

Sun-Dappled Lake

By C. Jade Wyton

A follow up to "Pen Pals."

Lefu enjoys a calm moment by the lake talking with her friend, Brendan.

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It was a mid-year summers day. The sun shone high over the caravan and birds called to each other in the trees on the other side of the lake.

It was beautiful, if not a little hot. Though Lefu knew that in the city she grew up in the heat would have been much more intense as it soaked into the pavement and reflected off glass windows and metal cars.

But here, in the copse of willow trees and long grass, the intensity of the sunlight was muffled. Drunken up by the plant-life and dappled across the lake in a white reflection that danced in the cool breeze.

Lefu heard a clattering sound and raised her head just in time to see Brendan stumble and drop his fishing tackle. The box burst open, spilling its contents along the worn path.

Brendan swore under his breath and Lefu couldn't help but giggle as she rose to her feet and headed over to help him collect it up again.

'Thank you, my dear,' he said with a smile and a gentle brush of his wing against hers. 'I appreciate it.'

'It's cool,' Lefu replied as she placed the last piece of tackle into Brendan's hands. She noticed, then, that they were twitching again. And once he had deposited everything back in its box she gave them a comforting squeeze.

It was such a nice feeling, to be able to hold Brendan's hand. He had been her friend and confidant for so long that it had almost been impossible for Lefu to believe her eyes the first time they'd actually *met* each other.

He had looked a lot more... *less*, than she had expected, with the things he had told her he had gone through.

Tired amber eyes that creased where they met his smile. And pale grey fur that, no matter how well-groomed it was now, still showed signs of neglect and damage.

And a few scars along his jaw.

Just a few.

He'd gotten better, he said. And it made Lefu hopeful that maybe one day she could look that healthy, too. When she gained a little more weight and grew into her wings, perhaps.

'Marcos said he gave you lunch?' Brendan asked, suddenly, and Lefu quickly nodded. 'Good, good. Remind me to thank him when we get home. What did you have?'

'Katsu,' Lefu answered. 'With rice and egg.'

'Ah, mum and bub,' Brendan chuckled and started for the lake again. 'Was it nice?'

‘Not as nice as your cooking, but I liked it!’ Lefu said with a cheeky grin. Then, as they made it to the lake she shuffled in place. ‘Can I cast off for you?’

‘Of course,’ Brendan replied, setting his box down on the bank. He popped it open and quickly assembled his rod; making sure each piece was firmly in place before setting the bait and handing it over. ‘Do you remember how, or would you like some help?’

‘I think I remember,’ Lefu said, carefully adjusting the length of the line and getting into position. ‘That’s enough line, right?’

‘Perfect amount,’ Brendan confirmed. ‘Your grip is good.... Pull back.... And cast! Good, good! *Very* nice!’

Lefu swung the rod and the hook sailed through the air, landing with a *splip!* only a little bit to the left of where she had been aiming.

She felt her tail sweep back and forth in a joyful motion as she glanced at Brendan. ‘First time!’

‘You’re improving very well,’ Brendan praised.

‘I never thought I’d enjoy fishing,’ she admitted as she handed back his rod and sat in the grass. ‘I always thought it would be too slow and boring!’

‘It’s only as boring as the company you keep,’ said Brendan. He joined Lefu on the ground, affixing his rod between the rocks at his feet. ‘How have you been finding it, here? I hope that you’re not feeling too out of place with all us adults.’

Lefu shook her head. ‘I don’t feel out of place at all.’

‘No?’

‘No,’ she confirmed, dipping her toes into the water and watching the ripples wobble out away from her. ‘Raine’s really nice. Even if she’s a little older, she’s not *that* much older. Just a few years.’

‘Ah, good, I was worried,’ Brendan said. ‘I can’t imagine it’s easy being without your peers.’

Lefu shrugged. ‘I dunno. I never really had any friends.’

‘Oh, come now,’ Brendan gave Lefu a friendly nudge. ‘Wasn’t there that one friend of yours? Oh, what was his name...? Zac?’

Lefu felt herself blush at the boy’s name. ‘He was... different.’

‘Mm,’ Brendan gave a knowing nod. ‘I still think you should have told him how you felt.’

‘No, Mum never would have let it happen, she *hates* Dr Drakenmyre,’ Lefu gave a heavy sigh. ‘Besides, he was more interested in Brittany.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘She was prettier than me.’

‘Oh, *pretty* doesn’t matter,’ Brendan comforted. ‘If *pretty* mattered, Griff would have asked Marcos out instead of me!’

It made Lefu chuckle, because she couldn’t argue he was wrong; Brendan was not a pretty man. He was a scraggly thing who couldn’t seem to shake his past of addiction out of his fur.

His brother was *very* pretty, though. The sort of pretty that could be found in fashion magazines.

‘Are you gonna kiss him?’ Lefu asked, much to Brendan’s amusement.

‘Not in public, no,’ Brendan answered simply.

Just as Lefu expected.

*Private.*

Everybody in this caravan was private.

They were kind, of course! But they kept their business their own and didn't much like questions about their personal lives....

Which, for a teenage girl run-away from home, was perfect.

'Have you written Zac, recently?'

Lefu nodded. 'Yeah, we talk online.'

'He knows it's you?'

'Uh-huh, though— He's promised he won't tell anyone,' said Lefu. 'His dad's a lot like my mum is, so he *gets* it, you know?'

'Yes, I do,' Brendan gave a small smile; though, it fell with Lefu's own as the girl turned to gaze over the lake. 'Lefu? What's wrong, my dear?'

'My...' Lefu hesitated. 'Mum was in the news again.'

'Was she, now?'

'Yeah. She seemed really worried about me,' Lefu said, tracing her clawtip along the ground to leave a shallow score. 'I've never seen her look like that before. She never seemed to care about anything but her job. But now she looked like she hadn't slept in days. And not for the usual reasons. I didn't think she'd get so worried. I thought she'd barely notice I was gone— She never noticed me when I was around....'

'Ah, well. Sometimes someone can love you, but still do wrong by you,'

Brendan said, carefully. 'Do you want to go back?'

Lefu shook her head.

'Alright. Just remember it's your choice. You just say the word and we'll take you home.'

Lefu leant against Brendan's shoulder and let out a long sigh, '*This* is home.'

—END—

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