

Deer Party

By C. Jade Wyton

Kenneth Bloom is so, so happy to have his daughter back after she vanished into the woods for a week. What he is a little less happy about, however, is the state of her mental health. It is clear that she is, as the kids would say, “going through it.” And Ken doesn’t know what to do. So, while Becky hangs around outside with some of her friends (deer?!) Ken takes Becky’s mother aside and they have a serious talk about their concerns.

Contains mentions of trauma, violence, PTSD, and other mental health issues.

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When Becky had told Ken that she was going to be inviting friends over, he had expected one of her usual cliques.

Like Katie, Jezzibeth, and Marilyn.

Or Jareth and Benny.

Or Malinka and Adam and Portia.

Hell, even that Shedskin girl, Wendy, would have been less of a surprise than this.

Seven deer.

Seven deer were currently in his backyard.

Sitting with his daughter by the shed.

Eating a small buffet worth of vegetables and watching cartoons on her laptop.

All the while, he stood awkwardly at the glass sliding door just... watching them. Don perched on his shoulder and drooling down his chest.

From what he’d gathered from his conversation with Becky, it seemed that these had been the “friends” she’d stayed with the previous week during her breakdown in the woods.

Her *friends*.

A herd of *deer*.

Ken was, to say the least; just a *little* bit concerned about the state of his daughter’s mental health.

Letting out a long, long breath, Ken slowly began to open the glass door—Which Don clearly did not like as he quickly leapt off Ken’s shoulder and, after picking himself up off the floor, ran in the direction of the kitchen.

Ken wished that he could run away, too.

Becky had told him about some of the things these deer had said about their... opinions on bucks. And he was honestly a little bit scared they may try to stomp on *him*. Especially the one called “Tenderhoof” who, from what Ken had observed of her today— Was not tender at *all*.

She was an older doe. Apparently well-travelled. Who’d come to live in Shadow Oaks because she “liked the vibes” (as Becky had put it) and wanted to

help look after some of the younger does who “got themselves into trouble”....

It was clear to Ken from the way that Becky spoke of her that this doe had been the one to keep her breakdown from turning into something much, much worse.

And, so, though he wasn't sure that Tenderhoof wasn't ready to ram him repeatedly against the shed wall for sneezing in the wrong direction... he went out to join the herd.

He quietly crept up to where Becky lay in the grass; her head resting on one of the doe's sides (Morning Speckles, was is? With the torn left ear) and her arms wrapped around one of the newly-born fawns.

She was still wearing one of the face-masks she'd begged him to make, which made his heart wrench. She'd been so terrified that there was something in the air. She'd babbled on about... mind-altering powder that sapped people's free will and made them easier to control?

Ken didn't believe it. And, even if it *were* true, he really wasn't sure how much protection a cloth mask was going to provide from it. The way she'd described it, it sounded like she'd need a *gas mask* to keep it out of her system.

But... if wearing a mask made Becky feel safe enough to come home, he wasn't going to say anything about it. She had so much anxiety nowadays that he was willing to help her find *any* sort of relief.... Even if it meant leaning a little bit into a delusion to meet her in the middle.

She wasn't hurting anyone, after all.... She was a good girl.

She'd *always* been a good girl. Even at her worst, when she was confused, and hurting, and easily led astray— Ken was *sure* that she'd always had good intentions....

*And nothing had made him prouder then the fact she'd started proving him right.*

'Honey?' he tried, softly; flinching when *all* eyes turned to him. 'How are you feeling? I-I know you've been having a hard time these past few weeks and I just want to make sure you're okay.'

'I'm fine,' Becky answered, sitting up to reveal another fawn that had hidden itself in her jacket. This one did not look as... *fresh* as the one in her arms.

Ken gave a curt hum as he watched the third and final fawn stumble over and settle down at Becky's hip. 'It's... a little out of season for fawns, isn't it?' he tried, hoping it would be taken as a curious question, and not a rude comment.

Morning Speckles gave a low grumble and Becky turned her head to listen.

'It is,' Becky answered slowly; clearly translating for the doe. 'But the girls prefer to mate outside of rutting season, because.... Ah. The bucks are more reasonable and not as wild!'

'Reasonable?' Ken blinked.

Becky nodded. 'Yeah. The girls don't really like bucks all that much. They're like. Not into them. They prefer to bond with other does and stuff. But sometimes they like, want kids and stuff, so they'll find like, a buck that isn't aggressive or whatever and ask him for help.'

Ken wasn't sure what to say, to that. 'So... what are... you watching?'

'Bambi,' Becky answered, simply. And then, when Morning Speckles gave another groan, she gasped and looked offended. 'It does *not* suck! It's a Disney

classic!’

A snort sounded from another doe, who proceeded to pull out a chunk of the lawn and chew on it.

‘Yeah, see! Cloud Head likes it!’ Becky defended. ‘You’re just mad cos the mum died— Yeah! Yeah! Right, Grass Sway! The meadow thing is good to teach the fawns—’

Ken stepped back as his daughter and the deer continued arguing amongst themselves, and quickly retreated back into the house.

His daughter had always attracted chaos. But lately it was becoming *ridiculous!*

‘Ken? Are you alright?’ Isa’s voice floated from the doorway, and he looked up to see the drow watching him with a soft, worried expression. ‘How’s Becky?’

‘She’s having fun. I think,’ Ken sighed, approaching Isa and letting her wrap him in her arms. ‘Her friends are... unusual.’

‘They’re *deer*,’ Isa let out a tense hum and pulled her lips tight. ‘Oh, Ken. How did things get like this? Everything is so.... So....’

‘Everywhere?’ Ken suggested.

‘Mhm,’ Isa agreed, leaning away from Ken (though she kept her arms around him). ‘I hope it all calms down soon. For Becky’s sake. *And* ours.’

Ken nodded, then bit his lip. ‘I... honestly. With the way everything has been going, lately, I was expecting to hear that something happened at Jezzibeth’s party,’ he admitted. ‘I was surprised when she came home with Jareth. After what she’d said about him... *never* coming over again.... I thought they were done. I was so worried. They’ve been so close for so long and I don’t know how she would have handled losing him like that....’

Isa closed her eyes, sighing as she gave a short nod. ‘I’m glad they worked out... *whatever* it was that happened.’

‘Becky didn’t tell you?’ Ken was surprised— He assumed Becky would have at least told *Isa* what had happened.... ‘But she... *always* tells you what’s upsetting her.’

‘Honestly, I’m not even sure *Becky* knows what it was that upset her so much,’ Isa’s nod turned into a shake of her head, and she let her ears droop. ‘It’s like she’s convinced herself that whatever it was, was her own fault. Just like she used to with Mattel. It’s worrying.’

‘*Very* worrying,’ Ken agreed. ‘But....’

‘But?’

‘Jareth is a good man. He’ll take responsibility for anything he did,’ Ken said, surely, gently wrapping his own arms around Isa and pulling her close again. *He trusted that Jareth wouldn’t let Becky blame herself for something she didn’t do.* ‘I’m just so glad she’s not with Mattel anymore. I thought she was going to get dragged down some sort of... alt-right pipeline like her grandmother.’

‘No. She’s just a conspiracy theorist, instead,’ Isa grimaced, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. But then her face softened. ‘Though... I’m wondering how much of it all really is just conspiracy.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well... the crows,’ Isa said, her brow furrowing. ‘She said something about that before it happened, didn’t she? But the only reason we ever ended up

believing her about that was because of the video. And... the music festival. She was saying something happened then, too. And I.... I don't *remember* anything happening, but.... When we were there, do you remember Becky leaving?

Ken thought for a moment... *No.*

*He didn't remember her leaving.*

She'd been standing right beside him, when....

Ken's ears twitched.

The last he remembered, she'd suddenly gripped his arm so tight it had hurt. As if bracing herself for something. And then....

'No,' Ken frowned. 'She just... vanished.'

'She was on the other side of town,' Isa said. 'We thought she was only gone for... five minutes? But she couldn't have gotten to that part of town *that* quickly. It still bothers me. It's like we're missing a whole block of time from that night.'

'Yes,' Ken agreed. 'I know what you mean.'

'And that guitar that she came home with,' Isa pushed. 'That was what got stolen, wasn't it? When the house got broken into? Nothing else. Just the *one* thing she had related to that night, that she *refused* to tell us about? I don't think it was a coincidence.'

'*That* was what was stolen on Halloween?' Ken blinked. 'I... didn't think she still had that thing. I thought she got rid of it well before the formal!'

'No,' Isa shook her head. 'I saw it while cleaning her room. She still had it, under her bed. And she had fucking vials of *holy water* around it, like she thought it was going to spring to life and kill someone. Then, after the break-in... it was gone. Poof. Not in the house.'

'Mm,' Ken gave a concerned hum.

'And the zombies,' Isa continued. 'Becky said that the deer that caused her accident had acted like a *zombie*. I-I told her not to worry, and that it was probably some sort of illness but— I *still* have the message she left me,' Isa admitted. 'It *still* makes my skin crawl, Ken, that she saw it before anyone else did. And that we just *brushed it off* as nothing severe until we saw it ourselves and realised how bad it really was.'

Ken nodded, feeling like his heart was going to break.

'And I just— I can't stop thinking that maybe this all could have been avoided if we'd just... *listened* to her,' Isa finally pulled away from Ken, and wiped at the single tear that was forming in the corner of her eye. 'I think that's part of what's been driving her so crazy, lately. Nobody believes her about *anything*. She must feel so alone....'

'I.... Yes, I think she does,' Ken bit his lip as he remembered what Becky had confided in him only a few months ago. 'You know that, uh. That night that... that Becky found us in bed together? She'd had a bad dream and.... She said that she thought everyone was leaving her, and that she didn't understand why.'

'*Ooh*,' Isa closed her eyes in a look so pained Ken instinctively pulled her into another hug. 'Oh, Ken. What are we going to *do*?'

'I don't know,' Ken admitted.

'Ken, I... I don't want to worry you, but.... I think....'

Ken waited for Isa to continue, squeezing her tight when her breath came out as a quiver.

‘I’m not sure that something *didn’t* happen at Jezzibeth’s party,’ Isa admitted, quietly. ‘Becky’s had nightmares *every single night* since she came back from it. Even when Jareth has been over. A-And she keeps touching her wrist. Like it’s bothering her. I asked if I could look at it but she got... defensive? Even though when I *did* look at it nothing was wrong with it.’

‘I’ve noticed the wrist thing, yes,’ Ken gave a slow nod. ‘I thought maybe she sprained it while climbing. I didn’t realise it was that bad.’

‘And the clothes she wore that day,’ Isa sighed. ‘I found her washing them in her bathtub. I don’t know why she was doing it, but she was acting like she was trying to hide evidence from a *murder* scene!’

‘That’s... *very* concerning,’ Ken mumbled. ‘I... hm?’

Ken was distracted as his phone went off; a notification from one of Becky’s social medias.

She had uploaded another photo of herself with the deer, and for some reason captioned it “we r hte queerist gals a round!”

It was *just* silly enough to earn a chuckle from Ken, even through his anxieties.

‘What?’ Isa asked; letting out her own weak laugh as Ken showed her the picture.

Then, a comment appealed below it, from....

Ken’s nose scrunched in a disgusted scowl.

*Isabel.*

He could still barely tolerate just *knowing* she was talking to Becky, let alone seeing the conversations they had....

“*Can we say queer now?? I thought that was rude!* ☐☐ 🌀 QUEER!!” was the comment.

Becky’s reply was quick: “*on ly if u r talking a but me. not abut oth er lgbt peeple. sum do not like it! b respect* 🧡❤️☐🔪🧡”

Isabel replied with a thumbs up, and Ken let out his breath. He tried to remind himself that Isabel was *trying* to learn and be a better person.

She was trying. And Becky was willing to give her a chance.

And, really, Ken could understand why Becky was so determined to look out for her.

He could see a lot of Becky in her. And maybe Becky saw it too; what she could have become if she hadn’t broken away from bad influences like Mattel....

But, still, he could barely believe that Isabel could be anything other than Barbra’s stupid, cowardly, racist sister.

‘Ken?’ Isa’s hand met Ken’s shoulder, and he looked up at her. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Yeah, I’m—’

Ken cut off as he heard the back sliding door quickly open and close, and he turned to see Becky hurrying in.

‘Becky? Is everything—’

‘Oop! ‘Scuse me!’ Becky exclaimed, slipping past her parents and hurrying into the lounge. ‘Yep! All fine! I just gotta grab the stuff!’

‘The *stuff*?’ Isa repeated, slowly. ‘What *stuff*, Becky?’

‘Collars and stuff!’ Becky called loudly, causing Ken and Isa to share a *look*

before following her.

‘Collars and stuff?’ Isa echoed her daughter. ‘You mean for the deer? Why would... why are you getting them *collars*?’

‘Cos if they wear collars, hunters will know not to shoot them!’ Becky explained. ‘I was reading that, like. There are deer that wear orange collars and stuff to mark them as like, not available to hunters or whatever!’

‘Really?’ Ken felt his ear twitch curiously. ‘That’s a thing?’

‘Yeah, apparently!’ Becky nodded, pulling a handful of collars out of a plastic bag and checking them over. ‘Like. I googled it. And deer wearing collars are like. Not supposed to be hunted down because they’re either like, a part of a study, or like.... You know?’

Ken had no idea what the second half of his daughter’s sentence was supposed to be, but he nodded anyway. ‘And you got collars for all of your friends?’

‘Yep! And one for myself!’ Becky answered, tying one around her neck.

‘Becky— You’re not going to wear that in *public* are you?’ Isa put her face in a hand. ‘Please say no.’

‘Why not?’ Becky asked. ‘It’s not a sex thing, if that’s what you’re worried about! It’s just to, like, make sure I don’t get shot while I’m in the woods and stuff!’

‘I doubt that’s what other people are going to think,’ Isa said, firmly. ‘You already have a reputation.’

‘Yeah, well, they can assume whatever they like,’ Becky retorted with a stubborn snort, tightening the collar to a comfortable fit. ‘*I* know what I mean by it, and the hunters who see me in the woods as a deer will know what I mean by it, and that’s all that matters. *And it’s not like anyone ever trusts anything I have to say, anyway.*’

The last part was mumbled under her breath, clearly not *actually* for Ken or Isa to hear.... But the pair still cast each other worried glances.

Then, with a sigh, Ken reached out and began to loosen the collar around Becky’s neck.

‘Tighten it *after* you’re in wildshape,’ he told her. ‘Or you’ll choke yourself. Deer necks are thicker than people’s.’

—END—

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