

Chapter 12

Transformations

Silver Sky and Rebecca peered stealthily from behind a large dead tree near the edge of the river. They had nearly closed the gap between them and the two figures. They took a moment to survey the scene ahead.

Crouched over a stump along the edges of a thick green forest, the two figures seemed to be studying a chess board. On one side, a thickly furred bear scratched his brown chin with a long, dangerous looking claw. He grumbled a few times before reluctantly moving his bishop across the board.

On the other side sat a scruffy old man with fly-away gray hair and a long scraggly beard of the same color. His baggy pants had several large pockets, all bulging, and were held up with a brightly colored elastic cord. He also wore a flannel shirt, both elbows patched with strips of denim and silver duct tape. The only thing that seemed neatly maintained was a large handle-bar mustache, which twitched periodically as he studied his next move.

“Ah-ha!” he cackled, clapping his hand together. He moved a piece, taking the bears newly positioned bishop. The bear let out a low groan, studying the board more intently.

“Dude, this game is hard,” he said in a low rumble that nearly shook Silver Sky and Rebecca from their hiding place.

“‘Dude’? Where do you pick up such words,” questioned the old man.

The bear shrugged. “I was wondering down the river the other day. There were some guys fishing. I went to see what was up and one of them yelled, ‘Dude! It’s a bear!’ and he ran away. They always do that,” he said with a sigh. “At least he left his fish.”

The two toys sat behind the fallen tree, wondering what to do next. The breeze was picking up, and the sky was clouding over. They needed to keep moving. Getting caught near a river in a rain storm didn’t sound fun, and it looked like rain was in the forecast.

The game continued; neither the bear nor the old man seeming to notice the changing weather. As the wind shifted, a puzzled look came over both of the players faces. The old man stood up, scratched his ear, and then started to wander over towards the toys hiding spot.

Silver Sky looked worried and tried to huddle closer to the tree. Even Rebecca seemed to be at a loss.

“We seem to have visitors,” the old man called to the bear. “Their smell has given them away,” he added with a grin as he looked towards the tree.

“Hey, now! What’s that supposed to mean?” grumped Silver Sky, pride trumping any sense of self preservation.

The old man laughed. It was not in any way menacing. It was a warm laugh. “Dear horse, how long have you wandered these woods? You need a bath.”

“A bath indeed!” fumed Silver Sky while Rebecca stifled a giggle.

The bear rambled over, eyeing the toys skeptically. “Rather tiny,” he said. “And misplaced,” he added.

“No need to be so critical, friend bear,” said the old man, patting the bear on the shoulders. “Lost toys are an all too common problem.” He picked up the two and unceremoniously plopped them down on the chess board between the many pieces.

Looking from Rebecca to Silver Sky, his mustache twitching in the breeze, he let out a whistle. “Looks like you’ve been through quite a bit. Why don’t you share the story with us,” he requested.

The two toys launched into their story with vigor, hoping one of the new strangers might have a clue what their next move should be. Their audience listened patiently, and asked questions about nearly everything. All too soon, it seemed, the story was over.

The old man sat twisting the bars of his mustache around his finger. “You want to get back with humans?” he asked incredulously. “Why would you want to do that?”

“We miss them. We love them,” Rebecca responded without hesitation.

“Noisy lot. Loud planes, loud cars, loud guns,” growled the old man, his mood visibly changed, and not for the better.

“But, you’re human,” pointed out Silver Sky.

The old man laughed, standing tall above the two toys.

“Oh, nice. Now you’ve gone and done it,” sighed the bear.

“Done what?” asked Silver Sky, but before he could get an answer, the old man let out an ear-splitting howl.

The toys stood, transfixed to the chess board as, right in front of them, the old man shrank and took on a more bestial appearance. Thick silver fur sprouted, and his shape grew more doglike.

“Holy cow,” whispered Silver Sky, his jaw slack, eyes wide.

“Not a cow,” started the bear.

“Wolf!” finished the newly transformed old man, angrily.

Rebecca sat down hard on the board, wondering if this was the end. She had never seen a wolf before, but all the stories she had heard about wolves had bad endings.

The wolf paced to and fro in front of the stump the toys rested on. The bear backed off a few paces. Even a bear knows not to mess with an angry wolf.

Around the edge of the forest, the air seemed to become electric. The first hints of rain began to fall from the deepening sky. The wolf began to growl.

“You like the humans so much, do you? Want to be reunited with them, do you? Your humans that cut the trees and foul the waters? They lie about my ancestors and kill as it suits them.” The wolf’s eyes blazed, his fur bristling.

His words emerged like guttural howls that sent shivers down both Silver Sky and Rebecca’s spines. They huddled together on the chess board as the rain fell harder.

“I have only one solution for this,” growled the wolf. “You like them so much, then you can *be* them.” He let out a piercing howl as a flash of lightning struck the stump.

Rebecca felt like she was on fire. This was odd, she thought quickly. She’d never felt anything at all, before. As she knelt on the stump, it was like a hundred hands were pulling her in different directions, her seams exceeding their ability to hold her together.

Was Silver Sky going through the same thing, she wondered. Would she ever see him again after this? The lightning gathered strength, shining brightly, making her eyes water. She couldn’t make out the shapes she expected. Something was very wrong.

As the rain came down, she felt very cold. Eyes closed, she used her hands to find her place on the stump, but fell face first into the muddy water at its base.