

Coping Mechanisms

It was snowing when I woke up. Not a bad thing, really. I like snow. I sort of have too—I'm a frost. It's in my nature. And I'm not alone—a lot of humans love snow, too. It's just, usually they prefer it outside and not when it's eighty five degrees outside. Despite the heat, fat, lazy flakes drifted down from the open beams of the ceiling, landing gently on the floor, desk and crotched bedspread. Once the flakes hit, they melted. In my sleep I hadn't been able to maintain the flurry and get it to stick. I called off the impromptu personal snowstorm and gave the bed a quick swipe with my palm. Only faintly damp. It likely hadn't been snowing long.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side, staring at the room and trying not to be disgusted about my lack of control. My room, I mentally corrected. It was my room now. When my parents died earlier this summer, I'd had no family left—or at least we couldn't find them. I'm not sure how hard Alistair searched. To put it bluntly—and really, why shouldn't we?—Alistair kept talent around if he could. I was an impressionable teenage Jill Frost, which made me talent ready to be reformed in someone's image, and Alistair wanted to be that image.

Or at least the talent part was right. I wished him luck on the rest. According to several people over the years, I was stubborn as a mule. So I went to live with Duncan and the Drove, either through goodwill because keeping the orphan Jill Frost safe was the right thing to do, or due to ambition. Really, it was probably both. Alistair saw no evil in doing something for selfish as well as noble reasons at the same time. And why not? Why not do the right thing and take care of yourself, too?

He could have been upfront with me about it. I wasn't exactly pushing hard to find a mystery relative. Why go live with a stranger in a new land when I could live with the drove? At least I knew they would do the best by me. I'd been accepted in, practically one of their own. In the drove, that meant you were family, and they took care of family. Maybe most people wouldn't find comfort in a huge pack of criminal bikers who changed in to wild hares, but they made me feel safe.

Should a second cousin once removed show up, I would have no guarantee that they would do their best by me. But I knew that with the hares, I would be sheltered, fed, loved, and supported. They wouldn't take things unless they were practicing, and even then they would give it back if I needed it. They could be violent, but never towards each other unless it was a dominance fight, and never toward me. So Alistair likely hadn't looked too hard, and I hadn't pushed him.

After I pulled myself to my feet, I bundled up my comforter and took it out to hang over the railing to let the moisture dry. My floors were hardwood, so I grabbed a towel to mop up the excess on my floors, desk and anywhere else I found water. There wasn't much to my room. I had a desk, a bed, and a carved hope chest nestled against the foot. The hope chest looked lovely, but innocuous, but there was a bonus to living with Duncan. My current guardian was magic with a carving knife. Like, literally magic. In this case, if anyone tried to open the chest but me, well, I wasn't entirely sure what would happen, but it wasn't going to be pleasant.

I hadn't brought much from my house. Some clothes which were shoved into my closet, a few framed photos of my parents. I missed them. Oh, how I missed them. But I was angry with them, too. There was so much they didn't tell me about

our family. So much I didn't know—and would never know. I'd thought we were a close-knit family, but once I watched the Drove in action, I realized that we hadn't been. My parents had loved me, I didn't doubt that, but they'd kept me at arm's reach. All of those secrets had created a wedge that I'd never realized was there, and it stung. Which meant I was angry, which led to me feeling guilty about being angry, which led to grief, which led to survivor's guilt, and now I had regular snowfall in my room when I slept. It was worse when I had nightmares.

The Drove did have a psychologist—a no-nonsense woman named Lauren who lived in a trailer out in the woods. Talking to her did help, even though her advice was usually some variant of, "Steal something. You'll feel better." At least she didn't bullshit me.

I'd just fixed my ponytail when my phone buzzed. When I checked the screen, I found a message from Olive. *You alone? No ears.*

Olive wasn't chatty, even over text.

No ears—just me in my room. My phone rang a second later. Olive didn't even give me a chance to say hello.

"I need a ride."

Why mince words when you could go straight to the demands? "Olive, I don't have a car."

"Still?"

"Things haven't changed since you asked yesterday. It hasn't been much of a priority." Why would it be? If I needed a ride, I got on the back of someone's motorcycle. I hadn't really needed a car, though I had enough to get my own. Thanks

to Alistair, most of my parent's money had moved into a checking account for me, the rest Duncan and Alistair had helped me invest. Alistair had also packed up everything and put it into storage for me—that way I could go through it later, when I felt ready. My house was being rented out for more income, though I doubt I'd ever live in it again, Alistair had advised that I wait before deciding to sell. Something about rash decisions.

“So go steal one.” Even over the phone, Olive sounded exasperated.

“Someone hasn't gotten around to showing me how to do that yet,” I countered, tallying a point in my column because Olive was supposed to show me the basics last week.

She cursed. “Look, I'm in trouble.” A brief moment of static before she mumbled, “I might have got caught stealing something. Allegedly. I got away but...I need back up and a ride.”

“Allegedly” was a word that all leverets of the drove learned at an early age. I'm not even kidding. They have the funniest primer books I've ever seen. *A is for Allegedly, B is for Burglary, C is for Con the rube...*

“I'll get Sid—”

“No!” Olive practically shouted. “No one from the drove. Please.”

I frowned at the phone, even though Olive couldn't see me. Olive didn't care about getting in trouble. She was basically on permanent diaper-duty, washing duty, and wood chopping detail. So it wasn't that. Which made me wonder what it could be—ah. Olive, the golden child of the drove, had been *caught* stealing. She'd never live the embarrassment down.

I sighed. "Text me your coordinates. I'll get some outside help." She tried to say something, but I cut her off. "I'll be discreet, Olive. Trust me." I hit the end button and stared at my phone, trying to quickly sort through the possibilities. There was really only one, when it came down to it. Olive would kill me, but beggars can't be choosy about their emergency back up.

I texted Ezra before I talked myself out of it. *Emergency. Need a pick up. Come get me? Stealth mode appreciated.*

His reply was almost instant. *Be there in 45.*

Aren't you in Boston?

Nope. See you soon, followed by a fox emoji, a kissy face emoji, and a snowflake.

I snorted and texted back *subtle.*

I didn't let Ezra even get out of the car before I slid into the passenger seat. I waved at the handful of drove children that had followed me before clicking my seatbelt shut.

"Quick," I said, smiling at the kids. "Before anyone questions our cover story."

"Which is?"

"I'm acting as lookout for you on a case for Alistair."

We came to a stop sign and Ezra tipped down his sunglasses so he could look me in the eye. "Why would I need your help breaking in? Did they buy that?" His brows furrowed. "I'm a little hurt that they bought that."

“They probably thought you were taking me under your wing to teach me, likely out of pity.” My phone pinged and I pulled it out of my pocket so I could check the message. “I think they’re just happy I’m out doing something.” This played into two main opinions floating around the drove right now. First, that I didn’t get into enough trouble, which was very true. I had perfect attendance at school last year. That’s a red flag to the drove. I’d been trying to convince them that it was a perfect cover, but they still worried. Second, that too much time alone and without a task would mean that I spent too much time moping over my parents. Sadly, this was also true.

“Oh, well, okay then.” Ezra pushed his sunglasses back up and made a left. He could accept people pitying me but heavens forbid that anyone think he needed help.

The message on my phone was from Olive giving us her coordinates. Was I surprised to find out that she was at a biker bar in the middle of nowhere? Not really. Despite her young age, Olive was the perfect combination of resourceful, determined and clever that made for a great drove member, but disastrous pre-teen. She was impossible to babysit. It’s not that she didn’t listen or take orders; it’s just that you had to convince that those orders were the best thing to do. If she wasn’t interested, forget it. She reminded me of a cat that way, but I would never say that to her face. The drove were prickly about such things.

Ezra slowed the car down as we passed the dilapidated bar hunched on a dirt lot off the main road. The weathered boards needed paint and the decorations leaned heavily toward beer signs, but the bikes out front looked worn and loved. I

hadn't known much about motorcycles before I moved in with Duncan and the drove, and to be honest, I still didn't know a lot. But I knew enough to tell that these weren't show bikes. They weren't for the weekend rider type. These were full time use, touch-on-peril-of-death kind of bikes. These were someone's babies.

"Wolves," Ezra said.

"How can you tell?"

"I can smell them on the breeze." He drove past the bar, turning on his signal before pulling onto a rutted dirt road that was more of a glorified trail. "Plus, the bar was called the Wolf Den, which is kind of unimaginative if you ask me. But then, foxes are more clever than wolves."

"Naturally." According to Ezra, foxes were basically the pinnacle of evolution in all ways. It was useless arguing with him.

We pulled the car over in a wide spot on the dirt track, closing our doors softly as we went. Ezra grabbed my hand and pulled me through the woods, and I tried to step where he stepped. As a fox, he was naturally adept to sneaking through the woods. Plus, he had loads of practice being sneaky. I hadn't had much call for it until recently, and was doing my best to catch up, only somewhat successfully. But if I focused on where I stepped, I could ignore that Ezra was holding my hand. Ezra and I, we're only friends, and new friends at that. He's significantly cooler than me, and exponentially hotter. I have about as much chance of dating Ezra Sagishi as I do suddenly sprouting glitter wings and rhinestone antlers. My brain knows this. But my body? My body is screaming, *Red alert! Red alert! All systems go! Awooooga!*

Awooooga! So now I'm sweating like crazy and all I want to do is grab my hand back before it gets moist and disgusting.

Right. Focus on where I'm stepping. Ezra pauses, his fingers slipping from my hand to my wrist briefly before whiskey colored eyes meet mine. I lock my knees, absolutely refusing to swoon and swallow hard. Ezra is, well, beautiful. I'm actually starting to get used to it, which is helping me be less ridiculous around him. I've been hanging out with him a lot, especially since Ava and Lock have been dating. He wants to give them some alone time and I think at some point he decided that I needed looking after.

And honestly? Some days I do. Some days the hole inside me is so dark and deep that if I threw a pebble into it, I wouldn't hear it hit bottom. Ezra is a bright and shiny distraction. So while some days I get used to his presence, every once in awhile he'll turn or do something and it's like time stops. Despite his many urban leanings, foxes belong in the woods. Right now the sun is slanting through the trees, bathing him in a warm golden glow and I feel hot and cold at the same time and my brain goes, *Oh. Wow.*

"Are you okay?" His frowns, his hand sliding from my wrist back to my hand, his fingers slipping between mine, our palms meeting. "Your pulse is erratic." He steps closer, into my space, and I can see a small spot that he missed shaving. How on earth does that make him more attractive?

"Your pupils are blown and you're breathing too fast." He pushes a strand of hair behind my ear. "Are you going to puke? Because if you are, I'm getting behind

you. I don't mind getting it on these shoes, but it will likely spatter up, and I don't particularly want to smell like it."

And just like that I was fine. I rolled my eyes and expended the energy to send a little gust of ice down along my skin, cooling my flush.

Ezra brightened. "Great, you look better now. Excellent." And he's back to leading me through the woods, but I can focus now, and I'm grateful.

Ezra follows Olive's trail to a particularly dense outcropping of trees. Specifically, we trace it to one rather large oak that Olive has climbed. I can neither see nor hear her, but Ezra assures me that she's there. He gives a little whistle and Olive climbs down, hanging from the last branch before letting go and dropping to the earth.

"I brought the cavalry, such as it is," I said, drily. "So let's go."

Olive shook her head, the longer top of her hair swinging back and forth. She'd shaved the sides down to a bare amount of fuzz. I wanted to pet it. Petting Olive would be a mistake, so I shoved my hand into my pocket.

"We can't leave yet," Olive said. "They still got what's mine."

If Ezra were in fox form, I'd say his ears pricked forward. "Do you mean that you didn't manage to steal what you originally came for, or that they managed to steal from you?"

Olive didn't answer, but her jaw squared stubbornly.

Ezra sighed. "The drove taught you better, I certainly taught you better, and really, you lost out to wolves?" He patted her shoulder sympathetically. "You must be horribly embarrassed."

I elbowed him out of the way. "Not helping, Ez." He didn't give up easy, so I had to shove him to the side. "Explain, please."

"The wolves have information on us, sensitive stuff. I came to get it back." She shrugged one shoulder, casting her eyes back down to the bar. "I got caught. Managed to get out--the cage they threw me in wasn't built for hares." Her brows pinched. "Reeks in there. Not sure how they stand it. Stupid wolves."

"What do they have of yours? Your wallet?"

Olive stared at me liked I'd insulted her entire maternal line. "You think I'm stupid? My wallet is at home. Cash in my jacket and my phone. That's it."

I kept myself from rolling my eyes. The hares were a prickly bunch, and Olive was frustrated and embarrassed already. No use making it worse.

"What do they have, then?" Ezra asked.

"None of your business," Olive said mulishly.

Ezra shrugged. "You think our help is free?" He eyed me. "Well, Katya's probably is as we haven't broken her of that altruistic habit yet, but mine isn't. Seeing as how I'm the getaway driver..." He grinned.

For a second I thought Olive would tell us to go to hell and go back in on her own. Instead her shoulders hunched. "A picture, okay? And I need it back. They found it when they frisked me. Along with my cash. I left my phone out here, so it was okay."

I ticked things off on my fingers. "So we need the original info, your picture, your money, and your pride." I wagged four fingers at her. "That's a lot of things to owe me." My grin matched Ezra's. "Oh, wait." I held up another finger. "Our silence.

Because I'm positive that Les didn't sanction this little solo venture." I waved my right hand. "That's a high five of favors owed, Olive."

She squinted at me. "I'd be mad at you, but I'm just glad you're finally learning our ways."

I nodded. "I have assimilated into the Borg."

"What does that mean?" Ezra asked, toeing out of his shoes.

"If I have to explain the reference, it's no longer funny." I crossed my arms, stealing myself. Ezra was going to change and scout the area, which meant that Ezra was going to get naked. Living with the drove meant that I'm getting used to people randomly stripping and turning into other creatures. Which is good—I hate that I felt compelled to blush and turn away from something that is natural. There's nothing wrong with the human body, and I know that. And yet, I still feel the need to turn away, and I can feel my cheeks heating. I hate it.

"If you don't explain," Olive said. "He'll never learn."

"Fine," I said, looking up at the fluffy white clouds dotting the sky. Oh look, that one looks like...a cloud. My brain couldn't pull up anything, because it kept reminding me that Ezra was getting naked. "I'll compromise. We'll have a movie marathon later so that Ezra can understand."

"Agreed," Ezra said, handing me his clothes. "I'll be right back." He kissed me on the cheek--I'm sure just to see me turn a brighter shade of red—and then shifted into his fox shape and darted through the underbrush.

Olive snorted. "At least you didn't turn around this time and cover your eyes."

"I'm counting it as a victory."

After Ezra scouted, we went over the details. The Wolf Den had a basic layout—front door, a side fire door, and a back door that led to several garbage cans, a small back gravel parking lot, and then the woods where we were currently situated. Olive filled us in on the inside—there was the main area that held a handful of battered tables, a jukebox, and a pool table that had seen better days. Next to the bar was a narrow hallway that led to the bathroom, a small meeting room, and then what passed for the kitchen. Off the kitchen there was glorified closet that served as the owner's office and supply cabinet. In that office was a safe, which is where we needed to go. Which means we had to draw everyone out front so that Olive could get into the back and get her things.

I let Olive devise the plan, because despite her current predicament, she generally was quite good at these things. She kept it simple, which I preferred. Less things can go wrong with simple.

We separated—Olive made her way to the back, while I followed fox Erza to the front. When he yipped at me to let me know that the coast was clear, I snuck around the side of the building to the front. As soon as I was around the corner, I knelt, putting my hands on the paved front lot. It's hard to create ice from nothing. Less energy is expended when I convert a liquid over to ice, but sadly no liquid was available. Luckily the air was humid, so I had a little something to work with. I didn't freeze the concrete itself, but placed a fine layer of ice on top of it. Then I covered the motorcycles, and the front walkway in front of the bar.

It took a few minutes. I was drenched in sweat by the end of it, and my mouth was dry as a bone. I wish I'd had the forethought to bring my water bottle with me. Once I was done, I nodded at Ezra. He shifted to human form, pausing only long enough to knock one of the bikes over, then shifted back to fox. He carefully picked his way closer to the road as the bikes knocked into each other, like a rather loud set of dominoes. When he found a good spot, he sat, curling his tail around him. I was already high tailing it back to the woods. It wouldn't do for me to get caught.

From my perch on the hill, I saw the bikers pour out of the bar—about fifteen men and women, and from the way they were moving, all wolves. They slid around on the ice comically, a few of them landing hard on the ground. I couldn't make out all of what they were yelling, but what I could hear could blister paint. They weren't happy. Three of the wolves looked about for the culprit while the rest of them began picking up their bikes and setting their babies to rights.

When they didn't see Ezra right away, he lifted his snout and gekkered—it's a sound that foxes make that's a mix between squeaks and an almost laughing sound. I've been around Ezra so much lately that I've been learning decipher his sounds, and this one can mean he's playing, but it can also mean he's ready to fight. The wolves paused, their heads snapping toward him. Ezra gave his little laugh again, then bolted into the woods.

There was a pause, a moment when the wolves had to decide what to do. They would lose time changing—they didn't change as fast as Ezra. But if they didn't change, they would have a harder time keeping up with and tracking the fox. So they compromised—two took off after Ezra while the rest stripped and shifted. Well, I

say took off, but they had to pick their way along the ice until they hit the road. It slowed them down a great deal. I felt bad for the wolves—they took longer to shift than the rabbits and Ez, and it looked painful. I also felt bad because the ice on the ground wasn't helping with that, either. They slipped and slid around on all fours.

This is yet another way that I differ from the drove—they wouldn't feel guilty about causing problems for the wolves. It's not that they lacked empathy; it's just that they had a very "us against them" kind of mentality, especially in cases like this. Olive would see it as them getting their comeuppance for taking things from her, even though she was stealing from them when she got caught. It didn't matter. Bottom line? They weren't drove.

Once I saw the pack take off after Ezra, I high tailed it back to the car. When I was buckled into driver's seat, I turned the key in the ignition, popped off the brake, and pulled back onto the main rutted trail we'd driven down. I drove until I was almost back onto the road, then I put the car in park and waited. The seconds oozed by, and I had to stop my thumbs from drumming on the steering wheel several times. Five long minutes passed before Olive slid into the passenger seat. A minute after that, Ezra slid into the back. I threw his clothes at him.

"Gas," he said, pulling on his shirt. "Now, please."

I slammed my foot down and tore out of the side trail, hitting the main road and speeding off in the opposite direction from home. A small precaution, just in case the wolves caught up and tailed us. I drove for twenty minutes before pulling into a gas station—the car needed gas, I needed water, and the wares would need snacks. I tried to give Ezra back his keys, but he insisted that I drive home as he

needed a nap. When we were all fueled up, I turned the car around, following an alternate route back to Duncan's, being careful not to speed or do anything to draw attention to the car.

Once we were safely on our way, Olive showed me her bounty: a laptop (full of the information she had been after, I assume), a photo, and a rather large wad of cash.

"Is that how much you had on you?" I shook my head, slowing to a stop at the light. "No wonder they found it. You could beat someone to death with that."

"No, I had about two hundred on me. Just enough to cover most emergencies. This is what they had in the safe. I'm counting it as getting my pride back, so now I only owe you four things."

The light turned green and I moved forward, glancing over at the pile. It was a lot more than two hundred bucks. "I get a cut of that, right?"

"I don't know, do you?" Olive asked, cracking open her second pack of beef jerky. I stole a piece, which I'd carefully avoided during the first pack. She was really hungry then, and she might have bitten my hand.

"Right, I shouldn't have asked." I sighed. The learning curve of my new life was so steep sometimes. What was considered bad manners by my parents were considered the way of life at the drive. One didn't ask, one demanded or that person was considered weak. "I get a cut and so does Ezra. I also get to see the picture."

Olive furiously chewed her beef jerky so she could argue, but I cut her off. "Right now that cut is 25-25-50. Argue? We split it three ways."

Olive swallowed. "Three way split? That's highway robbery!"

“Yes, yes it is.” I pulled over to the side of the road and came to a stop. “Picture.” I held out my hand. “Or the car stays as is. You can’t drive—.” I waved her away before she could argue more. “Legally. I know you can drive *actually*. But you can’t afford to be pulled over by the human police and arrested. So.” I waggled the fingers of my outstretched hand. Olive handed over the picture with a sigh.

The picture was from one of those old instant cameras—I can’t remember what they’re called—the kind where the pictures have thick white borders. A much younger and smiling Olive looked out at me. She was gap-toothed and adorable, sitting in the arms of a wiry woman who had Olive’s eyes, hair, and tough edge. Seriously, even smiling and holding her kid, she screamed “badass.” A dark-haired biker-dude had his arm around them both. He looked proud.

“Your parents?”

Olive’s face turned stony. “My mom.” She looked away. “I don’t have a father.”

I stared at the picture, a little confused. Olive favored her mother, sure, but she definitely had features in common with the man, too. “What happened?”

She stared at the window, ignoring the picture. “Mom died. He was human. Couldn’t cope.”

My heart squeezed and I wanted to hug Olive. I didn’t think she would accept it—she would see it as pity—but it wasn’t. I understood. Not because I’d gone through something similar, but because in the drove? Family is all. You don’t *ever* turn your back on them. Not a good parent? That’s fine. The rest of the drove picked up the slack and helped you out. But you were *there*. In the eyes of the drove? Olive’s dad was a ghost.

“Oh, Olive.”

She snatched the picture back, shoving it her jacket pocket. “It’s fine.”

Arms snaked around us as Ezra hugged us both, neatly circumventing the problem. Olive wouldn’t see Ez’s hug as pity—it wasn’t something he really did. He kissed her temple, then mine. “It’s not fine. It’s garbage. But you? Totally fine. Clearly still need some lessons in thievery, but you’re young.” He leaned back into his seat, his hand full of stolen beef jerky. “Now, when do we eat?”

I pulled back onto the road and headed to Duncan’s. We were back in time for dinner—our pockets fatter, and Olive’s secrets safe. The drove was cooking out, the tables near to groaning with side dishes, and the rich smell of burgers and sausages on the grill filled my nose. No one remarked on our absence. The drove was remarkably relaxed on details like that. Ezra stayed, eating and laughing with everyone. Several adults stopped by to make sure my plate was full and that I was eating. They had other excuses, but that’s what they were really doing. I may have lost my parents, but I’d gained a whole new family, and they took good care of me.

I helped clean up and get the leverets to bed. It was one of those moments where I didn’t feel the gaping hole that my parents left. I felt full and happy. And it was okay. I knew my parents wouldn’t want me to be miserable. They’d want me to live. Perhaps the drove psychologist was right—I just needed to steal something. I *did* actually feel better. Therapy works. Who knew?

That didn’t mean I wouldn’t still have nightmares. Hours after I went to bed, I woke up shivering and crying. The snow had just started to fall. At the edge of my bed, in a wide patch of moonlight, sat a fox. He looked at the ceiling, then dropped

his eyes to me in annoyance, right before he shook out his coat. I closed my eyes and stopped the snow. When I opened them again, he was curling up in the moonlight, his tale wrapped around him. I settled back in, pulled my blanket to my chin, and slept dreamlessly, knowing I was safe and loved.