

### The Three Owls

The first thing Rein noticed was the temperature drop. It wasn't anything drastic, but distinctly noticeable. The warm breeze of the meadow changed to a chill in the later afternoon breeze of the valley.

Rein and Taco crossed the threshold onto a beaten forest path. The trees were scattered far enough away so that they were not overshadowed by a canopy. They could still see the sky in patches and the large hills on either side that were more densely populated with pine trees than where they were.

"So, what are we doing here?" Rein asked, rubbing her arms to dispel the goose-bumps that crept up. "You said you had to show me something."

"I did." Taco confirmed, the hairs on her back were sticking up slightly. Rein guessed that Taco felt the chill also. A quick shudder settled the hairs again. "But to be more accurate, there was *someone* I wanted to show you."

Rein tossed Taco a surprised glance.

"And to be more precise again, there are a trio of someones I'd like to show you." Taco said, refusing to acknowledge Rein's surprise.

"W—who?" Rein managed, feeling suddenly anxious about meeting more unusual characters. She was awkward enough around fellow humans let alone more... whatever the heck Taco was.

"Ah! I see you already speak their language." Taco chuckled as they started walking along the trail.

Nothing seemed too unusual about these surroundings to Rein. She was expecting something bizarre like what had happened in the meadow with the tree and the desk, or the branch that manifested a bottle of water. This area seemed like a regular riverside forest path. Rein felt a sense of security in this. Despite the fact that she was being guided by a rainbow cat, everything else was normal around here and it grounded Rein.

This walk, she thought, might be a good opportunity to gather her thoughts and put together the pieces of what brought her to that meadow in the first place.

"Oh, hey! Look over there." Taco yelled excitedly, standing up on her hind legs and pointing a paw to the sky.

Rein looked up and noticed a black plume of smoke billowing out from the trees. It seemed to be coming from a little further down the trail.

"Smoke?" Rein mused.

"Mhmm. And you know what they say," Taco said with a smile. "'Where there's smoke, there's fire. And where there's fire... there's Germany, France and China.'"

Rein stopped in her tracks as Taco resumed walking once more, this time at a slightly quicker pace.

“That is not a phrase!” Rein called after the cat. “Why would three random countries be drawn to fire?”

“Oh don’t be silly!” Taco scoffed. “Germany, France and China aren’t countries. They are the names of the owls were here to visit!”

Rein took into a light jog to catch up to Taco once more.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. Did you say we are here to visit three owls named after countries? Why?”

“Yup, I sure did. And it’s quite simple, really. They are the reason you’re here. We need to catch them in order to bring you home.” Taco replied, nonchalantly.

Rein opened her mouth to speak but no words came to the fore. How the hell did three owls bring her to a place like this and why doesn’t she remember it? And the way Taco described that they had to *catch* the owls made Rein’s stomach wrench.

*This is not going to be as easy as a guided tour.* Rein thought.

“Come on, slowpoke.” Taco shouted back to her. “Let’s go get these owls. It’ll be a hoot!”