

Distant city spikes sparkled like a computer chip, but rather than brass and green, the structures floated in a purple white haze of clouds in the pre-dawn morning. The warmth of the sun had not yet colored the horizon, leaving everything clean cool. The bay at the foot of the city was smooth and held a bit of starlight left over from the night in its silent glistening surface. From here it almost looked like you could glide across the surface without sinking.

"How did you get a place with a view like THIS?" AJ turned awestruck eyes toward Nic. He just grinned with a shrug. His nose crinkled when he did that and he had to adjust his glasses back to straight.

"Luck? I didn't think I'd get it either, but apparently the folks who applied before me weren't as responsive on the paperwork side, so eventually my application superseded theirs."

AJ dumped her duffel bag beside a wide sofa and leaned an elbow on one of the overlarge arms, unable to take her eyes away from the floor-to-ceiling windows and the gentle morning light that cast the entire living room and kitchen in a blue glow.

"It's gorgeous." She breathed, like being outside, but..." She moved carefully forward, looked down the sheer drop to the trees beyond the glass. "No one to stare back in."

"And the tunnel across the bay runs like clockwork. I almost don't even need my car."

"Ha, you work from home. You don't need a car anyway."

"Well, obviously I did to pick you up from the airport!"

AJ laughed. "I know, I appreciate it. How early did you have to get up to get me?"

Nic shook his head. "You don't want to know. Let's just say I did get some sleep, but it was more like a nap."

"I slept on the way here so I don't remember how long it took."

"I know." He leaned in conspiratorially. "You snored."

"Didn't!" She argued, slapping his wrist. "You're so mean!"

"Says the girl to the guy who just picked her up from the airport."

AJ approached him, put paws on her hips, let her tail sway. Looking down at her, Nic could see the bags under her eyes and the strain beneath her coy smile. It made his heart ache how much effort she put into her energetic personality.

"Hopefully you'll be able to relax over the next few days. I took time off, so there's no agenda. We can just do whatever."

"Does 'whatever' include breakfast?"

Nic glanced at the green digital clock over the stainless steel range. It was barely past 6am. "Sure. Or if you wanted you could sleep some more?"

AJ tossed her head. "We can catch up on sleep when we die."

"Heavy words for such a light attitude. Whaddya hankering for?"

"Don't suppose a bachelor like you could whip up a continental breakfast for a poor country girl?"

"My lady," Nic bowed gracefully, deeply, with much twirling of paws and flattening of ears. "It shall be like a Saturday morning."

AJ's smile widened as she leaned back in her wheelchair.

Nic opened the fridge and gold light filled the room like a sunrise.

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Later, AJ was zonked on the sofa. Nic had carefully lifted her from the chair and arranged her legs comfortably straight, with pillows to support her upper body. The aroma of cinnamon rolls, freshly brewed coffee, and scrambled eggs with bacon had been enough to make his mouth water, but not enough to bring AJ out of her travel weariness. Nic had eaten, lapping down coffee like a car in need of gasoline. Then he sat, with a full belly, on the coffee table, watching his closest friend sleep.

Her face was drawn. He had thought she would relax into the bliss of rest, but it seemed like a weight or pain held her down. He watched small twitches of her eyelids and ears and nose. Sometimes her arms would clench for an instant as though she was afraid of losing something, then the muscles would relax again. But although there was life in her face, the pulsing of her neck, the minute bobbing of her whiskers, and the rise and fall of her arms and chest, nothing moved below her waist.

AJ was paralyzed in both legs. She had suffered a car accident that changed her life. She couldn't move out and ended up staying with her parents. She lost most of the independence she craved so much. And while Nic's life had moved forward full of endless work and opportunities, he feared that AJ had felt left behind. She struggled through the first two years of her reduced mobility. Nic visited when he could, but this was the first time AJ had accepted his

invitation to come visit. It was a special occasion since he had only recently acquired the condo and had no one to show it off to yet.

Nic was well versed in caring for AJ, and there was no awkwardness as the two had grown up together and were practically siblings. He had assured her folks that she would be looked after, but secretly he was hoping this would be an opportunity for him to guide some of AJ's craving for independence. He worried sometimes...

AJ's brow furrowed a bit more, she inhaled deeper through her nose, stretched her arms slowly over her head, not fully awake yet. Then she lurched and gripped the sofa cushions in brief panic.

"Hey, hey, it's okay!" Nic put a reassuring paw on her shoulder.

"I didn't know where I was for a sec." She closed her eyes again to avoid looking at him. He could tell she was embarrassed. The bear's nose twitched as she inhaled again. "Ohhhh, Nic. I bet I let everything you made get cold and greasy."

"It'll warm, ready as soon as you want it."

AJ's eyes squinted at the increased brightness of daylight filling the room. "What time is it?"

"A bit after 11."

"So much for what I said earlier."

"Think of it as a life extension." Nic wished he hadn't phrased it that way as soon as he said it, changed the subject. "Hungry still?"

"Famished." AJ pulled her body forward, then swiveled her wheelchair to the correct angle. With practiced familiarity, she placed one leg, then the other onto the floor with knees close together.

Nic watched covertly from the kitchen, pulling together a plate for the convection oven. "Let me know if you need a paw."

"I'm good." She braced herself with a paw on each handle of the chair, took a deep breath, and heaved herself bodily off the sofa. It was a surprisingly smooth motion. Nic noticed the muscle definition in those arms. She was probably stronger than he was.

Nic didn't realize he was staring until AJ bumped his shin with a front wheel. "Hey, space wolf, what planet you visiting?"

"Sorry." He whipped the steaming plate out and set it at the table, where a place had been left open without a chair. AJ squeezed his side teasingly. Nic yelped. "Don't! You nearly made me drop this!"

"Ha, can't believe you still have that weakness."

"Try not to goose the waiter while he's waiting."

"Waiting. I've made you do plenty of that already." AJ spoke through a full mouth, covering with one paw. "Did you eat yet?"

"Oh yeah. I couldn't resist." Nic patted his belly. "I happen to like my own cooking."

"What'd you get up to while I was out?"

"Not much."

She leveled a knowing gaze. "You fell asleep too."

"Well, for a bit."

"Good. Thanks for moving me, by the way. I was getting antsy in the chair and it would've been sore to wake up there."

"Of course. I meant to pull out your neck pillow but I didn't want to dig through your stuff."

"Psh. I've got nothing to hide." AJ sucked down half her coffee and emptied her plate in record time.

"Nothing but that black hole in your tummy, huh?" Nic chuckled.

"I usually mind the diet and all, but this is supposed to shake up my routine, so I'm permitting." She looked at Nic directly. Her smile crumpled and she pushed away her plate. "You know I'm not going to let you talk me out of it, don't you?"

Cold dread trickled through Nic's body in prickling waves that settled poorly into his stomach. "I had hoped maybe we could get through a day together before talking about it, but I should have known better." He tried a lopsided grin that was not returned, so he gave in to her serious tone. "I'm listening."

"I've thought it through, okay? I know everyone thinks that I'm crazy, but I mean, look at me." She presented her two lifeless legs with open paws. The appendages had atrophied since the accident, looking almost skeletal despite the insulated soft lavender leggings she wore. Onic

could not imagine those legs supporting her weight. It was difficult to imagine how they had looked before, though, and that disturbed him.

"I'm not like a person who was born this way. I could walk and run and jump. It's all still up here." She tapped two finger pads on her temple, habitually swiping her long purple mohawk from her eyes. "So when I see a chance to have that again, even if I can't feel it, I'm going to take it. I just need the opportunity to have a chance."

Nic couldn't blame her for that, but "I thought it was experimental."

"It is. That's part of why I have a chance at this. How would I be worse off if it doesn't work?"

"That's kind of easy to answer, AJ."

She shook her head. "The procedure requires a level of custom body prep. I am the only candidate who fulfills the preferred requirements. All I have is a severed nerve and a mildly jacked up spine."

"AJ, I've read all about this study and what the surgeons hope to achieve. But it's just too extreme for me. This isn't... reversible."

"Nic. I'm not going to walk with these again."

"What if you could though?" Nic couldn't keep the desperation out of his voice. "What if there was a breakthrough and this could be fixed? We've seen so many other medical miracles lately. It could only be a matter of time! You don't want to throw away that possibility permanently, do you?"

"Nicky."

Nic wasn't going to get emotional about this. Dammit. He was already emotional. He felt it in his pounding heart and the burning threat of tears in his eyes. He remembered long walks in the woods, diving off the pier in the summer, ice skating in the winter. He remembered sneaking long glances at AJ as she sunbathed, knew when he was caught and didn't care. AJ's legs were part of her beauty, and as far as he was concerned, they still were, even now in their unusable state.

"I can't live with the idea of them hacking your legs off, AJ." He said harshly.

"I can."

Nic glared at her. He hated how selfish he must seem, but he didn't know how else to behave. This was completely uncharted territory.

AJ's eyes softened. She reached out across the table and held Nic's rigid paw, stroking between his fingers with her own. Her voice was calm. "It is a planned procedure, not a barbaric ritual."

"Don't do it, AJ."

"When I think of myself in three years," She went on without acknowledging, "Either I will still be paralyzed, or I have the chance to be walking on my own two feet again. The difference is that I can help contribute to something that may help many others like me. Even if it doesn't work, I don't want these attached to my body anymore. It's almost like... parasites. They are there, but I can't feel them. They aren't a part of me. It would be a relief. I could be more mobile. And that's all if the procedure doesn't work. If it does... Nic I could be walking in three years."

"With robot legs."

"I'll be like your childhood hero."

"Oh gimme a break. You think that's enough to convince me?"

"No, but it gave you a great mental image for how sexy android legs can be."

Nic was nonplussed.

"All that shiny chrome."

Nic groaned and grabbed his blushing ears, covering his face with his forearms. "I still think you should wait." His voice was muffled.

"If I'm already well into the program and successfully managing the new legs, a cure like that would only improve my ability to use them. I'm not letting them chop me off at the waist, Nic. I still have some hope for that area." She didn't get an answer. "You've got to understand. The difficulty you're having with this? I've already been through that stage. I was terrified when I realized I was actually considering it. I believed at one time that I couldn't part with... pieces of myself. But then I really started to think, and I realized, these aren't part of me anymore."

"But they might be."

"I can't hold on to a maybe hope. I need my hope to be active."

Nic's head had lowered until his muzzle rested next to his hand. The hand that AJ was still stroking. The motion of her paws transferred to his face and he closed his eyes. She brushed his wet eyes and rubbed his ears.

"It seems extreme. I know. I don't expect you to understand my decision right away. You need to process this like I did, just in your own way. We can talk more over the week, but for right now,

I'll add one more thing." She gently held his face. "I want to be able to see you eye to eye again."

The wolf heaved a deep sigh, put his glasses back on, looked dolefully up at AJ. She used her thumbs to pull the sides of his muzzle up into a squinting cartoonish grin, making them both snort in laughter.

Nic beheld his ursine friend as she was framed in the glory of morning, flanked on either side by the distant computer chip city, like the electronics that he imagined would eventually interpret the signals from her spinal column and translate them into movement. There could be a type of beauty found there. A hint of hope fluttered inside him like the tiny seagulls over the wide, glistening bay.