

Delia always felt like she was a little bit *closer* to nature than most others would dare to claim. She wasn't too certain why such a feeling occurred, but the leopard usually preferred being outdoors than in, even if she wasn't much of a social butterfly. Resting against the sturdy bark of a tree while reading a good book... such thoughts seemed to occupy her mind regularly. Many times, she had found herself acting upon them as well.

In any case, it wasn't anything too bad to be outside watching the clouds roll by when she went out for a walk, or going to the top of the hill and gazing at the countless stars that could be seen when dusk settled in on the horizon. Moments like these simply filled Delia with a pleasant sensation. It was enough for the leopard to simply be in nature at times.

Due to her little outings, she also met a snow leopard who she quickly and unexpectedly became friends with. James was a bit younger than her but taller, and with how his rosettes were a soft grey as opposed to her blue, he would probably blend in even more in the winter than others. Her first time meeting him was actually in the park one windy afternoon, having accidentally bumped into him since she was too immersed in her reading. One thing about him, however, was how he was seemingly not *anywhere* other than the park.

It wasn't as if she *never* saw him anywhere else, since if that was the case they wouldn't have connected, but it also felt weird that she never found him in any other location in the city, at least when she tried *actively* looking for him. He practically hid his presence from her in a sense, but they did also hang out at the café every week. During those times, James even recommended some more stories to look at. Coupled with when they were at the park, it was almost *like* they were dating, but not quite. Still, she enjoyed seeing him every week, whether or not they could take it any further.

This week was different, however. For the first time in what seemed to be forever, he *didn't* show up. She had also tried contacting James, but Delia saw that she couldn't get her calls through nor any of her messages. It made her feel concerned for a few days. She didn't even go out like she used to because of it. Thinking about going outside didn't help to clear her head at all, either.

When almost two full weeks had passed, it was only then that the leopard suddenly got a message from James. Checking it, she saw that he wanted to meet with her, but this time it was at his *house* and not the café. The fact that he even mentioned the house alerted Delia that morning. She quickly got ready to see what happened to her snow leopard friend. In her mind, she hoped it wasn't serious.

Thinking about this as she took the bus, the leopard began to think of the reason why she hadn't seen him for the past few days. Of course, she knew that he wasn't obligated to actually tell her anything about what had happened. At the same time, however, she was even more worried. After a few minutes, she shook her head. She would be able to see what happened when she got to his place.

When she finally got to the location that James had sent, Delia was quite shocked. He had said before that he lived in a big place, but the *mansion* within her eyes right now was more than 'big'. Compared to her little apartment, it was huge. Such thoughts came and went, of course. Right now, the leopard needed to see what happened that made him ask for her to come here.

Going up to the door, she tried to calm herself down. Whatever occurred couldn't have been *too* bad. At least, that was what she was trying to tell herself right now. After all, she wouldn't know until she saw it for herself. As such, Delia took a few deeper breaths than before, wanting to stray away from any solemn thoughts. Looking at the door, the leopard pressed its bell and heard the soft chime play.

For a few minutes, there was no response, making her wonder if he was even *at* home like he said he would. When she was about to ring the bell again, the door opened. What greeted her wasn't James, however. Or rather, *who* had greeted her wasn't the snow leopard she knew. Instead, it was a young child, about eight or nine years old. His shimmering pink eyes startled the leopard for a bit.

"Umm... hello? Is James at home? My name is Delia, I'm a friend of his."

Considering that the young boy was inside of James' house, Delia assumed that he was a relative. There was also the possibility of the boy being the snow leopard's son. If that was the case, this would be an interesting way to find out he was a father. Little did she realize that she was *half* correct. The young snow leopard was indeed James' son, though his words confused her immediately.

"Oh! You're looking for Mommy? Mommy said a leopard would be coming here soon. I'll bring you to where Mommy is!"

While the little boy smiled and began pulling Delia inside, her mind was swirling. Why would James let his son call him '*Mommy*' of all things? Already she was even more concerned that something happened to her friend. Whatever occurred within those twelve days must have been really weird. Despite her thoughts, she allowed the little boy to pull her inside of the mansion, the door being locked behind her.

She had no time to properly stare in awe at the decorations of his house, either, because when they had gotten to what she assumed was his living room, she saw *another* child. This time it was a girl, but her eyes were still the same bright pink as the boy's own. No one could convince her that they *weren't* twins if they tried to at this moment. Well, apart from the *third* young snow leopard that had walked in behind her.

"Is this Mommy's friend? She's so pretty! Look at her hair! I wanna touch it!"

"No! You can't! Mommy said that she had to go immediately where Mommy is right now. Maybe later."

"What? That's not fair! Hmph... fine."

While the other young girl didn't talk, there was no denying how her stare was focused on Delia, making her even more worried. Why were these kids calling James 'Mommy'? Were they even *his* kids? With her still being led by the young boy to what was probably a bedroom, she couldn't wrap her head around anything. Things were moving way too fast. Too much information was being presented to her. The leopard felt slightly afraid.

"I'm going to play with Diane and Daisy now. Bye bye!"

With the young boy's job seemingly complete, he quickly turned around and went back downstairs. Delia was left in front of the door. After a while, she shook her head again. She needed to see what had happened. Standing by the door wouldn't help her at all. Thinking such, she opened it up.

Seeing the familiar blood red of James' eyes when she opened the door could not offset the *shock* rolling through her mind. Instead, her focus was on how her friend was actually *pregnant*. It wasn't something that she wanted to believe, but the fact that the snow leopard in front of her was slowly, softly caressing a rather gravid swell was enough to further make her wonder.

"Oh! You're here. Good... tada?"

"No. *Fucking*. Way."

Besides closing the door behind her, the leopard was practically frozen in place. Why did James become a *woman*? When did she get *pregnant*? And if she was, and those snow leopard children

downstairs were hers, *how* could they have grown up so quickly. She probably looked like she was about to faint, because the mother-to-be actually got up from her bed to try and support Delia. It probably should have been the other way around, but when she got led to the bed and pushed into a sitting position, she still didn't make any sound. After what was a few minutes of deafening silence, her now pregnant friend spoke.

"I... I have a *lot* to tell you, Delia. Sorry about last week, and this week too, but as you saw... I'm a bit occupied, heh..."

Her soothing, silky voice didn't exactly calm the leopard down, but it roused her from a trance like state. As she looked at the feminine face in front of her, and saw the scar running across her cheeks, she *knew* that it couldn't be any other person than James.

"... You have a *lot* to tell me indeed! When did you become a girl? How did you become a mother? Why are your kids... *kids*? Shouldn't they be like two weeks old or less? Your *son* answered the door!"

"Yes, I know. I'm even more surprised than you, trust me. You're not the one expecting *again*. It's... it's a bit of a long story. Care to listen?"

At this point, Delia didn't answer for a few seconds. The time didn't go on past half a minute before she nodded. Seeing this, James smiled softly, and the leopard felt her heart skip a beat suddenly. While her face flushed red, which the snow leopard definitely saw, she opened up her maw.

"You see, it began at the park..."