



Battenmont was small for a city, population just over six hundred thousand, but in the Baukaru Island chain, it was the most popular tourist destination. Melody had read briefly about the city before her trip and earlier in the day when she was looking for a hotel. She had checked into her hotel room, changed into a simple black bathing suit with a small skirt and tube top, and rode the elevator down to find Nicco waiting patiently for her in the lobby. He smiled when she arrived.

"You look much more comfortable now. How about seeing some of this festival?" He held the door open for her. She cinched her wetdry suit into a new cheap sling bag and beamed at him.

Although there were high rises, the city was designed to be pedestrian friendly, and at night the lights were a sight to behold. Displays normally relegated to advertisements were now glowing in radiant arrays of patterns and flashes. Melody was fascinated by how the lights spiked like fireworks with streams of color raining down. Many of the largest were synchronized to a distant throbbing bass that grew louder as they walked. The deep pounding began to affect her gait and she found herself swaying to the sound, a strangely feral feeling coming over her as they joined the excited crowds.

They wandered through the merch booths. Often the press of bodies made her press against Nicco. He often kept a paw on her wrist or shoulder to make sure she was close. Although she hated herself for it, Melody did inhale deeply trying to detect any hint of musk coming from Nicco, but she couldn't smell anything.

Melody chose an overlarge tank top sporting a Bonescratch logo. It was one of her favorite bands as a teen, and the loose white fabric caught blacklights and glowed an otherworldly blue at intervals as the two walked together.

Multiple stages were arrayed along Main Street, where the festival had taken over the adjoining streets and all traffic lights were blinking amber with no vehicles in sight except rumbling food trucks. Melody bobbed her head to the closest rhythm, thinking how nice this was compared to how Evan normally behaved, then she spun around, walking carefully backwards, scrutinizing Nicco.

"That's a look!" the skunk remarked.

"I know why I came out here, but I don't know what you want." Melody said. "What's your deal? Why put up with me?"

The skunk shrugged with his tail. "I could be boring and say I knew business would be nonexistent tonight. Hanging out with you and seeing the bands is definitely an improvement." His eyes sparkled.

She continued to eye him. "No other motives?"

"Not really. Is that okay with you?"

"For now. As long as I believe you." She spun back around, looking back over her shoulder. "I'm feeling restless, lets find something with a real beat."

She held open her paw in invitation and Nicco took it like a true gentleman, laughing as she pulled him off balance and hurrying to keep pace without tripping over her tail.

"How about over there?" he pointed.

"Let me feel it out."

The next stage was playing some kind of western-inspired music that was interesting but didn't hold their attention long. As they closed in on the main stage, laser lights painted beams through the air in white, yellow, lime, scarlet. Spinning, weightless shapes of light converged in kaleidoscope patterns.

Melody's ear perked at a familiar riff and signature yowl. A wild yearning roused in her core as flashbacks of her less-restrained younger years came to life in her mind's eye. Nicco noticed and halted in time to keep from running her over. She punched him in the shoulder.

"Um, ow?"

"Wake me up!" She couldn't stop laughing. "You let me buy this shirt and didn't tell me Bonescratch was playing tonight? I didn't even know they still toured!"

"They don't really. It's rare to see them, their style changed a lot over the years. No more screamo emo punk." He had to raise his voice as the intro began. There was a sizeable crowd already present, but the resounding slap and slide of a bass caused a change in the throng's current. Like a tide, they were pulled in. Glow in the dark plastic rods connected in bracelets and necklaces were thrown to the fans and soon even the two mustelids were bedecked in their own colors. Nicco traded to wear blue and orange, Melody took all the purple and whites.

In came the kick and guitar, building up to a crescendo that dropped to sudden quiet that the watchers anticipated. Melody knew the song, but it was a remake, very different than the tortured performance she used to know. Bonescratch was headed by Lynx known for his screaming lyrics, but now he was reserved, contemplative almost, but repressing an underlying energy that quickly burst with the crash of cymbals and... was that a tambourine?

The energy was infectious. Melody found herself dancing like she had not danced in years, her feet recalling steps that surprised her. Soon she discovered her moves had set her slightly apart from Nicco who shook his head in amazement, eyes shining.

Melody shook her shoulders and tail, lowering her head as she approached him again, switched to a fluid sway that brought her within whisker's breadth of his chest, then backed away with a series of hops and jumps. Nicco laughed out loud, then pointed over her shoulder.

Two other dancers moved toward Melody, mirroring her steps. One was a lioness, the other a lynx. The femmes followed the otter without missing a beat, moving to flank her on either side, clapping and snapping, hunching shoulders, swinging tails. The lioness's tail was like a whip, the lynx's was light as a feather. Melody could use the weight of her own tail to leverage herself into tight and unexpected moves, and she allowed herself to shake it all out, let it all come out.

It was a fever dream. Color and rhythm combined into its own limitless plane of motion. The other two dancers finally caved when Melody executed a particularly difficult step, the moonswim, where she was able to arch and fling her body as though underwater. Melody felt as though steam might rise from her body. Her fur gleamed in the lights.

"Those are some moves, girl!" The lioness shouted, barely audible over the music.

Melody could only smile breathlessly.

More dancers had joined them, nearly twenty other femmes and as the next song began with no delay, they fell into the routine dance that accompanied the official music video. No doubt all were true fans, keeping to the fast pace and breaking into lines. A break was coming and they all eyed each other, nodding in preparation. Melody heard several shouts and a number of people pointed at her. She glanced about as some kind of consensus was reached. The band continued to play, delaying the drop, in order to shout comments. They clearly loved the impromptu performance below. A ring of dancers formed around her as the music approached its climax. She understood then. They wanted her to take center stage.

The laser lights painted a starfield across the street and buildings, converging into a stream of radiant blue and white flowing particles.

"Lose control, and now I take control," she thought to herself, taking a deep breath.

She dived.

The drop came, echoing out into the stadium as Melody lowered herself into the riverbed, crouching, breathing as fast as she could and counting. On the perfect beat, she exploded upward in a leap off the ground. The lasers scattered like sea spray, the band slammed back into full session just as her paws hit the pavement. Surrounded by the other femmes and full of joy and amazement at the spectacle they were part of, Melody felt tears in her eyes, and was surprised to find she wasn't the only one. Nearly everyone around her was ecstatic, screaming, cheering. This ocean of strangers felt closer to her than anything she had experienced in years.

At last, despite the band delaying the end of the song repeatedly, the set was over. Melody gasped for air, tried to thank the other dancers, but was instead washed with so many waves of compliments that she decided to focus on breathing. The lioness and lynx femmes were the last to hug her and it was quiet enough to actually hear their voices over the cheers.

"Gods, that was amazing!" the lynx squealed, holding Melody's paws in her own. "You are a freaking machine. Moonswimming? No one has done it like that since Elvish!"

"Thank you!" Melody said, feeling light headed.

"You're a real fan!" The lioness was taller and leaned down to speak near Melody's ear. "We'd love to connect with you again! I'm here visiting my mom and Tee here is friends with the band. Let's meet up again! Will you be here tomorrow?"

Melody simply nodded and the crowd surged again, pushing the small group apart. Nicco was there, quietly diverging the torrent. The last thing Melody heard was the lioness saying something like, "If this is what the riverbed is like, Raif can go suck his own-"

"You are full of surprises, little lady." Nicco sheltered her in his shadow as Melody rested her light-dazzled eyes.

"I feel like my lungs are about to burst!"

"Rightly so. Let's get you something to drink."

He knelt down and offered a paw. At first, she wasn't sure exactly what he was doing, but when she took it, he casually hoisted her onto his back and she was conscious of their tails twining as he walked.

There were drinks - water first, but alcohol sometime later. More music, but no more dancing. Many festival-goers recognized her from the earlier set and she was something of a small celebrity. The final performance ended, as camera drones zoomed back and forth streaming the event to viewers across the world, confetti lights showered and sparkled down the sides of the buildings. Uproarious cheers filled the night.

The rest was a blur. She remembered Nicco's neck, her nose buried deep in his fur. Her legs wrapped around a muscular torso, arms about broad shoulders. He moved like she weighed nothing. The world faded away to the softness of cool bed sheets that smeared into lines and flashes of sentient color, a euphoric sensation of flying, or swimming over a huge chasm. A last flicker of latent paranoia failed to concern her. She felt good, and safe, and just didn't care. She felt free.

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Many miles away in a tall building, several figures wearing suits observed a simple screen in a dark room. It displayed an active feed from a camera drone controlled by a deft set of paws. A chair swiveled, a voice ordered. The screen froze on the face of a lioness in the crowd. At his direction, images were captures of her, her lynx companion, and the final parting moments they had with a certain female otter.