

Strings

by Kay Ohtie

The doorknob rattled a few times before a subtle click was heard. A soft beep preceded the sounds of an electric motor whirring to unlock the latch, and the door handle bent downward, pressed in by a grasp to the other side. Kay stepped into his apartment as softly as possible, minus a few gentle squeaks that sent his ears pinning back, and he allowed it to close quietly behind him.

Dark. The lights were still off from how he'd left them the previous night. Smart lights, he briefly thought to himself, only work when they're turned on. But rather than turning any on, he stepped forward, a clunk accompanying the ruffling of fabrics as the coyotes' backpack fell to the ground beside the door. The dim glow of street lamps, filtered in slits through the blinds on the windows, reflected off the exposed, glossy surface of the coyote. He glanced at his own paws, holding them before him, with something akin to a grimace on his face. "Right. That," he mumbled out loud, before blowing out a breath sharply in a sigh.

Taking a few more steps forward was all Kay needed to lean forward and fall face-first onto his couch, notably a slower fall than usual. His arms slid forward to wrap underneath the pillow at the end of the couch and pull it closer, pressing his face into it. "Why?" he muffled against it, though the compression of his inflated muzzle muffled it greatly, and had him groaning. He settled for a sniffing instead, as his snout shifted forward to rest his chin on the pillow, eyes squeezed shut against the dim light of the room.

Twenty-four hours prior, Kay had left his apartment for a party. He'd brushed his fur carefully for any knots, pulled on his favorite plaid shirt, and strolled out with his backpack and a bounce in his step as every footfall clacked claws on the pavement. Coming home, his bouncy step was fully unavoidable, with the squeak of rubber accompanying each step instead of the click of a claw, the rasp of dry paw pads, and only smooth rubber for a surface instead of fur.

The coyote groaned again, rolling around in place onto his back, and tugging the pillow down atop his head.

The doctors on campus hadn't known what to make of him. He wasn't, strictly speaking, alive anymore, at least in the sense of blood and cells. No nanomachines powered his body to give him life. He simply shouldn't be, some twist of the universe gone wrong somehow.

He lowered his pillow slowly, and turned his head to the side and froze. Something else reflected slightly in the dark, catching the filtered glow from below. He dropped the pillow to his side and rotated to sit up on the couch, staring.

The chemistry teachers had been equally confused. He'd had to fight against the idea of being partially melted or cut to try and examine the material he now comprised. A multitude of spectroscopy tests and comparisons had revealed a polymer yet unseen, similar to both polyvinyl chloride and rubber latex. It still showed no organic signs. No life.

Kay stood slowly, and wandered over to the reflective surface, carefully wrapping a paw around the neck and body, lifting the guitar from the stand. The movement set the strings faintly vibrating in response, a dull tone that perked his ears, as he fell back to his couch with it, resting in his lap.

The school had been confused about what to do, what accommodations would be needed. The quiet murmurs as if his intelligence had been lost had angered the coyote, setting off his temper in a flare of expletives that had him wandering to his psychologist after.

He tested the weight of the neck and body in his grasp, slowly sliding his digits along the strings and feeling the fret wires beneath. "It doesn't take much force, up close to the wire," he murmured to himself, softly. He took a deep breath, feeling his middle pressing against the back of the body, and squeezed his left pawpads carefully in a few places on the frets.

His psychologist had been useless in this. Transformation was only known of in lycanthropes, and the psychologist wasn't geared for helping someone who hadn't changed species, only physical composition. It didn't help him deal with the new nature. Toony. Toyish. Cute. Dumb-looking. Silly. Soft.

Kay grit his teeth a moment, but breathed out to ease, and brushed his right thumb claw across the strings. The sound came, muted, squishy. He grunted, shifting his paw, carefully plucking a rubber claw tip across the string, a much clearer sound greeting his ears this time. He kept at it, starting to pick up to his usual strumming pace, feeling his left paw drifting along the neck to grip new chords like before.

The walk home had felt lonely in the dark. One of his best friends had helped him unwind with a little fun with his new form, but it didn't solve the problem of being stuck. There was no going back when no one knew what even happened. He couldn't even remember who hit him, only waking up dizzy, and like this. Only a few had seen.

Kay hummed softly as he strummed, his eyes drifting closed as he listened to the sound of the guitar, and his own voice. "I look at the world, and I notice it's turning," he murmured, speaking at first but finding his voice. "While my guitar gently weeps."

Parents. Class. Jobs. Friendships. A relationship. Being taken seriously at all with this silly, synthetic look. The thoughts cascaded through his head but started to fade as he played. As he strummed, a new thought drifted in. At least it didn't take this away. It can't take everything away.

He began to smile, sniffing as he sang, and when he finished he wiped a tear from his eye. Not water. But still a tear. Still real. Still him.