

To Speak of the Silver Wolf

Chapter 1: Rails, Rocks, and Rachel

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Chapter 1: Rails, Rocks, and Rachel

A gust of wind carried the familiar scent of the Rendon River up from the valley. The wind ruffled the long, black fur on my head and arms, and my unbuttoned jacket flopped like a sail. As the wind died down, the scent of the river lingered and mingled with sweet aroma of the pine trees from the forest. Occasionally, I caught a bitter-sweet whiff of the moss from the cliff that ran alongside the railroad tracks. The old wooden sleepers that made up the railroad bed felt rough on my bare feet as I walked along the tracks between the rails. Every once in a while, the discordant stench of mushrooms assaulted my nose. Their pungent odor seemed unusually strong today as they feasted on whatever was dead or dying in the forest.

I perked my ears when I heard the lonesome wail of an air horn in the distance. I raised my tail slightly and continued to walk along. A short distance ahead was a rock outcropping that happened to be one of the best places for watching trains. I stepped off of the tracks, then climbed up the smooth, red boulders and made my way up to the outcropping that overlooked the tracks. To the east, you could see about a kilometer of the tracks until they curved to the north; and to the west, you could see the long, ancient trestle bridge that still carried trains over the Rendon River Valley. At the end of the bridge, the tracks curved to the south and disappeared behind the trees.

I looked to the west and scanned the old trestle bridge. One of Zeyeb IV's moons was almost directly above the bridge while another was setting behind the hills beyond

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the valley. Just as my gaze reached the end of the bridge, the train appeared from behind the trees.

The wheels clattered as the train slowly crept out onto the bridge to cross the valley. It was a short train, only a single locomotive and a dozen old coal hoppers that had been re-fitted to carry kanidonium ore to the starport in Tubala where it is used as fuel for starships. A bright red caboose brought up the rear of the train. I watched the train slowly cross the bridge, and as it approached, I detected the smell of hot grease from the locomotive's axles and gears as well as the helium exhaust from its nuclear reactor. As it passed by the outcropping where I was standing, I read the name printed in bold yellow letters on a blue background on the side of the locomotive: "MUTT". These were the reporting marks for Mavost Upland and Tubala Transport, the railroad company that owned these tracks.

I continued to watch the train until it disappeared around the curve to the east. As the train disappeared, so too did my brief respite from sorrow. My ears drooped again, and my tail hung low as I climbed down from the outcropping and continued walking along the tracks. I could still see Rachel, my sister, with her arms reaching towards Heaven and her black and white fur glistening in the lamplight as she sang of her love for Kelev, the Silver Wolf. Rachel's ears were erect, her tail was held high, her smile was warm and friendly, and her soft, brown eyes were full of fire.

I too, loved the Silver Wolf, but I could never express it as easily as Rachel could. It had been especially difficult since the Vanorites took over Zeyeb IV. These Vanorites were a strange-looking people, although I suppose we look as strange to them as they do to us. In some ways they are similar to us. They walk upright on two legs as we do, and they wear clothing as we do, but they are different from us in many ways. Although most of them have hair on top of their heads, and some have hair on faces as well, they are not completely covered with fur as we are. They have no muzzles to speak of, and their ears do not stand erect as ours do; their faces are almost flat, and their heads are almost spherical. They have no tails, and their feet are so flat it's a wonder they can even walk, especially with those awkward garments they call 'shoes'.

I had more or less gotten used to the strange appearance of the Vanorites, but the way they tried to force their religion on us was intolerable. Under Vanorite rule, we were

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no longer allowed to worship the Silver Wolf. Instead, we were expected to worship Hatoul, the god of the Vanorites. They told us that Hatoul was the appropriate name for the Silver Wolf, but that was a lie; Hatoul was *not* the Silver Wolf.

Hatoul demanded that his followers eradicate the unfaithful. But The Silver Wolf demanded that his followers share his message of redemption. Hatoul encouraged his followers to murder, rape, and steal. This was their reward for faithfulness and the victims' punishment for unfaithfulness. The Silver Wolf, on the other hand, demanded that his followers help those in need and encourage those who were hurting. Hatoul encouraged his followers to fight for personal and political gains, while the Silver Wolf demanded that his followers fight to preserve liberty and justice not only for themselves, but also for those who were unable to fight. No, the Vanorite god most certainly was *not* the Silver Wolf.

I walked along the tracks until I reached the old trestle bridge. I heard a familiar squeaking behind me. It was Onyx, Rachel's pet lemur; she must have escaped from the exercise pen again. I knew I shouldn't have left her there unsupervised, but I felt like being alone this morning. Nevertheless, I was glad for her company. Even though she was Rachel's pet, I had always had a pretty strong bond with her, especially since I'm not always comfortable around other people and tend to find some comfort in the company of animals. I guess Onyx and I both had needed each other more than ever since our beloved Rachel had passed away less than a week before.

"Aw Onyx baby, come to Uncle Albert," I said as I knelt down and held my arms out. Onyx jumped up and I caught her in my arms. "I'm sorry I left you," I said softly as I picked her up and held her. She put her arms over my shoulders and hugged me while her tail wagged and her entire body wiggled. I soon noticed my own tail wagging as well. "I'm glad you came," I said as I set her down.

The sadness came over me again as I looked out over the bridge. I had always been afraid to walk across the bridge as it was too long and there would be nowhere to go if I were halfway across when a train came. Besides, I had felt particularly vulnerable since Rachel had passed away. I looked down along the bottom of the trestles and for the first time, I noticed the faint trail where I had crossed the valley more times than I could count. But today, my curiosity was stronger than my fear, and I was not going to walk

through the valley; I was going to cross the bridge.

I stepped out onto the narrow catwalk that ran beside the tracks. Onyx didn't seem to like the catwalk, but she followed me cautiously. She stayed on the tracks between the rails, and gingerly stepped from one sleeper to the next. I walked slowly so that she could keep up. With each step, I moved further from solid ground and further above the valley floor, and with each step, I felt more nervous. Onyx continued following me, but she seemed to slow down a little bit with each step. Her reddish brown tail, which she normally held high over her back, began to droop. Eventually, she stopped and laid down across a sleeper. When I knelt down to pick her up, her entire body was shivering. I tried to pick her up, but her arms were tightly wrapped around the sleeper. I knelt down beside her and softly spoke to her. Eventually she let go of the sleeper, then turned and held tightly onto me. I carried her with me as I continued to walk across the bridge.

I stopped near the middle of the bridge, directly above the river, and looked down at the water. From up here, it seemed placid and still, but I knew that it was swiftly flowing over the orange and red rocks that made up the riverbed. Rachel's body had been found among the boulders along river bank at the bottom of the bridge. Her scent had been washed away, and she was so badly mangled that neither I nor our parents could recognize her. Even Onyx didn't recognize her.

I still could not make myself believe that Rachel had killed herself; there was never any indication that she was suicidal. She had finished school only the day before. She had aced her exams and had even been offered a scholarship by the University of Zeyeb at Mavost Upland, which she had accepted. She was looking forward to visiting the university in a few weeks. Rachel had so much to live for, and she was so full of fire—so full of life.

As I stood there staring down at the river and the rocks, Onyx began purring. She was still holding tightly onto me. I gently nuzzled her. “You miss her too, don't you baby?” I said softly, almost crying, “She didn't even tell us why.” The letter she had left me was very short—much too short. She only said goodbye and that she loved me, then asked me to make sure Mom and Dad were okay and to take care of Onyx. I began to softly stroke Onyx as I continued to stare at the river below. “It just isn't right,” I said softly, “Rachel shouldn't be dead.”

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The moment I said that, I had a strange feeling that in fact it was not right– that Rachel was not dead. I am normally a very logical and rational person; I am not inclined to be guided by intuition, but something told me that Rachel was still alive. Perhaps it was just wishful thinking.

With Onyx still holding onto me, I continued to walk across the bridge. As I walked along, I remembered the evening before Rachel died when I went with her to the café. I never had many friends, but Rachel had always invited me to hang out with herself and her friends. That evening, Rachel had invited some people we had just met to one of our underground services for the Silver Wolf.

I stopped dead in the middle of the tracks at the end of the bridge. That was it! Rachel was always telling people about the Silver Wolf, but that was no longer allowed under Vanorite law. Arresting her, or even killing her outright, might have fueled an uprising, but by kidnapping her and staging a suicide, Vanorite officials could silence her without making her a martyr.

I heard a rumble from across the valley. I looked across the bridge and saw the headlights of an oncoming train. Still holding Onyx, I moved to a boulder a safe distance from the tracks and sat down. The rumbling grew louder as the train raced across the bridge. Two locomotives, a hodge-podge of freight cars, and a bright red caboose hurried across the bridge and whipped around the curve. As the caboose disappeared around the curve, I heard the angry bellow of the air horn as the train approached the street beyond, warning automobile traffic of its approach.

I set Onyx down and continued walking along the tracks. The smell of hot grease overpowered the scent of the river and the forest– and even the mushrooms. I had made up my mind. Rachel was still alive, being held somewhere against her will, and I was going to find her.