

Skin Tight

The Bins were always full this time of year. Bones flocked the buckets of Coats like birds to seed, sifting through sizes in a flurry of thin arms and glassy gazes. This one too small, that one too wrinkly, all a little too itchy. Winter was a weapon that growled in gusts of wind and gnawed on bare bones. Coat Season made the upcoming months bearable, just about livable, but more importantly, it was a frenzy of fashion. Freezing wasn't an option. Dying coatless was scarier than dying at all.

"This one looks nice. A little leathery though, don't you think?"

He put his leg into the hole of the coat. The skin sagged but it was barely noticeable, he reasoned. The tattoo on the upper right torso complimented the complexion. Maybe a little too light for his liking, but you couldn't afford to be picky.

"It looks great. Can we go?"

He rolled his eyes and one popped out. That thing had been loose ever since his last replacement.

"Better get used to the Bins now or it'll be worse when you have your first fitting. You don't want to soil your first skin suit." He put the eye back in its socket with a sigh.

Her face paled, her natural skin glowing under the room's fluorescent lights. The other skinless couldn't help but hunger, drool dripping down the raw muscle of their mouths like dogs. You don't go around parading in natural skin, not near the Bins, not when Coat Season was only days away.

"Just pick one and let's get out of here."

He ignored his sister, shrugging and shuffling through the next Bin, just in case something caught his eye. Most he ruled out immediately. Freckles went out of style two seasons ago

and acne never matched with anything. Elderly skin wore out too quickly; it would never last the whole winter. He'd be lucky if the skin on his hands would make it to next spring.

"I've not going to be caught coatless just because you're afraid of a little bone. Do you understand how lucky you are?"

She swallowed her complaints. Her first skinning was only a couple of years away but she could feel it looming over her. The idea of someone else wearing her kept her up at night, more than the sound of the skinless freezing outside. "Be thankful that we can afford new Coats every Coat season. Not everyone has that luxury." He threw his discarded coats back in the Bins for the next Bone to pick at. "Don't you remember my first Coat? I barely fit in it. The kid was nine. My back hurts just thinking about it." He tossed his chosen Coat to her. She caught it with a startled jump, the leathery skin of the Coat between her fingers causing bile to rise in her throat.

"I know." She cast a suspicious glance around the other bones, worried her angry tone would attract more ravenous eyes. As her eyes swarmed the room, a tuft of blonde hair in a nearby Bin caught her eye. She moved towards it, her gaze glazed over in fear to reveal a whole head of blonde hair. An empty Coat. One that looked almost exactly like her.

Is this what it's like for your body to return to the Bins? The question was suffocating, almost debilitating. She couldn't move, not even when the nearby Bones began to notice the similarities. They pushed past her, grabbing at the Coat with round bloodshot bulges filled with hunger.

"Eager to replace the Coat you'll soon shed?"

"No one gets to be blonde twice."

The first Bone gripped the Blonde so tight she could hear its bones rattle in their exposed cages. The second Bone hissed in response, grabbing the other arm of the Coat.

“I saw it first.”

“I grabbed it first.”

The Bones turned in unison, both possessed with the same idea. Coats were freshest straight off the bone, anyway.

“I’m not for sale.” Her voice shook with fear but there was a fire in it, a flame dampened by years of Coats but hot enough to burn through them.

The Bones didn’t like her answer. They moved towards her. She took a hasty step back and bumped into her brother. In an agitated spin, he turned to the rogue Bones and gave them a glare. He didn’t speak, he didn’t have to, but the throbbing of that loose eye told the Bones everything they needed to know. As if there was no interruption, they went back to bickering over the Blonde.

She let out a relieved sigh. Her brother was never one to provide protection but perhaps he proved himself worthy of the title today. She smiled at him.

“Thanks. Forget the Coat. We should go.”

His posture stiffened. Patience was something he rationed for his sister and she had already used her share. He spent too much time saving for his next Coat to empathize with those who still had their natural skins. They were greedy, blind, and clinging to a life he shed a long time ago. He stepped closer to her, his loose eye darting back and forth so frantically that it threatened to dangle.

“Next time I take you with me, you keep your mouth shut. Or I’ll make you give it to someone who won’t complain.”

She held her ground, despite her heartbeat flooding her ears. Goosebumps raced down her bare arms. The Bones stopped their digging to witness the prickling flesh in action, their eyes wide with want. A raw steak among a pack of hungry wolves. She looked over at the Blonde in the hands of the first Bone, the Coat already torn from their greedy fingers. In a voice only the Bins could hear, she made a promise:

“You will never have me.”