

A Bend in the River

The ground began to soften as the path neared the river bank. Rein could feel her shoes sink into the muddy ground with each step. Taco, who was much lighter on her feet, didn't seem to notice much. That, and she seemed to be distracted by the fact that these three owls were so close by.

"Why are the owls attracted to fire?" Rein asked, being mindful of her footing so as not to slip.

"No vital reason, really," Taco replied. "They just like the bright lights. That and they get lazy by the warmth and just hang around to chat."

As they moved forward along the muddy trail, Rein and Taco moved past some trees that gave way to a clearing. Low and behold, a small campfire came into view. Rein's next question was why the owls were named after countries, but that question was answered for her when she saw the three creatures hovering lazily around the fire.

These things looked less like owls and more like floating basketballs that were perfectly spherical save for a pair of tiny wings and a little beak sticking out of it. The wings were comically small, definitely not large enough to sustain flight, but there they were, bobbing up and down in the air around this campfire.

Apart from their yellow beaks and large golden eyes, each owl was coloured in a peculiar way. One was coloured in the same fashion as a German flag, another like France and lastly, China. Rein thought it redundant to ask the question she had in her head now. And at least she wouldn't have to distinguish which owl was which.

"Okay!" Taco said in a hushed voice. "The important thing is not to startle them. They are your tickets home, but they spook easily."

Rein nodded and hugged a nearby tree to hide behind. She could hear the intermittent and gently hooting of the nearby owls. One had a deep, throaty hoot. Another was light and very lady-like. The third one sounded less like a hoot and more like a squawk.

"What do we do?" Rein mouthed to Taco.

"We approach very slowly and calmly," Taco whispered as she inched her way closer to the campsite.

Rein began to follow her, but stood on a fallen branch hidden beneath the thickening mud. The crack of the branch made all three owls bounce high with surprise.

They all hooted in a panic and fled towards the water. They began to fly down the river away from Rein and Taco.

"Uh oh! Not good!" Taco said as she darted to the river bank.

Rein cursed herself for letting the trio slip right out from their grasp. She made after Taco.

"What do we do now?" She asked the cat.

"We go after them, of course."

“How!? I can’t swim, and I’m pretty sure cats don’t like water!”

Taco gave Rein a confident glance as her colours began to glow and the sparkles in her eyes shone bright.

“You’re right. Cats *hate* water. But I’m not a cat...”

Taco began to grow larger and larger. Rein took a few steps back as the cat began to change shape. Taco grew to the size of a car and started forming rough angles. She jumped into the water, splashing Rein from head to toes. When Rein wiped her eyes, she saw a rainbow coloured boat with sparkling eyes at the bow.

“You’re a—”

“I’M A BOAT!” Taco beamed. “Come on! Hop in!”

Rein thought that she must be getting used to the craziness that’s been happening in these past thirty minutes as she jumped onto the Taco Boat without much hesitation or questioning. Taco shot off at speed before Rein could grab hold of anything, causing her to lose her footing and fall. Thankfully the boat still had the soft cat fur so it wasn’t a rough fall.

As Taco sped up the river, Rein got to her feet. The wind beat her face and blew the clips out of her hair causing her hair to flutter uncontrollably. As Rein steadied herself, she could see the three owls ahead—but they were just taking a sharp turn.

“Curve ahead!” Rein yelled.

“I see it. Hang on!” Taco replied as she took a hard right.

Rein fell over once more but pulled herself up in time to see the three owls flying towards a big garage door in the middle of the river.

“What the!? Why is there a doorway--?”

“Ugh! Cheaters!” Taco grunted. “They can’t escape from us *that* easily!”

“Where are they going?”

“Another world. Hang on, we’re gonna jump through before the door closes!”

Rein dug her fingers into the boat’s fur and closed her eyes as they approached the door. For a moment, it felt like she was floating once they passed through. Then, a second later, CRASH!