

Somewhere in north Arizona, several miles outside of the Navajo Nation, our Jeep broke down. This was not the driest part of the state, though I am pretty sure it was close to, and it was far outside the lowlands which at least got minimal rainfall. Fortunately, it was just around sunset, which for the desert was the most reasonable part of the day temperature-wise to just sit and wait.

My dad called automobile assistance, who said they would be there in four hours. We had water, of course—my dad had spent too long in the desert than to know to travel with less than a week's worth, and he usually traveled with at least a month's. There were six gallons in the blue cooler, and they were on ice, so we were not in any danger of dehydration. Also in the back was five pounds of buffalo jerky, a grocery bag full of bread, soup and sardine cans, and a small car-powered burner and a pot so we could also cook all of it. And before you ask: also a can opener. There was nothing that could go cartoonishly wrong about this whole ordeal, as my dad always had the foresight to prepare for these sorts of things.

That was up until, approximately six inches from my head, an arrow sliced through the canvas roof of the Jeep and sunk into the seat liner with a thunk.

"DAD!" I shrieked. I tossed the book I was reading so hard I could have torn it in half, then backed into the door of the Jeep like I was going to drill right through it. My eyes were fixed pointedly on that arrow—roughly hewn, fletched with local feathers, and brightly painted.

Coyote arrow.

My dad immediately seized me by the arm and yanked me out of the back seat, to hide on the floor of the front. I did so, cowering and shaking as he grabbed his service revolver. He snapped open the passenger's side door—the opposite side from where the arrow fell—and ducked behind the wheel. If he'd intended to use the Jeep as cover, it didn't really matter. Through the open passenger side door, I saw them. Coyotes appeared out of the brush surrounding the road. Four of them wielded bows all fully nocked, and a half dozen had long-barreled Winchester rifles.

I can't explain how hard I was shaking. I buried myself under the glove compartment, but how was I supposed to survive if I wasn't aware of my surroundings? I peeked out the window counting on my black fur blend me in with the shadows in the Jeep.

Dad, don't do anything stupid...

"Put the gun down," ordered the cleanest-looking male, who spoke with a mix of a Navajo and a southwest accent. He was the only one with any clothing on, a denim jacket too large for him. "And get down on the ground. You, cat! Out of the car. I want you where I can see you."

I hesitated. I thought, maybe if I just stayed put, the coyotes would soon think they were mistaken and nobody was in the car. But not wanting me to get hurt, my dad carefully pulled me out and curled his arms around me, protecting me with his body.

I was crying. Even then I could hear more shuffling paws from all around—there were so many more. Twenty? Thirty?

“Look, take whatever you want,” Dad said. “But do not harm Sabrina.”

The others tightened their bowstrings and raised their guns when my dad reached into his pocket, and he tossed the lead coyote his keys. The coyote caught it in midair, then approached the trunk and went through the keyring, trying all the keys.

“Sweetie, it’s okay,” My dad said under his breath.

I wasn’t terribly reassured. “They’re gonna kill us!”

“They are not,” Dad whispered at me. “They’re just looking for food and tools, they’ll take that and then leave before anyone else passes by. We can always replace food.” Despite his confidence, his brow didn’t seem entirely assured, especially since I could hear his heart pounding just as fast as mine. He sighed. “Still... should have gotten a rental for the local license plate...”

The leader finally cracked the trunk open. They whooped and howled at their haul. Most of the coyotes hauled the supplies into a beat-up shopping cart, likely stolen from a supermarket at least fifty miles away.

“There, you got what you wanted,” I called out at them. I shouldn’t have said anything, but I just wanted this to be over as fast as possible, “can you let us go now?”

The head coyote snapped his gun upward. I shrank into my dad’s grasp again as the jacketed canine paced in a wide arc around us. He picked up the revolver from the ground where my dad dropped it and tossed it in the shopping cart.

Dad sighed. “Well, never seeing that again.”

“Wallet,” the lead coyote said.

My dad pulled it out of his back pocket and tossed it on the ground. The leader, keeping his rifle up but not directly pointed at either of us, scooted the wallet back another five paces with his paw, and only when he was certain he was out of reach, he picked it up and opened it—taking from it only the three fifty-dollar bills my dad kept. Cash was cash, and it wasn’t like they were barred from using it if someone were willing to sell to them. He dropped the wallet on the ground and shoved the bills into his vest.

“You’ve been awfully compliant,” the coyote said. He narrowed his eyes. “Let me guess. You’ve got traveler’s insurance.”

“... I travel too much to leave home without it.”

“Dog, I hate humans,” the canine swore. “You have so much damn money that you can just pay money to get money. So if you’re gonna get it back anyway, maybe you wouldn’t mind parting with something else—what’s wrong with the Jeep?”

My dad almost had to roll his eyes, though from my position on the ground I could tell this was trying for him as well, no matter how level his voice seemed. “Tires went out, both on the right side. Triple A is going to be here in fifteen minutes.” That was a lie of course, we still had about three and a half hours but the coyotes didn’t know that.

The head coyote sneered. Even if he didn’t believe my dad—and why would he, this was the middle of the Arizona desert and we’d only been sitting there half an hour—he didn’t seem like he was willing to take the chance. Grand theft auto had some particularly harsh consequences for wildlife.

He turned to the others. “Strip the car of valuables and be quick about it. Setting Sun, Fortune Favors, Fridge, you three grab the cart, head for the rocky hideout and do not wait for us. Everyone else, follow them as soon as the car’s clear.”

As terrified as I was, I couldn’t help but tilt my head. “Fridge? Really?”

“Hey, it’s a luxury,” the leader huffed. “Speaking of, if you called someone that means you got cell phones. Drop those, too.”

Dad pulled the cell out and tossed it on the ground as well. The head coyote pocketed it with the cash, obviously hoping to clear it out and take it to a no-questions pawnbroker, the sort that services the desperate outside of casinos.

“The cat, too.”

“What!” I yelped, burying myself harder into my dad.

Dad curled his arms defensively around me. “Leave her out of this!”

“Dog, just her valuables!” The coyote lifted the rifle at us again. “If you feel that strongly about it, fine, I promise we’re not gonna hurt her. Last thing and we’ll be out of your fur. Er, hair.”

“You are not touching her.”

One of the coyotes struck my dad across the face with the butt of his rifle. He was thrown, me along with him, sprawled out onto the dusty ground. I coughed and wheezed, trying to scramble my way away.

“Blackjack!” The leader called to that one. “Gently.”

The very large coyote named Blackjack snorted. He seized me by the arm and tossed me down onto the ground, away from the protection of my owner. Several others started tying my dad up for the brief moment he was incapacitated.

“Don’t make a human seek revenge,” the leader chided him. “And believe me, you do not ever want to mess with a whole pack of humans.”

Seemingly ignoring the admonition and pinning me to the dirt, Blackjack forced off my collar and checked the inside of it too. That’s where us pets kept anything we needed—wallets, cell phones, and the like. He took both from mine. Shaking, I tried not to breathe too loudly—which was easy, as he was crushing my chest with his foot.

“There’s another,” he said, tossing the somewhat cheap clamshell over to the boss. He checked my wallet, but there was nothing in there but my ID and license. Growling, he tossed it to the side as well.

Then he noticed a glint from the tag dangling off my collar.

It was an ankh; my dad had picked it up at a novelty shop when we were in Egypt. I am pretty sure he overpaid for it—this sort of thing they loved to gouge Americans for. But when my dad saw me eying it, how much I liked the contours and the symbol itself, he paid what the man said after a half-hearted attempt to haggle. It was not made of gold, and it did not particularly look like it was anything but painted a glossy yellow.

Blackjack took it in his hand and snapped the thin chain that connected it to the collar.

“Don’t touch that!” I yowled. At that point, I wrenched myself out from under the large coyote and sank my teeth into his leg.

“YOW!” Blackjack shouted. I will not repeat what he said after that, because it was quite naughty and I’m fairly sure that you already have the gist of it. He grabbed me by the scruff and hurled me down the road.

“Sabrina!” I heard my dad shouting the moment he came to.

I am, fortunately, a cat—unfortunately, landing on one’s feet means having the self-awareness to know where your feet are, and the first time I struck the pavement was with my head. It was only a glancing blow, and I managed to twist around and catch myself on my hands and feet before any more of me shattered against the dust and asphalt. I was suddenly very dizzy, and after a struggle to stand, I collapsed into the dust.

“Blackjack, you idiot!” I heard the leader calling, “Do you know what you’ve done?!”

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I woke up several hours later. It was dark, I was stuffed behind a dry and cracked log, and nearby there was a fire going. I smelled only three of the more-than-a-dozen coyotes. The one I had bitten—Blackjack, being at least a head taller than the other two—was most prominent, as he was next to the fire looking exhausted, and the wound on his leg was poorly bandaged. I didn't move, and I tried not to open my eyes too far lest they caught a glimpse of my eyeshine and started making demands of me.

I quickly learned that I was tied up; this I figured out by attempting to move my hands and finding they were bound behind my back, and that was tied to my waist. My legs were also tied together, and I had a thick white cloth, probably the same material they used for the coyote's bandage, stuffed into my mouth. My collar was still missing.

"If you have a problem with my leadership then just say it. I'm not gonna bite."

"You didn't explain why we're dragging the cat along!"

I craned my neck slightly over the log and toward the fire, not enough for them to see me out of the corners of their eyes. A small glint of yellow told me Blackjack had tied the chain of my collar around his rather thick-for-a-coyote wrist. The ankh was dangling from it.

Behind them, I saw the Jeep. It was listed to one side worse than we'd left it behind.

"Firebrand, listen to me!" The third one—female—was shouting at the leader. "We're not going to have any end of trouble if they don't find her alive!"

"That's why we needed to take her!" the leader—Firebrand, in the denim jacket—said, huffing weakly. "It's a strategy my grandfather used a lot. When you're in big trouble, grab something very valuable, split up, and run. Then when you've gone far enough, you drop it. They'll spend all their time chasing us, and that gives the rest of the pack time to relocate. They'll be so relieved when they find her alive, they'll forget about the rest."

He took a drink from a glass bottle, and I was pretty sure the semi-clear liquid inside was not water.

"How far's far enough?" asked the female.

"Three days, maybe," the leader croaked. "We'll have to work our way west, then we hide a few months, then rejoin with the pack once the heat's off."

"A few months?!" Blackjack protested immediately.

"Look, we've done it before. Two months at most. Us three, we're a small enough group to stow away on a bus or go dumpster diving."

“Yeah but you get to be with New Horizon,” Blackjack said.

“Hey,” the female—New Horizon—said, “I love you both, don’t forget that. Besides, you never know. We might end up meeting another female.”

“Either way, I’m not going back to Vegas.” Blackjack turned and spit on the ground, “They have a million dumpsters in that city and each one seems to be accompanied by armed guards. Lights are on all the time, can’t move a whisker without someone crying rabies. Humans. Rolling around in food... and they don’t even let us steal the garbage. Steal garbage! That’s got to be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” He snatched the bottle from Firebrand and took a long swig.

Firebrand bared his teeth and snarled. He made to shove Blackjack over, but New Horizon interceded in the fight before it could go anywhere.

“Hold it, hold it!” the female said, “Blackjack’s wounded, alright? Don’t make it worse. We have no medicine, and I don’t think what we had is working too well as it is. Especially if you keep drinking it.”

Blackjack did look bad. Despite his size, like all wild coyotes he was quite scrawny, but he seemed ready to collapse in on himself like a bag of fur filled with bones. The female lifted Blackjack up again and checked his pupils in the firelight.

“No, it’s not good,” said Horizon. “Get the cat. See if she knows anything.”

The leader reached for me. I quickly made like I was being stirred awake and had not been paying attention until I felt his calloused hands.

I quickly found myself on the stone that Firebrand was sitting on, unbound and the gag removed from my mouth. My first instinct was to bolt, but where? I would not be able to survive in the desert or even find my way anywhere without these coyotes. And I was never one to fight, even if some cats might think themselves capable of taking on a pack of even three. Instead, I was just sitting there, frozen and unable to move or think or even breathe.

Horizon, who seemed to know a little bit about medicine, shoved the top of the bottle in Blackjack’s muzzle and made him drink at least half a cup more. Blackjack coughed and sputtered. She then dumped the rest of the contents over the bandage, soaking it. Horizon turned to me.

“Have you had your shots?” she intoned.

I looked confused, but I thought maybe I didn’t need to act quite so much when the leader shoved me after a half second delay.

Firebrand snapped. “Answer her or else you’re our next meal!”

“Why should I help you!” I snapped, suddenly with tears in my eyes. “You probably killed my dad, or worse!”

Firebrand rolled his eyes. “Dog no, we didn’t!”

“And I should believe you!?”

“Smacking him in the skull was not the plan!” Firebrand growled, then slugged Blackjack on the shoulder. Blackjack winced, cowering.

“You were threatening us the entire time!” I said. “You were putting us in mortal danger! And even if he was fine when you left... you don’t know! I’ve heard of people getting hit once and falling and dying because some artery or another popped in their head and that’s it... Goddess help me, I’m gonna die in this desert. You’re gonna drop me in the middle of nowhere and I’m going to be an orphan again, and I...” I was crying, but I’d become so dry that I couldn’t make any tears.

Firebrand glared with frustration, then nodded at New Horizon. The female picked up one of the rifles, holding it horizontally so it was visible in the light of the fire. Then, she opened it up by the breech.

I looked inside through blurry vision, but even then I could tell what she was showing me. “...empty?”

“Bullets are better saved for food,” she said. “Otherwise why spend precious cash on them?”

“Besides...” Firebrand sighed, tossing his own rifle aside in a dramatic gesture. “Most of these barely work.”

“You’re just gonna go give her all our secrets.” Blackjack grumbled. “It’s not much of a threat if everyone knows they’re unloaded.”

“If we are so lucky, we’ll never see this cat again once we dump her,” Firebrand snapped. “Look, cat, I know I can’t promise one hundred percent that your human is fine. Now, stealing the Jeep was one thing—that’s just my neck on the line. Theft? They expect wild animals to steal, so one incident is not gonna redouble their efforts to push us further and further into the wilderness. Murder, though? They’d decimate the pack. Your human said that help was on the way, so we made sure he was conscious and left him there with a blanket.”

“We really needed that blanket...” Blackjack murmured.

“Either way, he was calling out after you while we drove off,” New Horizon said. “He’s fine.”

“That doesn’t make any of this right,” I said. “I only have your word to go on that I haven’t been orphaned again, and you’re a pack of brigands. If you’ve left me alive, it’s only out of self-interest, not any kind of empathy.”

“Empathy is for pack-mates,” Firebrand said. “You start thinking otherwise and it becomes impossible to survive. But even so... facts are fact. Can’t kill you at this point cause we can’t anger the humans any more than we have. Besides... this was Blackjack’s blunder. You just did what you needed to survive, like the rest of us.”

He pulled from the supplies something that surprised me—a pack of cigarettes. There were only two left in the box, but he lit one on an ember and gave it to Blackjack to smoke, and then lit up the other one for himself. After taking a drag, he offered it to me. I shook my head. I’d known too many smokers in North Africa and was not keen on developing a habit.

“You got Blackjack really deep, you know,” Horizon said as she took the other half of the cigarette.

I winced. “How deep?”

Putting the cigarette to her lips, Horizon hesitated. She seemed far more worried than angry—all of them did. After hesitating long enough for it to be awkward, she unwrapped Firebrand’s wound, and winced. She then sniffed the wound, and winced even harder. Finally, she said, “... we need the vet.”

Firebrand cursed. “We just got a hundred fifty from that target, now we’re gonna have to waste it all on stitches again... you know how much food that could have been? We can’t catch a break...”

“Not like it matters at this point,” Blackjack said. “I’m a goner. Use the money for our pups.”

Instead of arguing with him, the other two just sadly contemplated the situation. New Horizon distantly stared at the fire with the half cigarette on her lips. Firebrand leaned back on his stone and stared at the sky.

Slowly it dawned on me how little of an act this was. They weren’t doing this for my benefit or anything, they really only thought of me as dead weight—or would, if “dead” wasn’t the opposite of what they wanted out of me. Weird that their lack of empathy made the scene before me all the more pitiable.

I looked between the three. “...you promise my dad’s fine?”

“Yes!” Firebrand snapped.

“And you are going to let me go?”

"I'm not risking it any other way," Firebrand said. "I'd let you go now, but we're about a mile off the road and I'm not letting the vultures get you before the humans do."

Scratching the back of my head. "So... just get Blackjack to the vet."

"It's forty miles from here," New Horizon sighed. "Least, the only one we know that'll take ferals."

"That's about an hour by Jeep," I said. "Should be able to easily make that."

Horizon stood up, grabbing a flashlight I recognized from the glove compartment. She gestured me to follow her, and though I hesitated a brief moment, I did. She shone the light on the other side of the Jeep.

I winced at the shreds of rubber. "Ah. Yeah, those tires are just barely holding this thing up now, aren't they?"

"Thing lists a bit," New Horizon said.

"I'm kinda surprised you know how to drive it."

"Oh, driving's easy," she said. "It's keeping the damn thing straight that's a problem, and the busted tires aren't helping matters."

I scratched the back of my head, thinking. "Well... the Jeep can do front-wheel drive. It'd probably destroy the thing, but if you moved the good back tire up here and put the bad front one back there, you'd be able to drive at least a little bit on it."

New Horizon snorted. "I can drive the thing, if I could fix it I'd be a mechanic."

"Oh, changing a tire is simple," I said. "There's a jack and a tire iron under the panels in the back. My dad showed me how to do this."

New Horizon lit up, her triangle ears standing straight. "You can change a tire?"

I laughed. "Dog no, I'm not nearly strong enough for that. But it just takes a bit of care and muscle. Maybe you and Firebrand together..."

New Horizon whistled. "Firebrand! We're learning a new skill tonight. Come on, cat, the sooner we get to the vet the sooner you can leave."

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Thing is, on two bad tires, it wasn't as if we could go highway speeds, so we were not getting there in an hour, or even by morning. But going even slow and plodding was

faster and easier than walking by night, not to mention a lot less bumpy. It was still bumpy, however, especially since they were still avoiding the road as much as they could.

For Blackjack's sake, however, Horizon risked the highway when she was able. She was driving, and Firebrand had his head shoved through the open top, spying for landmarks. That left me and Blackjack in the backseat, together.

"I don't want to die," he whimpered. His bones were knocking together so hard they sounded like dishes rattling in the back of a car.

Nobody else was nearby, so I was pretty sure he was talking to me. It might have been the fever, because I don't know many other reasons a wild canine would talk to a domesticated cat, especially one that attacked him.

"You're not going to die," I said, "how old are you, anyway?"

"Six," he said.

"That's not terribly old," I said, lying a little given how much shorter life expectancy was for ferals, "you'll be fine."

He didn't respond. I felt his hand—the one on which my ankh was still tied—and he felt cold, colder than he should have even in the desert night. My ears fell.

"Look, I'm... I'm sorry," I said.

Blackjack suddenly became agitated, and he tore the ankh off his wrist and shoved it back into my hands. "Just keep it! Keep it, alright? I didn't even want it that badly!"

I was now shaking almost as much, and I curled up, gripping the ankh in my hands. He had no one to lean against but me, so at the very least, I wedged myself under his head and used my curled body to prop his head up.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, choking up a little, "It's just... my dad gave it to me. I mean, my owner." Wild animals were often uncomfortable when domestics refer to their owners as their parents. If it bothered or confused Blackjack, he didn't show it.

"He seemed decent for a human," the coyote said, "Haven't seen so many try to stand up for their pets." He shook his head. "I bet you love him a lot, don't you?"

"Sure do," I said.

"I didn't want to take you along," Blackjack said. "Thought it was stupid. They'd give up before they started if we left you where you were."

I didn't realize it until it was happening, but he'd reached a paw up and was weakly stroking my fur in soft circles. I was about to pull away, but realized how gentle the

gesture was. For as aggressive as he had been, he hadn't actually gone out of his way to touch me forcefully since he'd tossed me. I'd always been overly-empathetic, but seeing him like this, I couldn't help it. Didn't matter what he'd done to me, I felt so bad for him.

"It's always been like this," he said. "For at least ten generations. Even after the humans wiped out the nomads on this continent, sent them to live in the barren deserts, we were still able to live like we had for a thousand years. With the big fire pits and dancing. My grandfather was a shaman of his pack. He used to tell me the story of how the settlers came through... it doesn't... it doesn't really make sense in English, unless you tell it just right. It sort of requires context that's provided by a well-placed bit of pyrotechnics in the fire."

I was quiet for a moment. But looking down at him, he was so weak. He needed to stay awake if there was any chance of getting him through the night. "Tell it to me anyway," I said, "I like listening to stories."

"Well, the sky came down to earth. The sky had two uniforms. Dark blue for the starless night, dark grey for the cloudy day. Never did much out here besides the night sky's rolling from the sea to the gulf. The dark blue came from California. We'd heard so much about California, we started making up stories about it. Even now when someone talks about California I think of someplace unreachable, like what heaven is to a filthy bandit like I am."

"Why don't you go there?" I asked.

"Because I know," he winced, shifting off his swollen leg, "I know that it's just the same as anywhere else. Maybe less desert, but wherever there is plenty of food, there's just more animals and people to compete for it. It's always been like that. It always will be like that."

I gently eased him back down. "Go on with your story," I said quietly.

"When the bullets were flying, it was like rain," he said, "they needed to feed themselves, and we needed to feed ourselves. After the night banished the storm, they built the straight lines to the sea and the metal horses that continued to run faster and faster. Always going toward the sea. And they killed off so much of the buffalo doing it, we had to eat something. So we ate their cattle, but when we did so, we were branded as bandits and thieves and cowards. Forcing us into the deserts and the mountains. The pack was never the same after that, and my grandfather called it..."

He paused.

"What did he call it?" I asked, leaning forward.

"... the end of the world," he said. "And you know, sometimes I think that's the truest thing I've ever heard. Because it wasn't long after the world ended we lost every scrap of pride we had left and we're left wandering through this barren wasteland until we die."

I watched my grandfather die of illness that the vet would not fix because we had no money. I watched my father get shot for poaching, and my mother get shot simply because she dared get within thirty yards of a chicken cage.”

At this point, he broke down sobbing. I sat up, and wrapped myself around his head in an embrace. His cries were pained and horrible.

“You’ll be okay,” I told him. “At the very least, you’ll be okay.”

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I woke up to the dawn, and suddenly sat straight up. I was in the Jeep. Briefly, I thought my entire experience had been a narrative-destroying dream, but no—while the coyotes were gone, they’d left behind a lot of their fur, and the rest of the Jeep was empty—except for my collar, which they’d left behind. I strapped it back onto my neck, and connected what was left of the chain on my tag back to it.

Out the windows, the dusty-if-empty highway lay not more than a dozen yards away. I blinked repeatedly, sneezing at the dust in my nose, and climbed out of the Jeep to take a look at why I’d been left behind. The back tires had ground down to uselessness, and the rim had taken so much damage that the rear bumper had started to scrape the ground. Yeah, not really any continuing with that extensive of damage. Pawprints led away, three sets of prints with the set in the middle clearly half-dragged. They led across the highway and into the dusty desert going south.

As the day was still cool, I took to sitting on the roof of the Jeep, watching the highway for someone—anyone—to pass by. And I thought about Blackjack the entire time.

I should have just forgotten about him. I didn’t know how far we’d gotten or how much farther they had to walk with Blackjack’s leg doing as poorly as it was, but it was certainly no longer my problem. They’d left me in view of the highway, and sooner or later I’d get a ride into town. I’d direct the local animal rescue to take me to my dad’s hotel room in Flagstaff, and sooner or later I’d connect with Dad and we’d leave this all behind, taking only a few bruises and a bad memory.

I hadn’t noticed that a car had pulled up until its door slammed. I’d been buried in the map, unfolded and sprawled across the interior of the Jeep, and I jolted up from the mess of paper. My heart leaped into my chest, and I jumped out the open window. My dad caught me immediately, swinging me around.

“Sabrina! You’re all right!”

“You’re not dead!” I said.

"No, wasn't even a concussion," he patted his head, then winced. "Bruised like heck though. At least according to the ambulance guys. You're not injured, are you?"

"Not that I can tell," I said, rubbing my own head. "I think the blow just shook me... other than that, the coyotes didn't... do anything else."

I glanced at the rental car, which also clearly had all-wheel drive. It was just like Dad to hurriedly arrange for a new mode of transport rather than take a couple hours to recuperate as the authorities handled things. I asked, "How did you even find me?"

Dad pulled away for a moment and took my left hand and tapped on my wrist. "Locator chip. It was a new thing so... I had them put one in you on the last vet trip."

"I knew that shot hurt too much!" I pretended to be grumpy, but just buried myself into him happily.

Holding me tightly, he walked around the Jeep, sighing as he noted the damage. "Well. This is almost certainly totaled now."

"Sorry, Dad," I said. "I know how much you liked it."

"No, it's fine," he pressed his head to mine, and I nuzzled him. "I'm just glad you're safe. I really shouldn't be taking you on these expeditions..."

"Honestly I wouldn't mind having a normal cat life," I laughed. "Well, normal for me, anyhow."

He held onto me as he looked through the windows to see if there was anything to salvage before the tow truck arrived, but looked curiously at the unfolded map all over the back seat. "You... you weren't planning on walking to the nearest city, were you?"

"Oh, no, I wasn't," I said, looking out at the trail of footprints, still present and clear in the still air. "I... uh... okay, Dad, this is going to sound really, really stupid, but there's something we need to check on, or else it's going to haunt me the rest of my life."

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It took a moment of flailing with my seatbelt before I unlatched it and popped open the side door, immediately dropping to the dirt and sprinting towards the just-barely visible figures in the dust.

"Don't come any closer!"

Knowing I should have probably not done something so stupid, I charged over the ridge anyway and came face-to-face with the barrel of a Winchester rifle. After a moment

where my heart stopped beating, Horizon's ears perked in surprise, and she lowered the gun.

"Said we shouldn't have told her the guns were unloaded..." Blackjack mumbled. The trail led all the way to him. He was laying on Firebrand's jacket, the arms of which were crossed under his armpits and tied over his chest in a poor, makeshift drag stretcher. His body had been towed slowly through the dust for the last mile, leaving an obvious trail.

"What are you doing?" Firebrand hissed. "We left you behind like I promised—why can't you leave well enough alone?!"

I huffed, hands on knees, trying to catch my breath and let my blood flow back into the parts of me that'd suddenly grown cold. "Firebrand... I know you don't have any reason to trust me. But I'm guessing the vet is still some ways off and... by the looks of it, you're out of time."

Firebrand and Horizon lowered their ears.

"Ten miles off..." Horizon said. "We took a wrong turn in the dark. I don't... I don't think Blackjack will survive the heat of the day, no."

"Leave Blackjack with me," I said.

They both bristled at the suggestion and bared their teeth, moving to block the near-dead coyote with their bodies.

"Don't you dare!" Firebrand growled at me. "This is our business. And I don't appreciate the suggestion that a domestic knows better than we do!"

I didn't move from my spot, even if my hands were shaking. "He'll get vet care. I can't promise what will happen to him afterwards. And you two can go, but I can't promise the Highway Patrol won't be here in an hour. Nevertheless, I promise you: Blackjack will live. I am going to make sure of that."

There was a long silence. New Horizon's ears fell further.

"Hon..." she said, "I don't know if we have a choice."

"We can't leave him for the humans," Firebrand said.

"No, believe me, I would not leave Blackjack behind just to be put down with indignity. But... this domestic didn't have to help us fix the Jeep, and in fact had less than any reason to help us, but she did anyway. There would be no reason for her to come out here if she intended on Blackjack dying."

After some fuming, contemplating, and pacing on his long, thin legs in the way coyotes often do, Firebrand looked down at Blackjack. The big coyote had barely even

responded to anything that'd gone on—he was staring at the sky, unable to pant even in the growing heat.

Firebrand looked up at me, and with a great sigh, he nodded. “If you break your promise, I’m getting our shaman to curse you.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I laughed. “Hurry, we have some water for you too.”

“You are absurdly generous to a gang of thieves,” Horizon said, grabbing one arm of the jacket around Blackjack’s chest. Firebrand grabbed the other, and they pivoted, dragging him back over the ridge and toward the SUV, where my dad had the back trunk open. He’d of course immediately stocked it with jugs of water, but had made a space in the back for a coyote to lay down on the carpeted space. Once in position, Firebrand untied the jacket from his friend and put it back on, not even regarding the damage it’d sustained.

As both Firebrand and Horizon tried to pour some water into Blackjack’s mouth, Dad looked down at them. “This is the one that hit me?”

“I told him not to,” Firebrand said.

“You know...” Dad said, “If you wanted food, if you approached unarmed, I would have just handed it over to you. Maybe not all of it, but...”

Firebrand glared at him. “But what?”

“I’m just imagining us sitting there with the doors on the Jeep open, having a picnic with some wild coyotes while we waited.”

Firebrand’s half-snarl vanished, and he lowered his ears.

“I know that’s hard to imagine,” my dad laughed. “I don’t expect it could have gone so easily, or for you to change your ways or anything. I’ve known many ferals in my travels. There’s more than enough reasons for us to not trust each other, for you to just take what you can without waiting for a yes. But I am saying... it would have been nice.”

“It would have,” Horizon said.

Blackjack made a half-hearted attempt to sit up, but Horizon pushed him back down, before kissing him gently. Firebrand kissed him too, and they both nuzzled him for a long, drawn-out moment.

“Follow the path to the end,” Firebrand told him.

“Let the sun always guide you,” Blackjack wheezed.

“You better get going,” I said, sitting down with Blackjack. “We don’t want to risk waiting any longer.”

Firebrand and New Horizon nodded. They grabbed their tools, but before turning and leaving, Firebrand reached into the pockets of the jacket, and pulled out my and dad's cell phones. Without even waiting for the normal exchange of words that came with a gift (even if it was a return) He tossed them into the back seat. He and his mate each grabbed a fresh pint of water, then both sprinted as fast as they could into the west.

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Blackjack, with the attack on record and his leg permanently injured, was deemed unfit to return to the wild. He was sentenced to a wildlife refuge. I gave Blackjack a long hug before I left and never saw him in person again.

The refuge animals don't often get as many niceties as the zoo animals, but phone access is at least one privilege, and it's far better than being locked away in a pound or released split from the pack. I got a few calls from Blackjack for a while, about a year. The last time that he called me, he said he was breaking out.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. "And... why break out at all? Having a bum leg is going to make it all the harder on the outside."

"It's not that bad," Blackjack said. "I can't run very fast anymore, but I can walk and that's all I need. And anyway, I can't stay here knowing that Firebrand and New Horizon and the rest of the pack are still out there. It's not right."

"I could warn the refuge, you know," I said.

"You could."

There was a long pause between us for nearly a full minute.

"Sabrina," he said, "I'm sorry."

I blinked. "That's new coming from you."

"I just... I don't know if I rightly like humans or cats still, even if some of you can be nice. But if some of you can be nice, then there's no longer this impassable canyon between us. You're not forces of nature or demigods. You're not a faceless enemy or prey. You're just not that different from us. And knowing that makes it a lot harder to rob anyone."

"Careful," I said, "This is how dogs became domesticated."

Blackjack let out a yipping, coyote laugh. "I don't think we're in danger of that. But you never know... it might happen someday."

I smiled though I knew he couldn't see me. "Are you sure you're going to make it back in one piece?"

"Sure will," he said. "I met a very cute female here and she wants to come with me."