

The Anchor Bracelet

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Aster was practically blown into the lobby of his apartment building. The plump, magenta tiger fought the wind to push the front door shut, sighing in relief once he was finally free of the cold breeze. His hair was a mess and a pile of crushed autumn leaves littered the floor around him, but at least he was dry and a little less chilly now. His boyfriend Alstor had joked about how his weight should keep him grounded in the city's infamous wind storms, but he was convinced he'd need to weigh a good two hundred more pounds for that to be true.

Of course, his thoughts couldn't help but wander, and the image of a blubbery tiger filled up his head and made him blush. If he didn't find a distraction soon, he'd need to lay down the second he got home.

Aster focused on the mailboxes against the nearby wall and headed straight for his. Thankfully mail wasn't horny. Unless another case of Belly Booster drinks had arrived. Alstor was almost obsessive about keeping their fridge fully stocked and Aster fully stuffed. So much for distracting himself.

His shaking paw missed the keyhole a few times, but Aster inevitably managed to open his mailbox up and retrieve the pile within. There was plenty of junk as usual, along with coupon books for local fast food joints and a catalog for a big and tall store Alstor insisted he'd be ready for in a year or two.

In the very back was a small package. Aster pulled it out and looked it over. It was addressed to him, but he couldn't remember ordering anything recently. Then he saw the sender's address and everything clicked. It was the anchor bracelet.

The anchor bracelet was a replica of one from a favorite horror visual novel of his, Echo. It had dark symbolism in the actual story, but between his boyfriend and him it'd be a fun, silly reference to tease each other with. He'd been waiting so long for it to arrive he'd managed to forget about it, turning it into a wonderful surprise.

Aster closed the mailbox and rode the elevator up to his floor, doing his best to avoid thinking too much about filling it. The first thing he saw when he opened the door was Alstor sitting on the couch. The thick otter's Cleveland Guardians jersey clung tightly to his belly, his chest, and about every other part of him. He'd held off on buying a new one because he knew it flustered Aster. Sure enough, the otter made a show of stretching as soon as Aster walked in, causing the buttons of his jersey to strain and creak as they fought to contain his gut. Aster's eyes were glued to his boyfriend's belly, eagerly waiting for even one button to give up and burst off. They all held, unfortunately.

"How was work, babe," Alstor asked.

"Good," Aster squeaked, his eyes still on the otter's middle.

The otter chuckled. He looked at the small bundle clutched in Aster's paw. "What'd we get in the mail?"

"Oh, just the usual junk," Aster lied. He wanted the anchor bracelet to be a surprise for later. "I'm gonna take a quick nap, by~e."

"Don't sleep too long. We've still got dinner at Olive Garden tonight and you'll be testing just how endless those breadsticks are again," Alstor grinned.

Aster blushed. Alstor was never subtle about his grand plans for the tiger's waistline, and

at times he felt like he ate more in a day than most did in a week, maybe even a month. His appetite and belly had both grown steadily since moving in with him.

Aster nodded and waddled to the second room he used as his art studio and emergency nap zone, trying not to be too self-conscious about how much his belly jiggled. He shut the door behind him and tossed the regular mail on his desk before sitting down, his full attention on the package. His claws made short work of the tape sealing it, and he pulled out a small box with a painting of the visual novel's load screen on the top. Inside was the bracelet. The bracelet was a woven leather band with an anchor at the end, which the band was looped around when wearing.

He pulled the bracelet out and looked down at it with awe. He'd seen it in official art and fan art of the visual novel countless times, but to actually hold a version in his paw was almost surreal. He carefully wrapped it around his wrist, securing it in place after a few failed attempts. Against the odds, it fit him perfectly.

"I can't wait to see the look on Alstor's face when I call him Chula," Aster snickered until he imagined himself as Leo a little too hard, betrayed by his thoughts once more. Alstor had made the comparison just the other day, after seeing him squeeze into a pair of jeans and a black shirt. Denying the resemblance would've been futile, and he'd secretly found it flattering. And horny. He wasn't ready for Alstor to weaponize that fact, though.

Wearing the anchor bracelet, Aster's thoughts inevitably drifted to the visual novel it'd come from. Scenes of the story flashed in his mind, surprisingly vivid. He blinked a few times and shook his head, suddenly feeling lightheaded. Maybe he really did need that nap.

Aster tried to get up, but barely made it an inch before falling back in his chair, his head spinning faster than before. He held a paw to shield his eyes from the light, but froze it in place. Something was off about it. The white fur of the paw had dulled somehow, and looked closer to beige. The longer he looked the more beige it became, like he was getting a dye job.

Confused, his gaze drifted up his arm, where magenta fur was looking darker and redder. Something obviously wasn't right, but he wasn't feeling any pain, and he suddenly lacked the energy to do anything at all. The tiger's snout extended and his ears grew pointier. Behind him, his tail shrunk and puffed out. His feline features were vanishing, replaced by canine ones. It didn't take long for him to resemble a red wolf more than a tiger, but his transformation was still ongoing.

Aster felt a warmth in his belly seconds before it began to slowly balloon outward. It smoothed out the few creases in his shirt and pushed out from under it, beige fur exposed to the world. He placed a paw on his increasingly doughy middle and slid a finger into his navel, which he could feel getting deeper. A tingling spread through his body as the short stack gained close to a foot in height without losing any width.

"Not...not good," Aster muttered, his thoughts a mess. He knew he needed to call for Alstor, but couldn't bring himself to say much of anything. It didn't help that he was mesmerized by the slight expansion of his gut.

Blurry memories snuck into his head. He felt the oppressive warmth of the Southwestern sun and the deceptive chill of frigid desert nights. He saw himself working under the hoods of dozens of cars, suddenly aware of things he'd never thought of before. He heard the droning sound of TV dinners heating in the microwave and cheap, cold beer pouring down his throat.

Memories of college on the East Coast melted away. The mental image of his social

circle collapsed and then built itself back up, smaller than before but just as strong and meaningful. The red wolf forgot the bulk of the tiger's life, but there was one thing he could never forget. Alstor. His otter. His Chula.

Just thinking about him cleared away the fuzziness that'd plagued his thoughts since he'd put on the anchor bracelet, which clung a bit tight to his thick wrist. He couldn't think of anything he loved more in the world than his otter. Even food and a good ball gut were second-best. He wanted nothing more than to see the otter right now.

He blinked and sighed, and suddenly there he was, lounging on the bed. The light cast dark shadows on the otter, who almost blended into the background. Aster hadn't heard Alstor walk in or get on the bed, but he had no reason to question his presence.

"Hey babe," the shadowy Alstor said.

"Hey, otter." Aster let out a belly-jiggling giggle. As handsome as Alstor was, Aster playfully imagined what he'd look like with a larger gut. He couldn't be the only gainer in the apartment, after all.

"Whatever you want, babe," Alstor answered.

The shadowy otter's belly suddenly wobbled and ballooned. The buttons of his jersey popped off in quick succession to release the doughy wave of his gut. Aster was too entrenched to notice the buttons didn't make a sound afterward. No clattering off walls or the door. They simply ceased to be.

Alstor's middle swelled right up to Aster and onto the red wolf's lap like a blubbery hug. He embraced it with glee, his tail wagging even as his chair creaked from the mountain of weight being added to it. It creaked and snapped, Aster embracing the wave of his boyfriend's gut without regret.

A loud thump startled Alstor and took his attention away from the TV. He looked towards Aster's art studio. "You okay, babe?" he asked. He thought he heard something like a reply, but it was too faint to make out. "You didn't roll off the bed again, did you?" It certainly sounded like the plump tiger falling again. At least he tended to bounce. Though once he'd added another hundred pounds to Aster's compact frame he could see them getting noise complaints from neighbors.

Alstor hefted himself off the couch to check on his wonderful, clumsy boyfriend. As he opened the door, his eyes widened in confusion. He was looking at himself. Well, himself if he was the size of a whale. And going through a goth phase with dyed fur. Buried beneath the immense belly of his strange clone was a red wolf wearing his boyfriend's clothes. As bizarre as the scene was, it reminded him of something, something that shouldn't have been recreated in his apartment. He spotted the anchor bracelet on the red wolf's barely exposed wrist and the empty box on the floor, an exact replica of the one he had hidden away in his closet as a Christmas present.

"God damn it Aster, what did you do?" Alstor groaned. He couldn't quite keep his eyes off his shadowy double, though. Now he knew how good he looked with room-filling heft.

The red wolf looked at him with a goofy grin on his face. "Chula? Two of them," he giggled in Aster's voice.

The nickname made Alstor frown. "At least you still have good taste in otters and didn't give me that dumb goatee," he grumbled. Nothing he was seeing made sense but it was all too vivid to be a dream. Besides, Aster was never that thin in his dreams. He slid around the

massive clone and his dazed boyfriend and grabbed the anchor bracelet's box. "Alright, I'm gonna make some calls and, uh, figure out what the hell to do. Try not to punch any holes in walls while I'm gone, babe."

Aster nodded, clearly happy to be under the blubbery version of his boyfriend. Alstor sighed and closed the door. He wondered if his boyfriend transforming into a fictional character was a valid reason to call out from work.