

Chapter 20

The Village

Rebecca woke up with a huge yawn and stretch. The bed she found herself mysteriously in was huge and comfy. She ached all over and her head swayed as she sat up, trying to take in her new surroundings.

The room was huge and square. Brightly lit by the sun streaming in from two sliding glass doors on one side, she could see that the walls were made of clean yellow logs. It made the space seem very open, yet warm. It was the first obviously human home she had seen since she and Silver Sky left on their journey.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, her other senses started kicking in. She became aware of a rhythmic rushing sound. It was a lot like the river but not as constant. Where were the waves? Had they made it to the ocean? She wanted to get up and see for herself.

"I wouldn't do that quite yet, my dear," said an unfamiliar voice with an unusual accent.

A young Asian man strolled in through one of the sliding glass doors. He continued across the room and sat in a rocking chair near Rebecca's bed. He looked at her thoughtfully.

"I'd give it another day, if I were you," he stated. Sensing Rebecca's confusion, he continued. "If your horse friends' stories are to be believed, you went through quite a traumatic few days before you arrived here. But," he added with a smile, "I think you'll find you're in good hands now."

"Thank you, sir," Rebecca said, quietly. "Are we at Joe's village? Wolf told us to go to Joe's village," she added, then cringed at what she had said. What would a normal human think of her talking wolves?

"Joe's village?" asked the man. "That'd be pretty presumptuous, to think it was his, wouldn't it?"

"I'm sorry," answered the little girl. "That's just what we were told," she answered, feeling a bit silly and more than a little unsettled. She still had no idea how she got here, or where Silver Sky was. There were so many questions.

The young man scratched his chin, thinking quietly for a moment. "Well, Wolf can be a tricky fellow, and very vague when he wants to be. I suppose you could say this is Joe's Village. After all, I was the first one here," he said with a grin.

"You're Joe?" asked Rebecca skeptically.

"Not what you were expecting? I get that a lot. My name is Jomei. Everyone around here just calls me Joe. While I was the first one here, I'd hardly call this my village. There are around fifty of us here, and we share equal responsibilities," explained Joe.

"But Wolf said you were a soldier," countered Rebecca.

Joe laughed a friendly laugh. "Well, in a sense, I was. A toy soldier, anyway."

"Do the people in the village know?" she asked.

"I certainly hope so!" exclaimed Joe with a loud laugh. "We're all former toys, here. You can think of this place as a refuge. Each of us is here to help the other. Some of the toys here have had pretty bad former lives. Others are only here for a while before moving on to other things," he explained. "I wonder which you'll be?" he added.

Rebecca chose not to answer that question, and moved on to one that was pressing on her mind.

"Where is Silver Sky?" she asked.

"Ah yes, your horse friend. I suspect he is out playing with Fox. They have gotten to be quite good friends in the past couple of days. Silver Sky has been rather therapeutic for our little pup," Joe explained.

"Therapeutic?"

"Quite," answered Joe. "Fox was owned by a rather unpleasant child. I suspect he was sewn back together more times than I'd care to count. I'm a toy soldier, and I'm fairly certain I saw less combat than he did."

Rebecca felt a chill go down her back at the thought. Her Samantha always treated her with care and love. That someone would tear a toy apart appalled her.

"Why would someone do that? What a horrid little child," she said in disgust.

"Don't be so quick to rush to judgment. In fairness, Fox doesn't much like to talk about those times. We don't *why* the child behaved that way. Maybe his life wasn't as good for him, either," Joe noted, with a sigh. "Everyone here has a story. Some good, some bad. We've come together because we share a common bond and to help out those who find themselves in similar situations."

Rebecca sat silently for a moment. It seemed a lot to take in all at once. The last thing she really remembered was falling in the water. I was not a particularly pleasant memory. She looked again at Joe. He seemed awfully young to fit the descriptions given of him by Wolf and Bear.

"I don't mean to be rude, but Wolf seemed to think you were, well, a little crazy and that you thought you had been in a war," said Rebecca, hoping she was not pressing her luck too much.

"Only a little crazy?" asked Joe. "Wolf must be getting soft. I think we are all a little nuts right after the transformation. It is a big change. As for wars, I've seen many battles. But they were all imaginary. A toy soldier fights many battles. And as a Japanese soldier in the hands of an American boy, I was always on the losing side," he said with a slight chuckle. "It's a good thing plastic doesn't feel pain," he added.

"My transformation was about forty years ago. Not by Wolf, but by a rather grumpy Coyote. To closely related, those two," he said with a smile.

"But you don't look that old," Rebecca said, incredulously. Could all this be a trick? She so very much wanted to trust Joe, but that seemed like a bit much.

Joe laughed with a broad smile. "One of the bonuses of not being strictly human. We may look, feel and have most of the same frailties as a human, but we are still, at our core, toys. I was made of plastic, it lasts almost forever."

Rebecca began to wonder what else Wolf had failed to mention to her. Taking in all of the conversation with Joe was making her head swim. There were still a great many things she was uncertain of.

"Wolf said that if we go back to our children, we'll return to our former shapes. We'll be toys again, I mean."

Joe looked at Rebecca, his smile fading. "It's true. And something you failed to tell your friend. I'm afraid he knows, but he should have heard it from you. Keeping something like that to yourself doesn't allow him to make his own choices. That's pretty much what this entire village is about."

"I thought it was about fishing," said Rebecca, perhaps a bit more sarcastically than she intended.

Joe gave her a stern look. "There are more ways to fish than you might know and what you catch doesn't always have scales."

Rebecca chose not to press the point. She knew she should have talked with Silver Sky before, and that it was her fear that he would choose not to continue the journey. Now, they were at a place that she again feared his choice. If this place was as perfect as Joe made it out to be, how would her friend *not* want to stay. She sunk her head back into the pillow, that familiar knot twisting in her stomach again.

"I won't lie to you," started Joe. "Most who have come here have chosen to stay. If that is his choice, we will welcome him. I already know that it is not yours. I am prepared to help you on your journey, as Wolf promised."

Rebecca did not answer. She lay on the bed in silent thought, fearing choices. As a doll, the

choices had mostly been up to Samantha. It was only when she and Silver Sky had left the box that the choices had been up to them. They made most of them together. She dreaded leaving without Silver Sky, they had been through so much together. Mostly, she feared that now he hated her for trying to steal his choice. After all, she thought, why wasn't he here?

"Who's up for soup?" asked a bright cheerful voice. Rebecca looked over to see a tall, muscular man enter the room. He held a tray with a brightly colored clay bowl.

Joe smiled, and motioned Rebecca to sit up. The man placed the tray on a table next to Rebecca's bed. While she couldn't place the smells, she knew that it was wonderful.

"Rebecca, this is Ken. Best cook in the village. Eat and get your strength back, for tomorrow we roam."