

Chapter Three – A voice like music

Tuesday, July 6th

Once again, the evening's warm drape has descended on this speck of a town, masking the baked roofs and scorched roads in its delightfully colorful glow. The blossoming view of the setting sun never fails to stir the part of me that just wants to capture its beauty as best as I can. Perhaps I could attempt to recreate it with the written word, dipping my pen into its radiant ink and hastily scrawling my best attempt at describing such a phenomenon. But I suppose that'd be a project for another time; too many other things on my mind to really focus on something like that.

The past two days have been a little off, really. I've spent my time thinking more than I usually do. Thoughts of all varieties flutter around in my head like butterflies. The weird thing is that of all the thoughts that've chosen to linger, the odd sounds from the other day seem to be the most persistent. I've yet to hear anything else, but I can't shake the feeling that what I heard wasn't just a part of my imagination. I know for sure that the human in the truck was real and that the figure next to him must've been there, too, but... I can't stop doubting whether or not the sounds were real. Maybe... I should go check when I get home. If no one answers, then it was just my imagination. But... if someone does... well, we'll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it.

With an exhausted sigh, I set aside my journal, the shade of the trees barely keeping me from the waning summer heat.

"Hey, Adam," coos a familiar voice, my head instinctively turning in its direction of origin.

"Evenin' Chester. Need somethin'?" I reply, as I lock eyes with the stout young otter.

"I was thinking about taking my break but... you're still here. You're not one to stick around after a day's work is done, so I figured I'd check up on you."

After a brief pause, he gestures to the open spot on the bench, as if asking to sit by me. Of course, I nod.

"I appreciate you coming to check up on me, but I'm alright; no need to worry."

"Who said I was worried?" he remarks as he takes his seat next to me, a playful grin shaping his lips.

"I've known you long enough to know you worry about little things like that," I tease, giving him a bit of a nudge.

His lips draw into a sort of defeated frown, as if he was disappointed that I'd seen through his clever guise.

"Alright, fine. So maybe I was a little worried. But can ya blame me? You really don't like it here and probably wouldn't stick around unless something was up."

I tilt my head toward my journal, still kept slightly cracked by the pen resting between its pages.

"Just needed to write some stuff down is all."

"Another story of yours?" he coos inquisitively.

"Nah, just some random thoughts that've be pestering me today."

Chester shifts his gaze back to me, the touch of worry still seeming to linger in his mind.

"You sure you're alright?"

I nod.

"I'm fine. I told you not worry," I reply, softening my tone in an attempt to dispel his concern.

Maybe I can change the topic to something a bit more light-hearted...

"What did you think about the last little story I let you read?"

The otter's expression seems to lose its dull undertone, his lips curling into an excited smile.

"The one about the two wandering warriors?"

"Mhmm, that one."

"I loved it! The part where the duel the stray demon in the town was so intense, especially when Sigmund was using his fire magic. I felt like I was there the whole time, watching them take him down and then being welcomed into the pub."

Hearing his enthused tone of voice makes me smile, his genuine interest still taking me by surprise no matter how many things I let him read.

"I know you usually don't continue those types of stories but..."

"But could I maybe make an exception and finish this one?" I state, taking the words straight from his mouth.

"Would you? Please?"

He looks up at me in that peculiar way of his, making puppy dog eyes and producing the slightest whimper.

He seems interested enough and it was fun to write... plus you've been looking for a steady project to put your time to, so... why not?

"I'll see what I can arrange--"

"Yes! Thank you, Adam!" he interjects, slinging his arms around my middle and squeezing me tightly.

I'd grown accustomed to the adolescent otter's spontaneous displays of affection, though the genuine gratitude and warmth they carry always seems to put me a little off center; it's not every day that I have someone tell me that they are truly thankful for sharing a part of myself with them.

"Anything for my favorite reader," I reply, smiling as I speak.

"Thanks... it means a lot that," he croons, the tenderness of his voice stirring a queer sensation in my chest.

"Like I said, anything for you, Chester."

He pulls back, sighing contently as he looks at me with that goofy grin of his.

"Well uh... I guess I'll come back in a bit to take my brake. We've gotta have someone at the register, even if the shop's dead."

"No worries. Just don't forget take it easy, alright?" I reply, carefully watching as he pushes himself up and onto his feet.

"Of course, Adam. Enjoy your evening," he chimes before scampering off to the front of the shop, disappearing as quickly as he had appeared to begin with.

Gotta give the kid props for making me feel just a bit less lonely... that, and giving me a bit of a push to actually try finishing what I start.

I remove the pen from the pages of my journal, fastening its buttons before tucking it away in my messenger bag. As if by an unspoken reflex, I nestle my pen against my ear, resting comfortable in the small crevice.

I just hope I can commit to this one... I'd hate to disappoint him, especially since he seems so interested in what I wrote for him...

I push myself onto my feet with a thoughtless huff as I rope the single sling of my bag across my chest.

Just go with the flow... work when inspiration finds you and seek it out when it departs; not much else I can do beyond that. Besides, a steady project you'd actually enjoy working on hasn't come around since you left home. It couldn't hurt to at least try, could it?

I carelessly glance up at the sky, the puffy cotton balls dancing on the evening's tapestry slowly turning a curious shade of lilac as the sun slips away just beyond the horizon.

Maybe I'll have some sherbert when I get home... sit outside and enjoy the evening 'til Bryan gets home...

The empty sidewalk greets me as I make my way along the familiar path, the occasional fragments of conversation managing to wriggle into my stream of consciousness.

"...moving out to the city next month..."

"...don't forget to tell him check in every once in a while..."

"...attending university, so it might be a while..."

A young man moving out to the city to attend university... really wish I'd have that kind of opportunity...

A bitter grunt crawls into the open air before I try to redirect my attention, hoping to catch part of a more interesting conversation.

"...long day today, but I'm glad to see you..."

"...and I'm glad to have you around..."

"...even got you flowers..."

"...you shouldn't have..."

"...I did because I love you..."

A young couple seeing one another after being apart, one gifting the other a bouquet of flowers... Oddly sweet...

I can't help but smile, the fragments of their conversation making me think of my own romantic pursuits... or, more appropriately put, the lack thereof. It's been a little over half a year since I'd been in any type of relationship, though that's likely due to the fact that I'm not exactly the best at forming bonds. I always appreciate company, but trying to find someone to share my time with is a tiring prospect. Plus,

it doesn't really help that I'm not exactly the most refined lover; I always have a hard time really expressing those kinds of things.

A slow inhale gently parts my lips, my gaze shifting up just in time to notice my turn was coming up.

With an agile pivot of the heel, I turn the corner onto our street, a peculiar tune catching my attention as I begin to approach the apartment.

Is someone playing music...?

I stop dead in my tracks as I carefully try to hone in on its source.

A violin...?

There was no mistaking that it was some sort of string instrument, though the level of expertise with which it was played was impeccable.

I know for a fact that no one around here can play the violin but... I'm definitely not imagining this. Maybe... there really is someone on the second floor...

The spark of curiosity kindles my courage, urging me to investigate its origins.

I mean... there's no harm in checking, right?

I gingerly make my way down the street and to the apartment. With every step, the music grows in clarity and volume, my heavy footsteps carrying me up the stair and to the quaint red door simply labeled by the number "201".

I take a long, deep breath, trying to ready myself for what was to come.

Just knock and welcome them as your new neighbor...

Stiff motions bring my hand close to the door, three slow knocks following thereafter.

The quiet tune almost immediately stops, the dull sound of approaching footsteps causing me to nervously fidget.

With a rusty creak, the door opens, an unfamiliar figure standing its frame.

"Hello...?"

The delicate tone of the figure almost makes me feel sorry for having knocked on the door.

"H-Hey," I reply as I look him over, his long ears and intricate marks making him easily recognizable as a lynx. His fur is a faded shade of white, striped by greys

and browns, covering his slender frame from head to toe. I try to not let him catch me staring, my gaze quickly shifting back to his ocean blue eyes.

“Do you need something? I hope I wasn’t being a nuisance with my music...”

I am quick to refute his assumption, having found his music anything but a disturbance.

“No no, please, there’s nothing wrong at all. Er... I just... happened to hear you playing and wanted to find where it was coming from.”

I muster an awkward smile, still trying to keep myself composed in his presence.

“You... were listening?” he mutters embarrassedly, bowing his head as he speaks.

I give a hesitant nod.

“Y-Yeah, I was. I uh... live on the first floor of the apartment and I was on my way home from work when I heard you playing. It was kinda hard to ignore someone who plays the violin so well.”

There... just take it one step at a time and be honest with him...

“O-Oh my... Thank you,” he giggles, obviously flattered by my comment.

A brief pause settles between us, the groan of cicadas barely having time to become a nuisance before he speaks again.

“Well uh... it’s good to finally meet you er...”

“Adam. It’s a pleasure to meet you. And your name is...?”

“Markus, but you can just call me Mark.”

We shake hands, his delicate touch managing to bring a more genuine smile to light. Surprisingly enough, the contact seems to have the same effect on the young feline.

“Sorry for having interrupted your practice session,” I remark, rubbing the back of my neck embarrassedly.

“Oh, don’t worry about. I was planning on taking a break anyway, so you timed your visit perfectly,” he chimes before folding his hands behind his back.

A warm silence envelopes the two of us as we both give one another a sort of awkward smile, a soft chuckle escaping me as I do.

“Hey um... mind if I ask you a bit of a weird question?”

The feline tilts his head curiously, his eyebrows raising slightly.

“Yes...?”

I bow my head before mustering the gall to ask, my words coming out as a bit of a jumbled mess.

“Are you uh... A few days ago there was this um... There was a human near the apartment. He was in this green truck and-“

“Tim?” he mutters, his soft tone of voice halting me in my tracks.

“Kinda tall looking, blonde hair, thick accent from the city... that him?”

He gives a firm nod.

“Yup, that’s Tim.”

“And you were...?”

“The guy next to him who disappeared after you gave him directions.”

An awkward, nagging silence forms between us, its presence cut short by Mark’s voice.

“I’d been meaning to find a place of my own for a while now but none of the available apartments really fit what I was looking for. So one day, Tim told me about this ad he’d seen a while back for a vacancy in this little complex in a town called Olivette. He told me that he thought it’d be my kind of town, so I figured that it’d be as good a place as any. After a week of prep and some phone calls to the landlord, Tim drove me out here with the few things I took with me. I wasn’t too sure if I’d have people living below me or not, so I tried my best to be quiet and not disturb my potential neighbors. I guess I was being a bit louder than I thought I was and now... now we’re here.”

He bashfully fidgets after finishing his statement, clearly made nervous by my innocent prodding.

Why the hell would a city cat who moves all the way out to Olivette? The city always provides everything that you could need, so why move out here, to this little speck of a town...? It’s not really my place to ask, but I can’t shake the urge to ask.

“We don’t bite, so if you need anything at all, feel free to come down and hit us up,” I reply, trying to redirect my attention from my curiosity’s itch.

“We...?”

“Sorry ‘bout that. I forgot to mention that a friend and I share the first floor of the apartment. If he happens to answer the door, don’t feel bad if he comes off as a bit of grouch; he’s not exactly a people person.”

“Alright, gotcha. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Again, a peculiar silence falls between us, our gazes meeting only once, the two of us both grinning like idiots before I manage to produce a reply.

“I uh... I probably should go. Again, sorry for having interrupted your practice session.”

“Don’t worry about it, Adam.”

He pauses, averting my gaze before looking back up to me.

“I’m glad we got to meet... thanks for stopping by.”

A bashful chuckle brushes past my lips before I respond.

“Glad I got to meet you too, Mark. Don’t be a stranger, alright?”

“Same thing goes for you.”

We both stand there a moment longer before we part ways, departing until we happen to meet up again.

Well... That was something... Could’ve gone a whole lot worse, though I’m still a little perplexed as to why he’s here. City folk rarely move all the way out here...

Heavy steps carry me down the stairs and back to the front door of the apartment before I absentmindedly reach into my pocket to retrieve the key.

I just don’t get it... A talented young lynx moves from the city to this speck of a town... Not to mention he’s pretty handsome too...

The door swings ajar with a light push, a dull thud followed by a metallic click signaling my arrival. A careless flick of my arm making my bag drop to the floor, my paws deftly untying my shoes before tossing them near the others.

There was something captivating about him... His looks were enthralling and his voice... soft... it was unlike anything I’d heard before...

I shake my head with a stiff sigh, my gaze lifting up to the ceiling as I listen to the dull sounds of Markus moving about on the floor above me.

Whatever... Might just ask Bryan if he’s got any ideas. Either way, it’s still a bit odd someone like him would come all the way out here...

I glance over the fridge, the faint curve of a smile starting to mold my lips as I do.

Sherbert sounds pretty good right about now... Hell, one bowl can't hurt. Besides, it's a nice evening out. Maybe Mark might start playing again... what a treat that'd be.