



Tee stopped short before reaching Melody, trying to understand what was happening between her and the male otter she appeared to be with. Ame didn't slow, bolting past the lynx to stand next to Melody.

"Friend of yours?" the lioness asked in a businesslike tone.

"Not in the least!" Melody hissed, pulling at her bag.

Evan let go, causing her to stumble backward, but Ame's strong arm was there to catch her. The lioness's eyes were dangerous and bore into the male otter.

"I was just offering to carry my fiancé's luggage." Evan said calmly to Ame. He held out his paw. "Nice to meet you...?"

"Shut up!"

Evan's eyes widened very briefly as Melody regained her feet. The otter femme was shaking.

"Darling, we have a lot to catch up on. I would rather do it privately-" Evan began.

"Like HELL!" Melody shouted over the wind. "I am sick of you, your amazing charade, and all your tricks to make me look helpless and stupid. We are not at home, these people aren't suckered into your playacting. I am not going to let you drag me around and do anything I don't want to do!"

Ame's arm wrapped more protectively around Melody's shoulders. Evan sighed, staring at the ground, then back at Melody with a raised eyebrow and mouth open to retort.

"It's time for you to leave, dude." Tee joined them, her hair flying crazily in the weather. Rain began to fall steadily. Evan pulled out an umbrella, opened it, and held it over his own head.

Evan acted as though the other two weren't present. "I am staying at the Courtyards. If you decide to come to your senses you can inquire for me by name at the lobby desk. I imagine it's better than where you're currently staying." He leaned closer. "At the Innlet."

Melody swallowed, her mind racing over how Evan could know so much about this trip. For a second, she thought the rumble she felt was more thunder until she realized it was Ame growling. Why were these two felines being so protective of her?

Evan didn't move, standing like a statue unruffled by anything around him. Melody faced him equally until Tee pushed her and Ame away with frantic motions.

"It's pouring. Come on you two. We need to go."

The spell was broken. Ame and Melody snapped out of the staring contest and together the three ran for it. It was too late to avoid getting soaked. Melody felt worse for the felines since they were wearing actual clothes. Her own bathing suit and T-shirt would dry easily.

They rushed several blocks before Tee called back over her shoulder. "How much of a problem is he? Do we need police?"

"No." Melody had to raise her voice. "I don't think so."

"Didn't like him one bit." Ame recalled herself and gave Melody some space, relinquishing her protective arm. "He gave off a really bad vibe. You okay?"

"Yes. No. I'm not sure," Melody stuttered. Keeping pace with the longer legs of the felines was a challenge. "I'm just really glad you both showed up when you did."

"We need a destination!" Tee squinted against the buffeting wind, rain streaming from her chin and tail. "Are you comfortable coming to my flat or would you prefer a restaurant?"

"Is your place close?"

"Yeah."

"Let's do that. If I'm not intruding."

"Hardly!" Tee laughed. She had a slightly maniacal light in her eyes. "I wouldn't offer otherwise."

"Don't mind her," Ame said in a lower tone as they adjusted their route north. "She kind of gets off on stressful situations."

"Sounds like a good friend to have," Melody griped.

"At least I wasn't about to get into a fistfight with a class 2!" Tee responded, completely aware of their talk. "How do you think that would look when the cops show up, Ame, beating up that pipsqueak? You're trying to keep a low profile, remember?"

That got Melody's attention. "Really? Why?"

Ame blinked rain from her eyes, her ears reflexively flicking back and forth in time with her lashing tail. "That otter, he said he was your fiancé?"

"In his dreams."

Ame's expression hardened. "I have the same problem, but I promise you, it's on a much grander scale."

Further conversation was forestalled as they fought the weather. The rain came on so hard a haze of gray backslash softened the edges of all their surroundings. They splashed over crosswalks, passing many of the monolithic bases of Battenmont's signature skyscrapers. The tops of the buildings were almost lost in the low cloud cover. Trees bowed and swayed in the onslaught, gathering the drops and sending them below as larger missiles that slapped and stung when they passed below.

By the time they reached the apartment building, all other visible foot traffic had vanished along with most of the vehicles on the roads. Melody had a sudden surge of concern for Arc and his plane. It was unexpected. She would have to turn that over later. Then she began to wonder about Nicco, but even he was pushed out of mind as they entered the apartment lobby, soaked to the core.

Each femme took a turn shaking off excess water in the splash foyer. Melody didn't really need to as her fur naturally shed the water, but she did groom her face and neck quickly. She watched water drip through the floor grate, listening to the muffled rush of wind and roar of a thousand raindrops.

"This way." Tee's soft voice got her attention.

Melody followed them into the elevator. They rode in silence broken only by their heavy breathing from the walk. Floor 12 dinged and the door opened. They cut across a short hall. Tee keyed her access number into the door handle and they all sighed in relief when the door was secure behind them.

The windows were partly shaded, plunging the living room into a muted half light. Small lamps cast golden circles onto a sofa, table, and kitchen. Tee snagged several articles of clothing and tossed them through a doorway, disappearing briefly to return with towels.

"I wasn't planning on company, sorry for the mess."

Melody patted her face. The towel had a pleasantly clean scent. It was obvious that this was Tee's residence, but Ame's scent was near equally pervasive as the lynx's own.

"Just makes things more comfortable." Melody hoped that would put her at ease.

Ame took more towels and spread them on the sofa before collapsing into it. Tee fell in beside her, snuggling into the lioness's embrace. Melody threw her towel over a chair and perched on it, suddenly uncomfortable.

"So!" Ame bared her teeth in a grin. "I guess it's story time? Who wants to go first?"

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Outside the building, a solitary pedestrian stood on the sidewalk with a sturdy umbrella. He tilted it just enough to watch as several lights illuminated a flat on the twelfth floor. Flicking open his phone casually, he held it to his ear.

"I've got the address. Heading back now."