

*Milk, eggs, sugar, bread... Milk, eggs, sugar, bread...*

Rouxls mumbled to herself, reading aloud the mantra scrawled on her tail in measured lettering. Her vent wings fluttered as she drifted through the store, talons hovering just above the ground, though not touching it. Never touching it. She didn't know who'd walked here or where their feet had been prior, or whether the cleaner had come through after them. No, it was better to fly, she decided. Not too high, though. Too high and she might block someone's view, or miss something on the bottom shelf. Given the amount of time she'd already wasted trying to find the items on her list, she didn't want to risk missing something.

*Milk, eggs, sugar—*

Oh, there was the bread, stacked neatly in plastic-wrapped, pre-cut loafs. She didn't need that, though, at least not yet. Bread was quite literally the last thing Rouxls needed. She'd put her list in order for a reason. She wasn't particularly sure what that reason was... But it *felt* like the right order, so clearly it was important. If it wasn't, she wouldn't feel so strongly about it. She shifted her true wings, flexing her feathers as though the small limbs had any bearing on whether she'd stay airborne.

*Milk, eggs, sugar, bread... Milk, eggs, su—*

"Gah—!!"

Rouxls was torn from her list as she collided with something in the aisle. Her basket, filled with items found in the proper order and therefore omitted from the list, overturned, spilling her gathered groceries across the floor. She dipped down to grab her things in a flustered frenzy, managing only to knock her skull square into that of the poor man she'd ran into.

"Shit, sorry, I didn't see you there. Are you alright?" He asked, gently rubbing where Rouxls had accidentally head-butted him. He was a CCCat, mostly a deep, dark blue so rich it was nearly black, but with a brightly colored mane, stripes and—were those neon lights? They certainly glowed like it.

"Oh, it's alright, I should have been paying attention. I am so sorry, sir," Rouxls blurted, still attempting to gather her things. The CCCat crouched, picking up her things and handing them to her. Maybe it was pure coincidence, maybe he was simply that clever, but he grabbed each item in the exact order. Rouxls set them back in her basket as she had before, carefully arranged to maximize space and minimize awkward wobbling.

"Please," he said, handing her a wrapped ball of mozzarella cheese, "Just call me Beau. What's your name?"

She took the cheese and set it in her basket, the last of her fallen items. She took his hand and shook it. "I go by Rouxls, it's wonderful to meet you, Beau!"

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Rouxls." The CCCat gave a wide, teal-toothed smile as he settled back onto all fours. "Are you from around here?" His crowns shifted, something Rouxls had come to understand was indicative of curiosity in his kind, searching for a connection via a hivemind she was thoroughly alien to.

Rouxls adjusted her grip on her tail, glancing at her list. The writing had been smudged in the collision. Quickly, she pulled a marker from her pocket and began to correct the damage. "I am, actually! I formed here. I traveled some, but I always kept coming back." She explained as she scribbled.

"Oh, nice! I'm from Inner Stonewing, have you ever been there?" He tilted his head.

"I can tell." Rouxls responded. After a long few moments of dead air, she continued, "Sorry, was that rude? I meant, you *look* like Inner Stonewing. Is that rude to say? I assume you look like this because you chose to, right? That's how CCCats work?"

Beau laughed, lights shimmering as he did so. "I mean, you're right! I loved the look of the whole place, the dark and the lights and the music. I even managed to get some of those lights on me!" He pointed to the shimmering neon on his shoulder.

"Okay, good, I was worried I'd said something offensive." Rouxls let out a sigh of relief as she finished fixing her list. "Oh—! Right, I still have to grab some things. Say can I get your number? I really enjoyed talking to you."

Beau laughed again, apparently amused by the gravent's bluntness. "Sure, do you have something I can write on?"

She offered him a clean corner of her tail and a marker. "Here works!"

He obliged, scribbling down his number on what felt so much like parchment that he almost forgot it was her tail.

"I'll text you," Rouxls announced as he finished, pulling her tail back to look at her list. "By the way, you don't happen to know where the milk is, do you?"