

Contagious Laughter

When they had moved to the underground together, it wasn't supposed to be like this.

Mia stood by her husband's bedside, a distinct look of despair colouring her expression as she looked onto her husband's grievous injury. It was lucky that he hadn't lost his arm in that mauling – but what wasn't lucky, was the fact that the wound was re-knitting right in front of her eyes. Flesh grew from the bloody gashes that the monster had left until it had fully mended, leaving no trace of injury save for the shredded cloth. A faint scent of blood still lingered in the air, mixing with the dusty smell of the desolate streets outside.

“Archie? How... how are you feeling?”, she asked. Images of the beasts outside flickered through her mind. To think, that they had once been people. She and Archie had stayed away from using KEY – they didn't come to this city for that drug. But they were being punished all the same.

“I'll be fine,” he replied, sitting up and rubbing at his shoulder. “But that doesn't mean you will. I have to get out there, bring home the supplies. I can't let you sit here and starve to death.” He tried to stand, before an arm clung onto his shoulder.

Mia pulled at his arm.

“I can't let you go back out there! You've already been attacked once, and the monster could still be there. We can wait until it leaves, and- and maybe, we can get lucky, find someone who would take us to an Edge Town!”

Archie shook his head, running his fingers through his stubble. He always used to do that when he was worried – but now, it just reaffirmed her fears. He was afraid too – wasn't he? They both knew that the odds of a runner bringing the both of them – especially someone who was infected, to an Edge Town were abysmally low, especially this close to the centre of the city, where the most beasts gathered.

“That won't happen easily, Mia. We need to keep surviving on what we have now - someone could take it before it leaves. I was caught off-guard before, but not this time.”

He glanced towards the makeshift spear in the corner of the room, the glass tip wiped clean of blood. He grinned, flashing her a thumbs up. The bags under his eyes did little to mask the discomfort that she could see. The way he leaned slightly off-kilter...

“Don't worry, I've got this. It'll just be like that time in Australia when I fought off that dingo stealing our lunch-basket. You just let me handle this, alright?”

Mia's arm fell slack as she watched her husband rearm himself, before stepping through the doorframe. His grin faded, as he turned away.

“Besides... I'm already infected. I don't want you to become like me.”

She could hear his steps echoing down the stairwell. Then, the beating of her heart.

“Don't... don't leave me...” her voice trailed off – knowing that he was already gone.

The supplies could sustain them for another few days, but as Mia studied Archie from the other side of the room, she could tell something was off. Her furrowed brow and keen gaze scrutinized him. One learns how their spouse behaves after a year spent in matrimony.

The way he'd grimace a bit with each swallow of baked beans, the little pauses in which he turned away from her and spat something out...

She had tried to get closer to him, to try and help him with whatever affliction he was going through, but it was always the same response. "I can't risk you being infected because of me." Bullshit! Whatever plague that was afflicting this hellhole, it sure as hell doesn't seem like it was airborne!

There was a chance he wasn't infectious, she tried to argue. From the time she spent spying out her apartment window – there was the occasional biped passing through the area, clothed and carrying equipment. At times, they were with humans – or what looked human enough, anyway. If those creatures were safe enough to be around other humans without fear of infection, then...

There had to be a chance, right? The thought of never being able to hold his hand again, kissing him and hugging him close to herself-

All of a sudden, Archie yelped, prompting her to stop her from rushing over with a raised hand.

"It's fine, it's fine. Just... bit my tongue."

Mia stared at the dark, crimson trail dribbling down his lip. He stood, placing the beans on the dirtied floorboards beside him. He wobbled as he walked across the room, one hand holding his bottom jaw.

Mia waited until Archie was well within the bathroom and scooted across the room, looking for what he spat out. Next to the can of re-heated beans was a napkin, several tiny lumps hidden underneath the paper. She leaned in, ready to pick it up, and -

And then, she heard groans of pain and the splat of something against the ceramic.

"Archie?!"

She jolted upright and pushed open the bathroom door, finding her husband hunched over the sink. His form trembled, and it was only the horrific sight that Mia saw in the mirror's reflection that stopped her from rushing over.

He was digging at his gums, groaning in pain as his fingers clawed at bleeding gums. Every so often, he would cough, open his mouth and spit out a bloody glob of teeth. A molar, an incisor, a canine, congealed together with mucus and blood. The globs slid down the basin, splatting and sliding down the porcelain until they gathered in a bloody heap in the centre of the bowl. Whenever he leaned against the benchtop, his lacerated fingers would leave trails of blood across the smooth stone.

Mia could only stare in horror as his jaw contorted, growls and groans of pain gurgled in his throat as the remainder of his teeth burst off, leaving only the sharp incisors of a predator behind.

The pair stood there for a moment, Archie's breaths echoing in the bathroom. He coughed; once, twice. Then he turned towards his wife, a weak grin on his face. His voice *rumbled* as he spoke, like that of an animal imitating a human.

"Guess I'm not gonna need that dental plan now, huh?"

The cage that they had constructed together was not the sturdiest of prisons. Made from rods and sticks hastily bundled together, the couple knew that it was barely a measure at all.

Behind those flimsy bars, Archie sat, nursing the cold beef stew he had in his hands. His face had stretched outward to make room for his new, powerful jaw, and the verdant green-white fur on his arm was gradually spreading outwards across his muscular frame. It would be easier to recognise him as a strange, mythical being reminiscent of a werewolf than a human at this point.

Each breath he took, she watched his barrelled chest heave in and out, the faint sound of an animal behind his semi-humanoid figure.

...Was it really her husband?

They were facing each other. As if in a loop, one would look up, smile awkwardly – sharp teeth or not, before looking back down and taking another spoonful.

Archie broke the silence, gesturing towards his neck.

“Hey, you know... maybe you could put a collar on me. Tie me to the window frame, that kind of thing. You always wanted to try something more wild in the bedroom, am I right?”

He laughed a sad little noise that petered off. Mia flinched as he closed his mouth, his teeth producing a distinct crunch as they realigned.

“Archie... you don’t have to keep joking for my sake.”

They continued to eat in silence.

There was a crunch.

Mia looked up from her meal, finding her husband grimacing. There was a clattering as he dropped another bent spoon to the floor.

“Damn it!”, he growled.

His slitted eyes dilated –

There was a flash of *something* behind his eyes as he raised the can of meat up.

Crunch.

A splash of gravy splattered against the wall as his powerful jaw compressed the can in a moment, crunching again and again –

Then he swallowed.

She looked on horrified, as he stared down at the dribbles of gravy running down the tatters of his shir. She sidled away, a new fear behind those eyes of hers.

A thought entered her mind – *those bars won’t hold him.*

And Archie...

He thought to himself that for the first time since the mauling, he didn’t feel hungry.

When he wasn’t eating, he paced. When he was, he crunched.

Mia couldn't meet her husband, that thing's eyes. He glanced at her like he was eying her up as a meal. His limbs had stretched outwards, no longer the proportions of a normal man. It brought to mind the poor hounds she saw at the adoption centre when she and Archie had gone out to try and pick a pet for their old home, before returning home dissatisfied.

"Mia. Hey. *Mia.*"

He would call out to her, like a child seeking attention. But his voice was far gone from the gentle, joking man that he used to be. Each word was punctuated by a faint, inhuman lisp. His expressions didn't match the jovial attitude he seemed insistent on maintaining.

And when he *laughed*...

She shuddered, hugging her arms close to herself. She couldn't smell much besides, a strange, discomfoting animal scent.

"You know, if you're feeling cold, I've got a fur coat *right here*... you could give me a hug, mm?"

He drawled out the syllables, each one feeling like they're slithering down her spine.

"Mia... please... "

And there were those moments too, when he reclaimed some brief sense of lucidity and spoke to her pleadingly. She couldn't meet his gaze. She couldn't see what he had become...!

The man she wedded, the man she was meant to start a bright future with. He was going to hold a stable job and she would be able to return home for once, no longer having to slave away at a position she neither enjoyed nor was adequately compensated for. They would be able to spend time together...

So, why? Why did things have to play out this way? Why did she have to sustain herself on vending machine snacks, while her husband gradually turned into a monster right in front of her eyes? She couldn't even leave this place without being eaten by the exact kind of monster that her husband was turning into.

She clutched her head, trembling. Why? Why her?

Archie, sensing his spouse's distress, whined sympathetically. *He whined. Like a dog.*

"Will you cut that out?" she snapped, gritting her teeth. "Archie, damn it! If you didn't convince us to move to this city... we wouldn't have been in this situation! And you just had to be a hero, huh? Well, how are we meant to get anything done if you're no more than a dumb animal?"

Hot, frustrated tears streaked down her face. "Don't cry, Mia", echoed a familiar voice in her head. "You can cry and scream as much as you want... but when it comes down to it, you have to be the one to change things. Letting your emotions control you won't accomplish anything."

That familiar voice echoed in her head... A voice no longer present.

She swallowed, a strange sense of resolve passing through her. Yeah... that's right. She had to figure something out. Even with things in its current state, getting to an Edge Town was the only thing she could do.

But...

Mia cast a look towards the beast in the corner of the room. She would have to leave him behind, wouldn't she? Even if someone came along now, they wouldn't dare risk bringing someone who was this far gone to an Edge Town. There was no doubt about it – Archie is infectious. She would have to leave him behind.

Mia stood, a grim expression behind her eyes. Still, she ignored the cries of the caged beast in her room, walking away from his noise.

“Mia... Mia...” Archie whimpered piteously, as she left the room and shut the door, trying to block out the sounds the beast made on the other side.

Mia awoke to the sound of muffled snarls in the middle of the night.

Terrified, she crept across the floor, towards her husband's cage.

There, cast in the glow of the moon – Archie *writhed*.

His large, clawed hands were clamped over his bestial jaw, preventing him from screaming out in pain, even as his talons dug into his flesh. His hands and his legs scrabbled against the floorboards as his bones violently contorted, shredding his pants and revealing more moss-like fur. The sound of heavy breathing punctuated by roar-like yells of pain echoed in the apartment as his chest barrelled outwards and his lungs expanded.

Mia rushed over to the edge of her husband's cage, on the verge of tears, shock and fear overwhelming her past resolve.

“Archie! Archie, you have to fight back, you have to- Ah!”

She was cut short as the beast in front of her roared, its slitted eyes flaring amber as it swiped a paw towards her. She stumbled back, falling on her rear as she helplessly watched her husband's humanity drain from his body. Sickening cracks could be heard as his legs continued to change, forcing Archie down onto all fours. His claws, sharpening by the moment, clawed deep gashes into the ground beneath him as his tailbone extended outwards into a plume-like tail.

Finally, as the beast clawed off the remnants of Archie's clothing – it howled out in agony. In the distance, the sympathetic chorus of other once-human beasts rang out in the desolate city streets.

Out of the corner of her tear-sodden eyes, Mia caught the glint of a snapped golden band amidst the dust. His wedding ring.

Her resolve melted away, leaving nothing but her sadness and despair.

The turned beast sat on its haunches – larger than Archie had ever been, staring at Mia. She hugged her knees to her chest, sobbing to herself, as the animal's chest puffed in and out, staring blankly at the person in front of it.

This was her husband – no longer human, but a strange beast that looked like it had come from a storybook. Even now, the pain that had wracked its body in its final metamorphosis caused it to sway, not quite settled on its new legs.

Even though the beast could break through the bars in a moment – it simply sat, watching as Mia cried herself to sleep. Soon, it too rested its head on its paws, closing its eyes. Together, they dreamed of flowing hills of grass, and the blue sky above – far, far away from this city.

Mia opened the bag of supplies, to find nothing but dust and disappointment.

She leaned back against the plaster-dust covered wall, a look of dread in her eyes. Her past resolve dissipated three days ago along with the remainder of her husband's humanity.

Was she... was she going to have to go out there? By herself?

She flicked a glance towards the caged animal on the other side of the room. It didn't do much besides look at her, like it wanted to say something.

Mia sidled over to the cage, a safe distance away from the predator. His gaze drilled into her, following her as she moved around. Those terrifying eyes were more omnipresent than ever, looking far better suited for a snake than the hybrid creature in front of her. It tracked her wherever she went – but at least it no longer cried out her name.

She sat there, breathing in and out. What... what should she do? What options did she even have? She wasn't a fighter, not in this crazy hellhole of a city.

Before she knew it, she simply started talking to the animal. As if it could understand.

"Archie... I'm sorry. We... we never should've come to this city together. I should have been satisfied with the life we had built together."

She laughed, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes as she chatted to the green beast inside the cage.

"Remember that time we said that we'd start a family together in a place where our kids'll be able to reach for the stars? Well, I'm wondering if I was drunk when we moved here, where's it's underground! Ha ha!"

The beast chuffed, raising its head from its paws. In her mind, she could imagine the retort. "Well, maybe it's because you've got your head stuck in the ground all day – you'd think that a pebble was a star!"

She got a response from that? *Sassy bastard.*

"What about you, huh? You're the person who got turned into a weird dog when I told you to be careful! We could have just adopted a puppy if we needed a family pet, you son of a bitch!"

She chortled to herself with that one. Archie craned his head back, an animalistic groan rumbling in his throat.

Maybe he could actually understand her – maybe not. Maybe she was simply trying to cope with his loss, imagining his words in his stead. Mia didn't care – whether he was a beast or a man – maybe, just maybe, it was still her husband.

And she sat, talking to the beast – talking to Archie, until the artificial sun set in the underground city.

Mia couldn't sleep – on account of the hunger, and the narrowing options splayed out in front of her. It was either linger in here until they both starved to death, or getting eaten by the beasts out in the street. She could leave by herself, but there was no guarantee that Archie would survive either. She shivered, the bedsheets too cold for one person to enjoy. If only she could hold him to her chest, like before...

She exited her room, approaching the shoddy cage where she had been keeping Archie. Hearing her footsteps, his ears perked up and he raised his head, like a faithful hound awaiting his master's return.

If only- if only Archie was still human...

Maybe things would be different. Maybe they'd be able to find a way out. But it's too late for that now – they were both stuck down here.

She watched with half-lidded eyes as her husband-turned-beast batted at a bowl that sat just barely outside of his reach.

"Archie... there's, there's no food left. I can't help you with this. I don't think eating more cans would be good for you either."

Archie tilted his head wordlessly, before once again trying to reach for the bowl.

Mia bit her lip. Something about the sight made her heart ache – and, knowing all the risks it carried, she made a decision. She pried off one of the cage's bars – in actuality, a flimsy plastic rod scavenged from outside.

One by one, she dismantled the barrier between her and the beast.

For the first time, she met its slitted eyes – as if to say, "Do as you will. I'm tired of everything."

She glared at Archie – unsure of what he'd do next. She closed her eyes, bracing for the vicious attack.

Instead, he simply strolled out of his cage, brushing against her waist much like an affectionate pet. And, the first thing he did was headbutt her legs.

"Wh- hey!" she yelped, as she fell to the ground. Archie simply made an annoyed chuff, before pulling the bowl towards himself.

"So... I guess you're not hungry enough to eat me, huh?" she mused.

Then, she saw a glint of a talon across its other paw -

Thick, viscous blood dripped, staining the bowl red as Mia watched the process unfold.

"What are you doing?!"

She watched as Archie's blood flowed into the bowl, before he started licking at the wound – and the flow stopped, leaving an inch of dark blood splattered against the ceramic.

He pushed the bowl toward her, snorting.

"This is... but I..."

Mia knew exactly what he was suggesting.

It was an offering, an ultimatum.

“If you can’t bear to be parted from me... you could join me.”

All this time, they had stayed apart from each other, for fear of infecting Mia and turning her into a beast too. But there were no more supplies, no more alternatives, were there? They would simply be stalling. It would be wasting time for everyone.

If she couldn’t sacrifice her husband – she had to sacrifice something else.

If she was to go anywhere – she wanted it to be with her husband.

She met Archie’s slitted eyes, a look of grim determination on her face – the very same look from a few days ago.

“Till death does us apart, huh? I guess you never really died...”

She sighed, looking down at the beast that waited in front of her. Was she going to look like that soon? Would she retain her memories, or would she become yet another abomination roaming the streets? The time for caution was long past – and unless she wanted to get mauled, this was the best solution.

Mia considered the possibilities, staring at the clotting blood in front of her. Archie batted at her shoes as if to say, “That isn’t going to get any warmer any time soon.”

Hastily, she stripped off her clothing, dropping them to the side. She wouldn’t need it later.

Archie tilted his head, almost like he was raising an eyebrow. She blushed, shouting at him. “H-hey! Don’t look at me like that, you’ve already seen me naked a hundred times! Do you want me to treat you like a dog, or what?”

She grumbled to herself as Archie playfully batted at the bars with his paws. Even as a quadruped he was still a mischievous bastard.

She turned away and sat down on the cold floor of the apartment that they had been hiding in for the past few weeks. Her arms shook as the ramifications of her choice crossed her mind.

She could lose her sanity. She could become like one of the many beasts roaming the streets of this city. Maybe she’d end up forgetting who Archie was, and they’d end up fighting – two animals, vying for territory.

Her fingers curled under the rim of the bowl, bringing it up to her lips. The taste was foul and bitter, like she was the world’s most reluctant vampire.

She coughed, the taste lingering foully on her tongue. She clutched her stomach, grimacing as she felt her body cramp up.

So, this was what Archie felt...

Her body tensed up as the infected blood flowed through her system.

For a moment the world felt like it moved in slow motion. She groaned, raising a hand up to clutch her throbbing head.

“Ow!”

She recoiled, finding her fingernails growing out into sharp claws. Her fingers were covered by a thin layer of scales, a clear sign of her new, chimeric ancestry.

Archie could only give a whimper of sympathy as he watched his wife change, moss-like fur spreading across her body like lichen. The verdant green crawled across her complexion like plants sprouting in a desert. New-found strength built within her form as tensed muscle forming as her limbs warped. She grabbed onto a nearby drawer for support as her heels lifted off the ground, one of her toes pulling upwards and becoming a dewclaw.

Even as the myriad sensations and overstimulated nerves flooded her mind, she wryly noted that; at very least she'd fit into high heels pretty well now.

Her teeth clattered and rolled on the ground as they fell, her jaw cracking, shifting, changing to match the visage of her husband – perhaps a little leaner, sleeker. The sensations overwhelmed her: pain, punctuated with the alien sensation of new flesh being formed, bones being altered, neural pathways being rewritten. She cupped her mouth as she spat teeth out – but compared to her husband's agony – she was changing fast, and that made the pain more bearable.

Just like ripping a bandage off.

Strangely enough, it didn't feel all too bad. Was this what those people on the streets felt when their humanity melted away from them?

And the smells! Whatever beast that she had become, it was like seeing the world for the first time. She could smell the world around her more distinctly than ever – whether it was the lingering scents of food in the home that made her drool, to the wilted flowers that she had planted a month ago. She laid on her back, clutching at her snout as she struggled to process, to adjust to her new strange.

Mia yelped as she felt something brush against her rear. Was that – Oh.

She glanced behind herself, finding a vestigial tail forming from her lengthening spine. Such an alien sensation, having a new limb that humans were never meant to have. Soon, once it reached the appropriate length, her tail sprouted long, plume-like hairs that tickled her legs – something else to get used to.

A growl escaped her throat as she felt pressure in her chest. Was she about to be confined to a life of walking on all fours, just like Archie?

She gasped as she struggled for breath for a brief moment, her lungs changing. She expected herself to be forced to the ground, but as she adjusted to her new, deeper breaths, she realised she was still standing.

Although her ribs had expanded outwards, allowing for larger lungs, she could hesitantly dance around on her clawed toes like when she had just learned how to do the ballet.

And just as she had that thought, she wobbled, and fell onto the floor with a "Whomf!", cushioned by her thickened skin and fur. Archie bark-laughed at her inexperience, prompting her to give the tricky beast a quick swat with her enlarged hands. She looked back down at the claws – the mark of a hunter. Funny. She had never been one for athletics before.

Finally, with a bestial grunt, she pushed herself off the ground, examining her changed form. The same verdant green, though a shade paler. She felt warm, the thick skin of her altered body shielding her from the cold night winds. She stumbled and grasped onto the bars of the cage as she changed her footing.

Unlike her husband, she still stood on two legs, her heels casually lifted off the ground – her new natural stance. Her centre of balance felt strange, anchored by the large, moving, living thing behind her – her new tail that seemed to move of its own accord.

She closed her eyes, trying to take in all of the new sensations. Was she... was she still herself? She tried to recall her past memories, no longer clouded by the euphoria of metamorphosis:

Their wedding,
their relocation to this city,
the painstaking process of obtaining a visa,
going past customs,
picking out a home with a good view,
the quarantine,
the screams,
The apocalypse.

It was all there, with a slight shade of animalistic commentary. New instincts seemed to reach out to her. Where to run, where to climb. Which of the abominations seemed to be the most efficient prey...

Maybe she would have been disgusted by that last thought, but the pit in her stomach spoke otherwise. She was a beast too. And the two of them had to survive, survive until something changed. She could reach out to one of those towns, constructed at the edge of the city... but she had to make it there first.

She opened her eyes, seeing the world in a new light, with slitted eyes. Even the way the light seemed to gather around her seemed different. And, as she raised a hand, she realised that her wedding ring had snapped off too, leaving only a faint mark where the metal had dug into her clawed fingertips. Examining herself, she smirked. Her arms and legs weren't covered by the same viridian fur as the rest of her body, instead being covered in dark scales, like a mythical predator. Not quite like any existing animal on earth, a little wolf here, another predator there...

The image of her and Archie, stalking prey in the dead of night...

Not a thought she thought she would enjoy, but one that she relished.

Instinctually, she reached for her shirt, holding it up to her chest, finding it much too small. How was she meant to get her arms through the sleeves? Archie whined from inside of his cage, scrabbling against the pole. "Why even bother with clothes if you've already got a fur coat?", he seemed to say.

"Because then you can't ogle my chest all day, you lech!", she retorted, tearing her old clothes into strips and tying them around her body. It was primitive... but she wasn't exactly entirely human now, was she?

She fastened the cloth around herself, sighing. It was one of her favourite shirts...

It didn't matter now. Mia pressed her snout against her husband's soft pelt, inhaling his scent deeply. Underneath the gentle sting of animal-musk, she could still smell a scent that her human nose would not have recognised. Through the layers of obfuscation, there was the scent of the man she loved, the man she married. For now, they'd be together.

"Let's go."

Together they descended the stairs on uneasy footing, pushing open the makeshift barricade at the ground floor. There they walked out into the open city, smelling the dust and the debris lying around the urban wasteland.

And yet Mia found that she could smell something else, the scent of other beings, other beasts like them... and food. There were few beasts around, lurking in the alleyways, growling in tones that sounded too human to be natural.

Like a switch was flicked in her mind, Mia dropped down, following instincts that were new to her yet as familiar as a close friend. It was something primal, something written into the genetic code of all people.

She growled, matching the rumble in her stomach. Archie joined her, and together, they ran in a staggered gait – not quite human, not quite animal. Mia noted how much she still had to learn in this new form of hers. But she had Archie and a goal to work towards. She'd go to an Edge Town. She'd explain. They'd both be accepted. If one rejected them, they'll just find another.

They'd hunt. They'd eat. They'd survive. They'll do it together.

And then, they'd be able to laugh about it together.