

Chapter 21: Meeting Mesmeren.

The trio walks along the sidewalk of Avalon Forest: Justin's hands in his pockets, head tilting towards Zorua, lips moving. Ada stands beside him, her arms folding, squinting while tapping. Ramon strolls between them, eyeing up. The trees hover over everyone like an umbrella, the sun peeking through.

"What do you call a Magnemite without the screw?" the boy asks.

"Erm...I'm not sure," Ramon replies.

"A magnet." Justin snickers, slapping his knee. The Zorua raises his brow, tilting.

Ada's hand covers her face, her head shaking. "Wow...That was terrible," she says, rolling her eyes.

Justin's hand lifts up and down. "Oh please, you can't admit that my jokes are amazing."

"Yeah, in your dreams. I still remember the time you told that pokéball joke to everyone at Synchronic." The teen stares ahead, shivering. "It was...so bad."

Justin shrugs. "My comedic flavor wasn't on point back then, aight?"

"And it's still not on 'point'."

"Aight. How about you tell a joke then?" The boy grins. "Since you're an 'expert' at jokes."

Ada huffs, looking at the bushes while blushing. "I never said I was an expert at all," she grumbles.

Justin elbows the girl. "You sure actin' like it. Heh."

Their chatter continues, Ada playfully punching the boy's shoulder while he laughs. Ramon smiles at them, his ears shifting, his tail wagging. The fox giggles. "Honestly with how much you two banter, I'm starting to believe Justin's mother about you two liking each other."

The teens look at the Zorua, shaking their heads and hands. "What!? No way!" they shout.

"I appreciate Justin as a great friend, but being more than that is not happening," Ada elaborates.

"Yeah. She's like, way out of my league, fam," Justin agrees.

“Really? I believe you two would go well together.” The fox smiles once more. “I’ve seen how much you two care about each other, and overall wanting to help each other out.”

Ada tugs her arm, staring off at the ground as a car passes. “While all of it is true, it doesn’t mean we should be in a significant other relationship.”

Justin huffs. “And besides, we go together as well as oil and paint.”

“Don’t you mean ‘water’?”

“They don’t mix with paint, either!” Justin gazes ahead. “I know because of experiences.” He shudders. “Just the thought of getting them off is...Ugh.” He shakes his head, stroking it.

Ada eyes up the boy, raising her brow while Ramon snickers. “Well, if you two insist on believing you don’t go well together, then go ahead.” The Zorua then stops, staring at the bushes. His brows lower, gazing.

This feeling... He scans around as the other two continue ahead, his fur peeking. *It’s there again! Like I’m sensing someone or something nearby!* His ear flickers to a soft voice, turning around to his side. The blue ribbon Drowzee lies on the ground, rubbing her head.

“Oww,” she whimpers, sitting up.

Ramon rushes towards her, lowering his ears. “Are you alright?”

The Drowzee looks at him. “I’m fine...” Then she gasps, slamming her hand against her chest. Her heart pounds like a rhythm. “Y-You felt it too, right!?”

Ramon blinks, his head backing up. “What?”

The Drowzee lowers her anxiousness, shaking her head before standing on her feet. “N-Nevermind.”

Ramon tilts his head. *Is she the one causing me to feel her presence?* he thinks.

“Hey Ramon!” Ada shouts, the Zorua turning around. “We were wondering why you didn’t keep up with us.” She then looks at the Drowzee, her brow quirks. “Say, weren’t you the Drowzee we saved a while back?”

The tapir holds her hands together, shielding her face. “Y-Yes. And I w-wanted to say thank you afterwards.”

Ada folds her arms. “But you disappeared before we even got a chance to meet you.”

The Drowzee winces, looking away. “A-And I’m sorry for doing that. I...wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“I see.” Ada smiles. “At least this lets me know that you’re not ungrateful.”

“I-I did come off that way, didn’t I?” The Drowzee covers her face more. “Again, I’m so sorry!”

Ada and Justin look at each other, scratching their heads before staring down the Drowzee.

“Uh, you can stop covering your face now,” Justin says.

“Hmm?” The tapir blinks before lowering her hands. She puts them behind her, staring off while caressing them. “M-Mhm...”

Justin tilts his head while Ada forms a peculiar look. “Oookay then.” Ada’s hands slip into her jacket’s pockets. “Why were those Conjure groups after you, anyways?”

The Drowzee blinks. “They’re...known as Conjure?”

The teen nods. “Indeed. I’m not sure what their motives are, but I know that they’re up to something *far* from good.” Her fist clenches. “Especially after what they did to my home...”

The Drowzee eyes the girl: The shaky fist, the squinting eyes—Anger writes all over. “Oh...” The tapir looks down. “I...d-don’t know...”

“Hmm?”

The Drowzee pokes her fingers together. “I don’t know why they’re after me.”

“Oh.” Ada’s hand nudges against her chin. “Hmm...Whatever their reasons, at least it’s over now.”

The Drowzee nods. “Y-Yeah.”

“Say, what’s your name, Drowzee?” Ada asks, smiling.

The tapir strokes her arm, shifting and looking off. “M-Mesmeren,” she says before twirling her fingers.

Ada descends to her knees, her hand displaying. “Ada is mine. The two beside me are Ramon and Justin. A pleasure meeting you, Mesmeren.” The girl smiles.

Mesmeren stares at the open hand and then at the girl, uneasiness creeping throughout as her heart sinks. Her hand quakes, inching close to the girl’s. She nudges it, gripping it like a candle before looking away. She shakes, closing her eyes while Ada quirks her brow.

“Um, you’re supposed to look at someone when you shake their hand,” the girl points out.

Mesmeren turns towards the teen instantly, lips quivering as she feels like she’s going to explode. “S-Sorry!” she exclaims.

Ada then stretches her arms. “So you live in Avalon Forest, Mesmeren?”

The Drowzee shakes her head. “No. I...travel around on m-my own, pretty much.”

“Well that makes the four of us, huh?” Ada smiles. “Hope your travels go well. Besides, erm...what happened with Team Conjure.”

“H-Ha...yeah.”

Ada stands. “Thanks for the gratitude. I appreciate it a lot.” She lifts her thumb at the Drowzee, leading her to look away.

“Y-You’re welcome!” she squeaks before covering her mouth. *Stop embarrassing yourself, me!* She stares at the trio, the look of uncertainty painting them. “E-Erm, sorry about that.”

Justin puts his hands behind his head. “It’s cool. Nothing to beat yourself over.”

Ramon nods. “Agreed.” The Zorua lifts his lips. “Whatever is going on with you, you can ease yourself from it. Alright?”

Mesmeren gazes at the Zorua, shock spreading throughout. She slowly smiles back, nodding. “Al-Alright.”

Ada waves at Mesmeren. “I wish you good luck on your travels!” The trio walks away from the Drowzee, carrying on with their day while chatting.

The distance between them fades, the tapir wailing. *J-Just say it!* she thinks, biting her lips, trembling. She then opens her mouth: Inhaling, exhaling. “W-Wait!”

The three stop, turning around as the Drowzee runs towards them. “Hmm?” they say, Mesmeren panting while stroking her knees.

The Drowzee eyes up, flusher at the attention given to her. She stares down, nudging the ground with her feet while poking her fingers together. “Um, well...”

“Yeah?” Justin replies.

"I, um...d-don't have anywhere to go so." She looks up, pitying. "May I...come with you?" Justin and Ada look at each other, suspicion spreading across like wildfire. Mesmeren shrugs, staring off to the side immediately. "I-It's alright if you d-don't want me to come...I understa—"

"Sure," Ada answers, smiling down.

Mesmeren blinks and gasps, her hand to her maw. "R-Really?"

"Yeah, man. You're alright in our book," Justin says. "And besides, if you're going to be lost, then let's be lost together."

Ada's eyes roll. "Justin, we actually have somewhere to go, remember?"

The boy's arms fold, puffing his cheeks. "Fam, I'm just trynna make her feel welcome, that's all."

Ramon snickers, his paw against his maw. "You two are hilarious, you know?"

Justin raises his brow. "Are you sure about that? I mean, I'm understandable. But Ada? ...Zzz."

"Do I have to roundhouse kick you now?" Ada asks, her hands sliding into her pockets. Justin laughs, his voice becoming raspy.

"Ah...I'm good." He scratches the back of his head.

"U-Um..." Everyone looks at Mesmeren again, her face glowing red as she looks away. She caresses her ribbon, twirling it. "Th-Thank you so much for letting me join you..." She then smiles, her lips jittering.

"No problem, man. Although..." Justin rubs his nose. "Walking is starting to get boring. So—" he smirks at Ada, taking off running. "Last one to Serenity is a rotten egg!"

Ada gasps. "Oh *you're* going to be the rotten egg this time!" She dashes after him.

"Whoa! Wait for me!" Ramon chases the two. Mesmeren remains still for a moment before scrunching up.

"U-Um! H-Hey, wait!" the Drowzee says softly, running ahead.

Meanwhile, the cloaked figure looks from behind a tree, the distance between him and the group are further apart. He squints, snarling before following.