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Lindsay Hause

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FOOTPRINTS

Lindsay Hause

THE big window of the zoo's welcome center reflected the blue sky and bright sun brilliantly. A near perfect image. As they approached the entrance, Adrienne could see her little sisters in the glass. Corrin was a full head shorter than Laney, a pixie of a girl, her dark curls dwarfing her small face. And Laney was tall for a six-year-old but still growing out of her baby fat, her fine ash blond hair falling in a close bob near her jawline. Neither of them looked like their mother. Neither of them looked a thing like Adrienne for that matter. In the foreground, a woman pushed a stroller along the paved path to the main entrance, holding the hand of a chubby little boy trailing after her. Adrienne turned away from the sight.

For a moment her mind slipped back to this morning, the familiar yet strange woman sitting behind a glass wall. The sticky phone pressed to Adrienne's ear, her mother's voice crackling through, "*How are the girls?*" Adrienne's face had prickled with anger, skin flushing.

A small thud sounded against the glass of the massive window, bringing her back to the present. She looked down to see a little brown bird, unmoving. A sparrow, maybe. She could see its heart beating a rapid staccato beneath the feathers. Its eyes, she swore, held a stunned sort of terror. The girls didn't notice. Corrin was tugging at her sleeve, anxious to see the animals. Adrienne turned away from the small brown body and the deceptive glass.

The four-and six-year-olds were screaming at each other, racing around the base of a bronze rhinoceros statue. Laney's arm outstretched and her pudgy hand pulled the trigger of her brand new "grabber" toy, its bright green T-Rex head chomped at the flying tendrils of Corrin's curly hair. Adrienne looked at the bored leopard in its enclosure; licking its massive paws and staring idly out of the finger-smudged glass that separated them. Down the path, a tiger paced by a watering pool. The air was sticky today, hot and heavy as the sun bearing down on Adrienne's shoulders. Her irritation rose in increments with the heat.

“Hey, will you two quit fucking around? Aren’t we here to see the animals? You two twerps begged me to take you,” Adrienne chastised her little sisters. Sweat gathered at the nape of her neck, soaking the collar of her black t-shirt.

“It’s not doing anything,” Laney said, abandoning her chase. She sniffled her nose, wiping her arm across her upper lip. Laney was always sick, it seemed. “It’s boringer than I thought it would be.”

“How do you think they feel?” Adrienne asked, nodding to the big cats in little spaces.

“No bad words, Addie!” Corrin squealed, as she came to a standstill beside the leopard enclosure. Adrienne ignored her.

“Look here,” Adrienne tapped the toe of her high-top sneaker on the plaque mounted at the overlook. “It says, ‘not long ago, Amur leopards lived over a wide area of northern China, the Koreas, and a small part of Russia’s Far East. Expanding human populations have reduced the wilderness and isolated the leopard. It has adapted to life in the temperate forests that make up the northernmost part of the species’ range. Similar to other leopards, the Amur leopard can run at speeds of up to thirty-seven miles per hour. It is a solitary animal—”

“What’s solterary?” Laney interrupted.

“Solitary,” Adrienne corrected and continued, “It means they live alone. Amur leopards are probably the rarest big cat in the world. Listed as critically endangered since 1996, there’s fewer than fifty individuals living in the wild. Take a moment’s pause, as this may be the last time you see a living specimen.” The last word snagged in Adrienne’s throat.

“The leopard is in danger!” Laney cried, but she was already turning away to T-Rex chomp a nearby flower from its stem.

“Endangered, Lane, but yeah, same thing really. There aren’t very many left.”

Corrin was wandering off down the path, trailing her tiger teddy in one hand. So, Adrienne grabbed Laney’s hand and took off after the littlest sister.

The three finished their feast of corn dogs and salted popcorn, the last few fluffy kernels soaked in butter: Adrienne’s favorite part. She let Laney snag the last handful.

“Auntie Charlotte never lets us have so much junk food,” Laney said. “But she lets us have a spoonful of dough when she bakes cookies on Sundays. She gives me a real serious face and shakes her head no if I try to sneak another.” Laney pauses and considers for a moment. “She does

that a lot, actually. Like when I chew too loudly or jump down on the stairs real hard. Her mouth goes real straight and her eyes get crinkly.” Adrienne caught her own scowl before it could surface on her face. She’d aged out of the system three years ago and had only the barest relationship with the woman who looked after her sisters. Cookies from scratch, Sunday routines, bedtime stories, none of it sounded real to her, even if Charlotte was on the stricter side. Adrienne tried to swallow the lump of bitterness rising in her throat.

The barking could be heard before they rounded the bend in the path and the sea lion harbor came into view. It was a pool of turquoise water broken up by cement islands and peninsulas. Seals and sea lions swam in circles around the perimeter of the enclosure, some splashing up onto the concrete like great beached water dogs. Most of the ones not swimming were hollering up at the spectators, demanding food. The place reeked of fish. Adrienne explained to her sisters the smaller ones with spotted coats were the seals and the great big brown ones were sea lions. Corrin and Laney caught sight of some folks throwing fish down to the noisy animals and pleaded with big eyes to feed the seals. Adrienne went to the kiosk, paid the five dollars per cup of the stinky, silver-scaled treats, and handed them to her sisters. Laney picked one up by the tail and pretended to slurp the minnow and Corrin squealed in disgust, earning a laugh from the oldest sister.

Corrin eyed the fish in her cup and plugged her nose with her free hand. “They like these icky butts?” she demanded, little face incredulous.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Laney said. She leaned over the barrier and flung the lifeless minnow into the water below. The nearest sun-bathing sea lion heard the little plop on the surface, and slid into the water, coat sleek and shimmering. “Look, it loves it!” she declared smugly, as the sea lion found its prize.

Corrin, still looking skeptical, leaned her face away as she upended the entire cup into the water below. Seals and sea lions alike descended on the murky cloud of fish bait, the stragglers barking loudly in complaint. Adrienne couldn’t imagine they were actually still hungry, being fed constantly by the zoo goers every day. She remembered being little, maybe Corrin’s age, with an empty belly, eating stale Cheerios she’d found in the couch, her stomach protesting as loudly as the animals below. She was glad the girls didn’t remember things like that, glad they were only scolded for too much cookie dough. Adrienne eyed the animals swimming in the same big loop, over and over again, and felt restless on their behalf.

Laney continued to let fly a single fish at a time, making it last, trying to spread the love to a different animal with each throw. Eventually the cup ran out and they went to wash the stink from their hands.

Its small black button nose twitched as it sniffed the air, staring at Adrienne and her unruly tagalongs from behind its black mask. It was a slender creature and rose up on its hind legs to better assess the situation. You'd think it would be used to being ogled at, Adrienne thought.

"What is it?" Laney asked at the same moment Corrin burst out, "I want one!"

"It's a black-footed ferret. And you can't have one, Rin."

"Why not?" the four-year-old pouted, folding her arms and popping out her lower lip.

"Because not everything is for owning." Adrienne looked out at the ferrets, there were six in the enclosure. She looked at the information sign and wasn't surprised at what she saw; endangered, but with a glimmer of hope; population increasing.

"What's it say?" Laney asked. She held her T-Rex grabber in one hand, idly snapping its jaws, resting her chin on the railing.

Adrienne cleared her throat and skipped ahead to the second panel, "Black-footed ferrets are very vocal animals. A loud chatter is used as an alarm call. A hiss is used to show agitation or fear, and females use whimpering sounds to encourage the young to follow. Male ferrets often 'chortle' to females during breeding."

"What's breeding?" Laney asked, all innocence and curiosity.

Adrienne let out a long sigh and rolled her eyes. "Making babies."

"Ew," Laney said, as she screwed up her face into a scowl. She turned from the curious animal eyes studying her, and started snapping the T-Rex, its plastic mouth eating air.

Corrin, seemingly disinterested already with the animal she wanted so badly to have, stomped over to a penny press machine, the soles of her tennis shoes lighting up in red and blue. She jiggled the machine's coin slot before staring hard at the asphalt walkway, only just now noticing the strange prints painted there.

"What are those for?" she asked. She jumped from one print to the next, shoes flashing with each impact.

"Hey, don't go too far," Adrienne called, catching up with her and tugging her back by the sleeve to where Laney still stood chomping away at the nearby greenery. "Haven't I ever told you about Sawyer before?"

Corrin looked up at her with big eyes. Her response was cut off by a

plastic T-Rex head biting down on her boney little elbow. “Laaaaneey!” she wailed, crocodile tears already pooling in her eyes.

“Christ,” Adrienne sighed. “Both of you sit down. If you promise to behave, I’ll get you each a unicorn lollipop.” They immediately sat on the wrought-iron bench, Corrin hiccupping and still pushing back tears and Laney bouncing in place. *Snap-snap-snap*: the T-Rex’s jaws were unceasing. “Give me that thing,” Adrienne said, as she pulled it from Laney’s grip.

“Sawyer was a great big silver-back gorilla that used to live here at the zoo. One day in early spring, Sawyer got bored and decided to climb out of his cage.” Laney gasped and Corrin sat with her mouth hanging slightly open, curls clinging to her forehead. Adrienne couldn’t help but laugh, before straightening and looking at them seriously. “Sawyer was freaking huge!” Adrienne expanded her arms out and above her for effect. “He weighed about four hundred pounds and was six-feet tall.” She put her hand up over her head to show her sisters.

“Nuh uh, you’re making it up!” Laney interjected.

“Am not! He climbed a fifteen-foot wall and went for a walk about and gave all the people a big scare. Those footprints painted on the path show where he went. I’ll show you!”

“Unicorn lollis!” Corrin squealed, leaping up from the bench.

“Alright, you little punk, lollis first,” Adrienne agreed. “Then, the gorillas.”

The girls were quiet, consumed with their sticky, sweet treats. Adrienne took a swig from her water bottle, the heat still pressing in, making her temples pound. Perhaps the zoo wasn’t the best idea on a ninety-degree day, she mused. But she’d needed a distraction from her cramped studio apartment and the endless hours on her feet waiting tables. Besides, her sisters needed some fun. Charlotte was nice enough, but a little bit cold and a lot frugal. And why did Adrienne pick up extra shifts on the weekends if not to splurge on her baby sisters when she felt like it? Corrin and Laney plodded along in the heat, heads down, following the footprints of a rogue gorilla’s path.

The day was growing hazy, and Adrienne remembered hearing reports of smoke settling in the valley from the west. Apparently, wildfires were raging wilder than usual. But Adrienne felt far removed from it. Even as the smoke obscured the zoo exhibits, her mind was occupied with this morning. With their mother. That woman that tied her and her sisters together with thin, invisible threads of DNA and happenstance.

“How are the girls?” Her voice crackled in Adrienne’s head. As if she had the right to ask. Adrienne didn’t know why she still visited the woman, some sort of masochism perhaps.

“You weren’t lying!” Laney yelled suddenly, running right up to the edge of the now improved gorilla enclosure. Netting stretched above the updated habitat, ensuring no escapees would find their way outside its confines. There were four gorillas below, the smallest pacing along the wall. They all seemed restless. Adrienne found she didn’t want to read the plaque here. She was tired and sad, and wasn’t the zoo supposed to be a cheerful place? Looking down, she noticed the footprints in concrete, Sawyer’s actual footprints from when he escaped that day, unknowingly walking through wet cement as he made his way around this strange place. She found herself wondering what he made of the other animals, trapped behind glass walls.

“Look,” she said to her little sisters. “Those are Sawyer’s real footprints. He stood right there.”

Laney stepped into the prints; her shoes small inside of them. Adrienne just barely heard her mutter, “He *was* huge.” Adrienne stared at the footprints. Large, but a small thing really. A small mark to leave behind. She looked at the paved walkway, the concrete buildings painted to look like jungles, the glass of the welcome center shining in the distance, shining even through the haze.

In her periphery, Adrienne noticed a zookeeper near the gate to the indoor enclosure. He was placing food inside and the nearest gorilla took note and started moving toward him.

The haze was getting thicker, and a zoo attendant looked over at Adrienne, she nodded toward the enclosure below and said, “The air quality has gotten really bad—we’re bringing them inside.”

“Shit,” Adrienne muttered to herself. If it was that bad, she should get the girls inside.

“No bad words,” Corrin told her.

“All right, all right. Let’s go look at the gorillas up close, yeah?” The girls nodded enthusiastically, Corrin still working on her unicorn lollipop, Laney’s whittled down to just the stick. Adrienne took the stick from her and threw it in the trash. The three made their way inside.

Corrin stared at the large primate as it sat before the glass, its brown eyes pensive. Laney was busy skipping back and forth down the hall in the primate building, and somehow the gorillas paid her no mind. Adrienne had already made the mistake of reading the information

plaque near the entry. The western lowland gorillas existed in a critically endangered status. She watched this massive animal watch her little sister. Massive, but smaller than the rest. There was a large fake tree in the enclosure, a couple of tire swings, a rainforest painted as a backdrop on the concrete wall. Three of the gorillas rested, two in makeshift nests in the artificial tree, one on the ground. But the fourth gorilla stared out of the glass at a tiny human.

“That’s Nola,” the zoo attendant from earlier informed Adrienne. “Her baby had an injury the other day when the gorilla family group had a scuffle. We had to sedate her and take the baby away to give her medical treatment. Nola hasn’t been the same since. Her baby should be fine, we just have no way of telling her that in the meantime.” The attendant cast a worried look at the gorilla. Nola sat on her haunches close to the glass, not taking her eyes off the little girl in front of her.

Corrin, half-eaten lollipop and tiger teddy forgotten on the floor, pressed her sticky little palm against the barrier. The gorilla considered this for a moment before placing her hand on the other side. And without warning, Adrienne began to cry.