

Sketchie Story: Happy Place

by Cerine Hero

The world was cold and gray, wrapped in a bitter half-light. Out in the middle of this abandoned town wandered a lone wolf, flashlight gripped in one paw. The cone of light shimmering from the bulb could only pierce into the fog by a few feet before scattering and diffusing to nothing. The fog had grown thicker by the hour, closing in so tight that she could barely read the street signs as she walked past.

This old town was neglected, decaying, and covered in refuse. Trash was piled in bags along the concrete porches of narrow townhouses, if it even was collected. Much more of it blew across the street or lay in wet clumps in the lawns, soaked by the thick fog. The wolfess ignored it. She lifted up and peered at her map, holding her flashlight in her other paw to see by. The tourism map was faded but readable. She'd made notes in marker already, circling places of interest and scratching out roads where the pavement had collapsed, cutting off her progress.

As she had explored, it became clear that the town was keeping her penned in. So many of the roads were shattered and broken. They were all paths towards the highway. Towards escape. Each time she marked a new roadblock on her map, it became clear that the negative space between her scribbles was pointing her towards one place in particular.

The hospital.

She folded up her map and tucked it back inside her jacket pocket. Flashlight in paw, she made her way there. All she could hear around her was the soft padding of her own feet against the sidewalk. Gentle, measured steps. Not too loud. She didn't *want* to break the silence of this place. Fear of the unknown was trying to claw its way into her heart, but it was being smothered by a sense of stillness. A serenity through the fog. The world was very tiny right now. It only stretched a few feet away from her in each direction. Whatever lay out of sight was not her problem; only what was right here and right now. Folding her ears down, the wolfess let the melancholy wrap around her like a comfortable blanket.

An iron hinge squeaked just out of sight. She stepped closer and her light washed around the metal bars of the gate, hanging askew in her path. Reaching out, she placed her paw against the gate and pushed it wider. It creaked and whined, the shrill noise spoiling the quiet calm. The wolfess squeezed her way between the two gates and stepped into a courtyard, clearer of fog. There was an old tree here, dead or dormant, its branches clear of leaves, and a doorway with beautiful oak doors, worn down and faded. Over the door read a sign, only half-legible. She couldn't make out the name, but in bold, uncompromising letters underneath, it read out: "Hospital."

She stood in front of the door, gathering the courage to step inside. There was no knowing what was waiting inside there, or why the town seemed to want her to be here. The wolfess breathed deep and turned to sit down on the stoop in front of the door, collecting her nerves.

But it didn't last. The tiny portable radio she'd picked up earlier suddenly began to crackle and blare with ear-grating noise, like frequencies overlapping all at once. That meant *they* had found her. The wolfess leapt to her feet and looked around for anything to grab. There was a wooden pallet around the side of the stoop. She wrenched a length of wood from the frame and held it ready. Ready to fight...

"What are you playing?" Cerine asked, holding a mug of tea in one paw. She sat on the armrest of the couch that Megan was occupying and watched the screen.

"Silent Hill," the werewolf answered. She was stretched across the couch, head on one end and feet dangling over the far side where Cerine was sitting. Her golden eyes shimmered in the dark. "It's my happy place."

"Alright, then." The fox lifted her mug up to her muzzle and took a sip.