

"No, I know, AwDae. I just wish there were more guys out there like you."

AwDay stiffened in their seat and looked away towards the window. Sasha caught the movement and splayed her ears, "Sorry fox. I keep putting my foot in it, don't I?"

The silence stretched out a little longer before AwDae shook themselves free of it and gave their friend a grin, "Sorry, no, you're fine. I should get a thicker skin about it and stand up for myself, after all. I spend night after night hiding in here, and even here, I can't really stand up for myself. I appreciate you trying, though."

Sasha smiled cautiously and nodded, "I think that's what I meant earlier, that you remind me of school. You haven't done like all the rest of us and grown up, gotten married, all that crap. You're still doing what you loved to do in school, from the picture you showed me, you're as androgynous as ever. You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways, even though you're succeeding in others."

AwDae nodded before a thought occurred to them, "Oh, speaking of frozen."

"Debarre?"

AwDae nodded once more.

"No news, yet. He's been trying to get in touch with the center that's taking care of Cicero, but the family has been getting in the way. They're fielding everything. They always sort of

supported the relationship on the surface, you know, but never actually wholly approved of them being together.”

“What? Really?” The fox shook their head, poking a claw at the table as though it might dent the wood, though the sim was hardly that immersive, “That’s unfortunately not all that surprising, given what Cice said about his family. They at least confirmed that’s what happened, though?”

Sasha nodded. “That’s what these are,” she said, slipping the stack of vcards over to the fox. “There’s contact info for the family, and a few centers around there that work on contacts, we’re thinking that those types of places might be where he wound up. There’s also a card detailing his laston information.”

AwDae slid the stack of vcards over to sit in front of them, leafing through them slowly and taking in a few of the details that slid through their fingers. “Mind if I make a copy?”

“Go ahead, it’s a deck Debarre and I have been working on. Not complete, but I’ll give you ACLs.”

“Mm. Debarre looked crushed. Is he doing alright?”

Sasha hesitated for a moment, caught in the middle of a gesture to transfer access to the cards, then shook her head, to which AwDae could only frown. “I’ll take a look, too. I can’t do too much right now, I’ve got a—”

“I know, you’ve got a show coming up,” Sasha said, grinning. “Don’t worry about it, dear. Debarre’s working on it, I’m taking a look when I can, and I’m sure the weasel’s got others helping him out as well. No reason not to, either; we all liked Cicero.”

The two sat in silence once more. AwDae fanned the cards in front of themselves before shuffling them back into a stack and swiping above them, instructing their workstation to make a copy of the deck, which wound up in their pouch.

They lifted their muzzle away from the silence to scan the scent of the room once more. The tourists had gone, leaving mostly familiar smells, now that it was starting to get on in the evening even in the Americas. Some familiar scents, some unfamiliar, but most of them at least detailed, which told AwDae that the owners had put some thought into them. None, however, really jumped out at them, and they were more content to keep their post at the table with Sasha, their friend from so long ago, now.

Finally, they slid the deck of vcards back to Sasha, who equipped them on to her person somewhere; ACLs being what they were, there’s no way AwDae could’ve done more than look at the covers. Had he tried to walk off with them, they would’ve re-equipped to Sasha as soon as they passed into the tport alcove.

“Hey, Sasha, I gotta get going. I know I only got here a little bit ago, but I’m starting to crash hard.”

The skunk nodded and gave a little flick of her tail, “No, it’s alright, AwDae. It’s late there, and I know you’ve been in rehearsals for a while. Go get some sleep.”

Both stood up once more and exchanged another hug, AwDae breathing in that dandelion scent of his friend once more, brought back to thoughts of high school, when she had explained that the smell always reminded her of muffins.

“I’ll see you later, skunk, yeah?”

Sasha nodded and smiled once more, “Take care of yourself, okay? No working too hard, slaving over a hot rig. . .”

AwDae laughed and shook his head, giving the skunk one last squeeze before making his way back through the crowd toward the alcove, already swiping his command palette into view to head home.

Chapter Three

As RJ slid his hands from the pads and leaned back from the headrest, he let out a full-fledged yawn, startling even Priscilla across the room with the sound and the stretch. He stumbled up out of his seat and over toward the still-purring cat, stroking over her ears once more as she butted her head up against his hand, his mind whirling with a mix of work, of Cicero's disappearance, and of school with Sasha.

"I'm wiped, Prisca," he informed the cat, who simply purred louder.

Smiling, he peeled his shirt off over his head and slipped out of his jeans, knowing that tomorrow's dress rehearsal would mean full dress for everyone and makeup for the actors. He'd have to make sure his suit was clean, or he'd be in trouble. For now, though, as it neared two, he focused mostly on making sure the door was locked and the lights were out before stumbling over to bed.

As he flipped the screen down on his workstation to signal for it to go to sleep and wandered over to his bed, he couldn't get Sasha and all of her talk of high school, gone these last fifteen years now, out of his head. Even as he climbed into his narrow bed and pulled the comforter over him to ward off the chill of the night, he was replaying scenes from school, back in the US, through his head, a worn out film, dim and scattershot, but still laced with emotion.

He and Sasha had tried dating early on. Later, after a few weeks of it not going anywhere, they had both admitted that they had felt pressured into having a relationship in school. Good boys and girls fell in love with other good boys and girls, pretended they didn't have sex, and went out to the movies together. They had continued the trend of going to movies, and later to live performances, together, but the relationship had petered out, rather than ending in some climactic fashion. Sasha had gone on to have a string of other relationships, some earnest and some not, some more intense than others – a string that remained unbroken, if tonight's conversation was any clue – but RJ had stopped there.

The social pressure to date throughout high school was only equaled in intensity by RJ's apathy toward the whole scene. He'd felt the occasional twinge of romantic attraction, and to other students of all genders, but the expectation of sex that went along with the idea of a relationship so put him off that he had instead buried himself in his school work. He did well in some courses and not as well in others, but on the things that he enjoyed, he dumped all of his effort. He had gotten

started early on in working the school's older sound board in their theater, running sound for plays, concerts, and assemblies, quickly earning the trust of the other tech crew and the school staff and faculty, rising to lead sound tech within a year.

Computer class had captivated him as well, and for his sixteenth birthday, his parents had surprised him with the implants that would be needed for full interfacing with a workstation. To be honest, it hadn't been too much of a surprise: his father was an engineer and his mother a fairly forward-thinking person, and they had promised him the procedure eventually.

It was a simple affair that took place in an outpatient office, involving self-guided implants that had largely installed themselves. The worst part had been the itching. It was bearable on his hands and along his spine, where the implants breached the surface of his skin, because at least he could scratch (though he had been cautioned to try not to), but the worst had been the NFC pads in his forehead and the interferites embedded even deeper, providing an itch that no scratching would ever reach.

Sound and the interface had taken up all of his energy throughout school, leaving little time to worry about the social stigma that went along with not having a relationship. He was simply the nerdy sound kid who knew more about computers than even the teachers.

Training on the interface was a daily task that he had applied himself to with gusto. It hadn't always been fun, of course, but by the time he'd reached that age, he was starting to understand the idea that work put into a craft was a good way to get more out of it. That he had found furry around then was another thing that kept him going, working and improving at the art of interfacing with his workstation in a way that felt natural to him and came off as natural to others on the 'net. He moved effortlessly through the Crown Pub and a few other choice spaces, slowly crafting the primary persona that he used when interacting with others, the cross fox known as AwDae.

It was then that he and Sasha had really started connecting, for it was her that introduced him to the community. They started hanging out more, talking more, and, especially, building a network of friends together. Dating hadn't worked out for them, what with RJ slowly coming into his identity as asexual and more and more androgynous over the years, while Sasha remained fairly sexual and interested in guys much more masculine than him. All the same friendship had seemed almost natural.

The training had culminated in an offer to go into interactive sound technology at a rather prestigious university out on the east coast. It meant leaving Sasha and a few other close friends behind along with his family, but it also meant that he would be at the forefront of a new technology used in production of both films and live work. In fact, the field was so new that his own studies at the university helped fuel the change in theater tech work, his dissertation, what was meant to be his capstone project, being eventually published and spread around the world.

He had continued to work at the university for a while, as they were one of the few places

around with both a theater and the technology to back it up in such a way that he had helped create. He had considered continuing his studies beyond where he had, but the draw of the theater was what focused him most, rather than strictly academia, or even limiting himself to college theater.

The call from London, had come less than a year after he graduated. Would he like to help start a tech-savvy theater group in town? The pay would be slow to start, but the troupe had a loose collection of apartments he could stay in. He would have full run of the sound department. When could he start?

That conversation had taken some convincing, when it came to his parents. They were pleased, to be sure, but they also felt that London was fairly far away, even though still in the western bloc. He made his promises that he'd come and visit every now and then between shows or when an understudy would take a show for him.

Burying himself deeper into the covers and the mattress, leaving enough room for Priscilla to join him later, RJ thought more about what had come up between him and Sasha before. When they'd Lost Cicero, it was a blow to them all. Getting Lost was not something that happened often, only a couple dozen recorded cases to date, but among those who were counted among the Lost, a disproportionate amount of them were those who were heavy users of the integration technology. It was a risk, everyone had assumed, just as was travel. Something could always happen.

All the same, it was an intense sensation to feel it hit so close to home, and it reminded RJ of just how much he relied on the integration technology, not only for work, but for a large part of his social life. He enjoyed the company of the troupe just fine, and often accompanied them out for drinks and the like, but his heart truly lay among the friends he'd made on the 'net. His friends being on the 'net meant more use of his contacts, and more use of his contacts meant more risk.

It was risk for all of them.

Chapter Four

Doctor Carter Ramirez rubbed her face into her hands, ground her palms against her eyes until she saw stars, before finally slicking her hair back. She had put it up into a bun earlier that day, but there were plenty of flyaway hairs, as there always were.

She felt out of her league. Everyone did, here on her team, but that didn't stop the fact from wearing on her. It's not that there was no support from on high to help with the Lost, because there was. It's not that there was no one else trying, because there was there, too. It's that no one seemed to take it all that seriously. It was a thing like addiction, or plane crashes, or suicide. Something to look at, to study long enough to say "Ah, *this* is happening now," and then set aside like some work of art which was only good enough to be a conversation piece.

People admitted that the phenomenon of getting Lost was happening, but only in as much as it didn't affect that many people. A simple number to point to.

She wasn't the last one left in the lab, by any stretch, but it had reached that point of the night where collaboration had stopped and everyone was butting their head against their own individual problems, toiling in silence. She put down her tablet and pressed down the display on the workstation that she had been assigned for this project, sending it to sleep. It had also clearly reached the point of the night where she wouldn't be getting anything else done.

It was as though the brains of the Lost were just elsewhere, just dreaming on some level, but there was no sense to it, no rhyme or reason to why such a thing would happen to the patient. Some of her team were working on pulling together all of the facts about the population that they could, from demographics to physical stature, searching for clues. The neuroscientists were digging into what was going on within the brain, and what few scans they had from before someone had gotten Lost. Their two pet lawyers (thankfully not present) were digging into both the legal status of the Lost as well as doing what they could to procure under health information law from patient medical histories.

And Carter was supposed to tie it together.

Or, that was her stated goal. The university medical center had grudgingly provided space and funding for the project in an attempt to win some much-needed kudos, but she was starting to doubt just how much the UMC even wanted her to continue. As manager, she had been met with hurdle

after hurdle in trying to make any progress in the case as soon as she started to venture outwards. Colleagues assured her that all projects worked this way, but it was as though the advisory board had given her all the data that it was willing to give, and any more might put those kudos it was receiving at risk.

Carter patted her associate on the neurchem on the shoulder and stood up, stretching her back. “Sorry, Sanders. I’m done in. Catch you in the morning?”

“Mm,” Sanders replied, rubbing at his eyes and stretching his hands out, alternating between clenching them into fists and flexing his fingers out wide. “Sounds good, Ramirez. Catch you then.”

Carter gathered up her coat and her messenger bag, taking one last look around the workstation lab, counting heads to see who would be staying later than her. She swiped her way out of the wing so as not to set off any alarms and signed out at the front desk before making her way out into the night, bundling herself up in her coat.

At home, she scoured the fridge for a bite to eat – she had ordered dinner for the lab earlier, but it was getting on midnight and she didn’t want to go to bed on an empty stomach. She settled on a few pieces of salami stacked onto a couple of crackers, enough to keep her empty stomach from complaining through the night and sat herself down on the couch in the shared living room. She left the lights off so that she wouldn’t bother her flatmates, or so she told herself. In truth, the darkness felt good. She could keep her eyes open and not be greeted with a tablet, a screen, a simulation.

She sat long after finishing her snack, listening to her flatmates sleep, thinking in the dark of all the administrivia that surrounded her task and just how she would be able to get what she needed.

Eventually, finding herself at just as much of a dead end as she had at work, Carter stood and ambled into her room. It was small, but clean, and it served her well. She changed from her work clothes into a comfortable pair of lounge pants and a night shirt before crawling into bed.

#

The morning’s alarm startled her awake. She had thought that the end of grad school had meant the end of six-hour nights of sleep, but apparently, that had not been the case.

Blearily, she pawed at her phone until she managed to swipe in the right direction to turn the alarm off. It was tempting to go back to bed – after all, the Lost weren’t going anywhere, she mused – but she managed to at least kick her feet out from under the covers and sit up. in bed, letting her frizzed hair hang down around her face and shield her from the world for just a little bit longer.

It was her phone, as always, that brought her back to reality. It’s mere presence, even silent as it was, was enough to draw her back into the problem at hand.

Ramirez

Another, this time with scans from before the incident. Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it, do you :p

S

The brief message from her colleague left her puzzled until she'd put it together that he was talking about one of the other subjects' past records, indicating him as a member of a fandom. Sanders didn't honestly believe that people who pretended to be animals on the 'net were more predisposed to get Lost than anyone else. And, to be honest, neither did Carter, even after giving it the token consideration.

All the same, the thought stuck with her through her two cups of coffee that morning, the first in the kitchen and the second out of a travel mug on the L as she headed out towards the UIC campus. *Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it.*

She felt sluggish, and craved another cup of coffee even after she'd reached the bottom of the mug she had with her. The thought nagged at her, caught like some spinning shape against the threads of her thought in a way that the rattle and screech of the train couldn't displace. It tugged those threads free, stitch by stitch, until it reached... what?

Until it reached the hem, and then the same thing over again.

"Holy... holy shit. Holy shit." Carter said, startling the elderly lady next to her. She murmured an apology and fished her phone out, thumbing in a quick message to the team.

Chapter Five

RJ allowed himself to sleep in until nearing 11 that morning, given that tonight was the last night of dress rehearsals. Many other members of the troupe held part time jobs during the day, and he had been known to offer his services as consultant during times like these. Even so, with all that he did, he made enough to not have to worry about holding down more than the one job

As it was, on days when they had nighttime rehearsals, he felt no compunctions about sleeping in. There was nothing to be up for, and with only the ‘net to keep him occupied in the mornings, he felt little need to get moving.

It was Priscilla who has woken him up, butting her head against his cheek and purring loudly to him. The more insistent the cat got, the less he was able to ignore her intrusions on his admittedly banal dreams.

He finally trudged out of bed and refilled his cat’s water and food dishes, giving her the requisite morning pets to keep her happy. That done, he scooped her litter box and made himself a pot of tea. He sat at the tiny kitchen table, sipping from his oversized mug and watching the late morning traffic from his window, primarily composed of business traffic, with the occasional mother with child in tow.