

## Scrounge

The dog survives. The people dwindle, trekking through sun and rain, streams and muck, the smell of decay clinging like a pest. She watches them break from a tangled and complex group into greying loners who leave in pairs or fall one by one by the wayside, until the man who smells like trees, crickets, tobacco, motor oil, and smudges of grime under jagged fingernails is her only companion. They travel together, sharing what food is left. He gives her the dregs of cans and she licks them clean, careful of their rippled edges. He smells like hunger, but not the hunger the dog knows means trouble. That hunger wears masks, has tried to come for her in different faces and bodies, thinks her missing leg makes her an easy meal. But she's too quick, made swift by what seems to make her less.

She'd had a pack, before. Rescued barely more than a wobbly pup, all she'd known was her humans' apartment, the hardwood floors she slipped across when excited—a scheduled life contained by fences and stairs. And yet: the world so much bigger now, so full.

She'd sensed something coming, similar to how she felt the approach of storms. One day, ripe with distress, her humans leashed her to the legs of the dining room table. She whined and shimmied, tongued at their sorry hands: why was she being left, why wouldn't they let her soothe their worry away? Her humans choked on her name, propped open the doors, and disappeared.

She chewed the leash and tried to follow, but their familiar smells vanished on the street. She couldn't remember ever being packless, and roamed the strangely quiet city, following flickers of the familiar. Humans yelled, gave chase or chased her off. Her own kind trapped indoors, crying out from high windows, snarling in parks.

Finally, instinct urged her out, to the suburbs and hills. She proved adept at scrounging: crunching dead birds on the cracked asphalt, soft furred things in the scrub. Blood tasted electric, like memories not hers. She took up with a group of humans shuffling the frontage roads, approaching cautiously: her desire for touch and self-preservation so often at cross purposes. She didn't know how long she'd been alone, only that it had been long enough. She wears time differently.

At his end, the man is kind to her. She watches him stumble, pant for breath, and knows what's to come: she smells it on him and in him. He stays still too long, slumping against the guardrail as he grunts the sound she recognizes he thinks means her, herself. She pushes her head against his hands, he becomes empty.

She sleeps in the curve of his cooling body despite the excrement, and a ghost moves between them: a dream of the sea. She dreams of the pale blue overhead, the reek of salt, and agrees to meet him there. When she wakes, there's a new scent on the breeze, or one she's only just noticed, she's been too close to the man's dying. She lingers awhile nosing at his body, until his scent fouls and she knows enough time has passed: he will not return.

She sets out after the aroma of water, hopping past splintered farmhouses, rubbing herself into meadows to get at that itch, returning to the roads pinned with castoff pine needles. She smells the marks of other dogs, dull and faded, and leaves her own response in kind. She hovers over smells like puzzles to savor, flees the ones that smell thick and greasy like threat.

Having a purpose is the not the same as a having pack, but for now it's enough. She pulls toward that new scent as she travels, and it deepens, like a maze expanding, bent and winding corridors that overlap in her senses—earth, concrete, grit, flush, scale, lime, blood, rust—until one day the smells pop so loud she hears them, she sees the crash of waves. She races from the drab shadows of the greenery to the sand. She prances and snaps at the curl of the noxious sea foam, sprinting after and from the gulls that dive to nip, the cormorants that rush with wings half-spread and beaks parted in want. She paws at the grainy silt, chasing the sand nits that bite at her fur, and snatches up a crab whole. The smelly excess of kelp, the rank tang of dead things, makes her giddy.

The daylight leaves slowly, the crab aches in her gut. She sleeps in a nook high in the rocks, shielded from the wind, missing the man's smell.

The next day the same: chasing, rooting, glutting herself on what lodged in the sand overnight. Paradise, perhaps. Each day awash with newness, ecstatic with difference. Blue skies and grey, once a large fish left by the tide, meatier than the dog herself. She fights the birds for it, burying her fangs in their necks as they bloody her flanks.

More days pass. The birds leave her alone, bobbing on the waves, streaking through the sky in crowds. She patrols the beach from end to end, smells the edges of something approaching. She cries into the night, and the waves cough in response.

Sometimes she leaves the shore, scrambling from trail to

treeline to sniff at the passing of time. But the wind so light and empty, carrying only dampness and decay, the tickle of pollen. Sometimes the smell of death catches her attention anew, rot growing so full and thick with itself that it breaks and things sprout in the gaps. She dreams the man will return, that her owners will appear at the trailhead, will carry her up stairwells and into rooms.

She thins and bores of the things the ocean brings her.

Then one day, from behind and suddenly, almost obscured by the scouring wind, she hears the gruff call of barking.

Her heart stands still: the world aflame, burning with taste and odor.

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