

*Espen accidentally hears a conversation she shouldn't have been privy to.*

**TRIGGER WARNING!** Contains: adoption and fostering, argument, cross-cultural children

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## **While I Was Sleeping**

### ***Coevolution Int.2***

Forty-seven days.

Espen had been alone in this room for forty-seven days.

*Good night, Renée...* The darkness didn't answer back, nor had it for the last six and a half weeks. She missed her sister. She missed all her siblings.

It was her tenth birthday. Darius and Kendra had bought her a small cake, that she then had split with all the "siblings" she had accrued over the past years. They weren't her real siblings. Espen knew that now. Only the ones she'd grown up with were really hers. And now they were all gone.

It was a pathetically small piece of cake, too.

*Do you think she's asleep yet?* Espen's telepathy perked up. Her parents were talking about her.

*Darius! Of course she isn't. You remember what happened last time.*

*Right, right... I just, I really think we should be talking about this with her. She deserves to be a part of this. She's ten now.*

Yeah, Darius. You tell her. Espen strained to listen for more brain waves, but they must have switched to spoken communication.

She had to hear this.

As quietly as she could, Espen pulled back the covers, set her paws down on the hardwood floor, and crept toward the door. She crept around the boards that had woken Renée and herself up many times during late-night bathroom trips and pantry raids. Without Renée's abilities, the door had to be opened excruciatingly slowly to keep it from creaking, but it was necessary if she wanted to know what Darius and Kendra were talking about.

Once she finally made it to the upper landing, Espen carefully made her way to the top of the steps. Five steps down, and she could hear them comfortably.

"...don't know if she's going to get the cultural support she needs," Darius was saying, soft enough to avoid disturbing the youngest ones sleeping on the ground floor.

"What's the alternative? We can't keep her here. You know how unlikely adoptions are at her age, and the longer we wait, the worse it gets," Kendra said. She sounded horribly hopeless. Wait—was she finally getting adopted?

“Ken, she’s a psychic-type. You know what can happen if a psychic-type is raised by non-psychics.”

“Not every family is like yours. The Castoras are wonderful people who will give Ez what she needs to thrive. Much more than we can give now.”

“She’s going to suffer if she doesn’t have people who can properly mentor her abilities. It’s great that they’re good people, but they’re not psychics.”

“We don’t have the funds to support her for much longer. If we can empty out the bedroom—”

“This isn’t about money, Kendra, this is about Espen’s safety and psychic identity!” Darius was almost whisper-shouting now. Ez had only seen him this upset once before, when the house had been graffitied. Marcus, her brother at the time, had told her someone had spray-painted a bad word on the front of the house. Espen and Renée hadn’t been allowed outside to see it.

“If we start to go in debt because of one kid, then they all start suffering. For the sake of all of us, we need the extra room and money.”

“Espen is so much more than a bedroom and money.”

“That’s not—you know I don’t mean—”

“This is exactly what I’ve been talking about, Kendra. We can’t just send these kids off to any set of good parents who come knocking. They need to be parents who support them in who they are. You remember Adrian—”

“Do *not* talk to me about Adrian. This is different.”

“Is it?”

Adrian was a name Espen had only heard a few times before, but she knew that it carried a lot of weight. Marcus had mentioned Adrian once, and Kendra had yelled at him. Whenever Darius and Kendra talked about them, Espen was pushed out of their minds, unable to probe for more information.

“Kendra, we can’t lose another child because we made the wrong decision.”

“What if the Castoras are the right decision?”

A sigh. Probably from Darius.

“We’ll talk to them tomorrow and see what happens. Maybe they’ll surprise you,” Kendra said. “Besides, Ez needs some hope. She hasn’t been the same since Renée left.”

“For Espen’s sake, I hope you’re right.”

The talking stopped. Espen knew that should be her cue to leave; soon, Darius would mentally scan the house to make sure all the kids were in bed before he and Kendra went to sleep themselves.

At the same time, something told her that it might be better for her to stay.

*Espen. I see you.* Sure enough, there was Darius, looking up at her from the bottom of the steps. The Grumpig gave her a warm smile and motioned for her to follow him.

Silently, Espen followed Darius into the kitchen. He immediately busied himself with rummaging through the cupboards, filled two mugs with water, and put them in the microwave.

*Marshmallows?*

*Always.*

Darius smiled and pulled a bag of marshmallows from the top corner cupboard. It was supposed to be out of reach, but the counter was all too easy to climb up onto. Luckily, there were enough left in the bag for exactly two cups of hot chocolate.

*I'm sorry you had to see us like that.*

Espen looked away. *I shouldn't have been listening.*

Darius nodded and took a sip from his mug. *You're right. You shouldn't have. But that shouldn't stop my apology from meaning anything.*

*I know.* Espen put her own mug to her lips. It was perfect, just how Darius always made it. *If I get adopted tomorrow, I'm gonna miss this. You make the best hot chocolate.*

Darius chuckled. *If you get adopted tomorrow, I'll make sure your new parents know how to make you a good cup of hot chocolate.*

*Yeah, but it won't be yours.*

*I know, sweetie.*

For a while, they sat there in silence. Espen finished hers first—she always did, because Darius would say he had to “savor the flavor.” And then he’d complain about the last few sips being cold. But this time, their mugs were balanced in the sink among the other dirty dishes without words.

*I can share my room, if I need to.*

*I know, Espen. But you shouldn't have to.*

Espen met Darius's eyes. She studied him, and for the first time, she realized how tired he really looked.

*Are you and Kendra in—in debt?* She only had a vague idea of what it meant, but she knew it was bad.

Darius sighed. *That's also not something you should have to worry about. You go get some sleep, alright? We're gonna meet the Castoras in the morning.*

Okay, Espen lied. There was little chance she was going to sleep that night, and Darius knew it. New family days were always a big deal in the house, and they would both be up all night thinking about it.

Espen turned to go back upstairs. *I love you, Espen,* Darius said after her.

*I love you too, Darius.*