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Animal Café

Chapter 21 - Pets must be pets

"Alright, Clara. Now, tell me what happened, and then we will fix it together. I'm sure it can't be that bad."

Right after Elizabeth threw her little friend into the lounge, and who knew what was happening behind that door at the moment, she turned to me and placed her artistically-gifted hand on my shoulder. She wanted to learn the reason for my devastated state, but how could I tell her that I had failed the totality of my sudden responsibilities.

"... I... I..."

"It's okay. I'm here now. I'm very used to this kind of work. Start from the beginning. Why is Lucy at the hospital? You said a pet got hurt?"

"Yes, yes. Trixie. She broke her arm, she said. So Lucy... she went to the hospital with her. And then... Accalia went to the hospital too. And Lucy also said I had to come here... with Oreo... to take care of the café. And then..."

"Woah... slow down a bit. Have you taken care of the pets before?"

"Yes, but I never ran the café. I... I can't do that... I don't know how."

"Oh, if Lucy asked you to do it, it's because she thinks you are very capable of doing it well. I've known her for a while now. She wouldn't let you take care of her pets and her café unless she fully trusted you."

What Elizabeth just said made me pause for a second. It was true that Lucy wouldn't let anybody she didn't trust run her café. It was way too important to her. I haven't seen anybody else feeding her pets outside me, and I've been visiting for a while. Perhaps it was real, and she had thought me capable of doing this. What I wasn't so sure about was if her trust in my abilities was justified.

"But... I messed up... everything. The kitchen... It's all dirty now. And the cakes are wasted..."

"That doesn't sound too bad. Show me."

Before leading her to the kitchen, I glanced at the lounge door and wondered how Kitty fared in there. If it were true that she had no clue that our pets were girls wearing rubber costumes, she must have been having a heart attack right now, but Elizabeth tried to be reassuring.

"Oh, don't worry about Kitty. I'm sure she is in heaven. I'll go check on her soon."

"O...okay."

Avoiding the food that I had spread all over the hallway, I entered the kitchen area, and as soon as I saw the pile of crushed cake boxes and all the bottles leaking food, my heart sank, and

my face turned beet red with shame. It was beyond embarrassing, and I just braced for the harsh comments Elizabeth would direct at me.

"So, where is the problem?"

"..."

"Clara? What did you want to show me?"

"The... boxes... and... the bottles..."

"Yes, I will clean it for you, but what is the big problem?"

"..."

"Was that it?"

"Yes... the cakes fell... and..."

"Okay, you had a little accident. It's no big deal. I'm sure you've heard waitresses dropping glasses or plates in a restaurant before. It's normal when you work in a café. Where is your mop?"

"O... Over there..."

I felt even worse now that Elizabeth acted as if there was nothing wrong. She went to grab the mop, leaving me paralyzed behind. How come she was able to react so calmly while facing this mess? Panic had been the only reaction I had been able to express. When she grabbed the mop and started filling the bucket in the sink, my soul sank some more. That was all I needed; a feeling of guilt ravaging me because she was working and I was not. I was in charge, but someone else was doing my job.

"Clara? Outside the kitchen, do you have other issues?"

"Y... yes. I was mean... to Oreo... I panicked and... and I said mean things to her..."

"Oh? Where is she now?"

"Upstairs... in the costume room. I think..."

"Well, I think that should be your top priority. Lucy won't mind if you lost a cake or two, but if you made one of her pets sad, that probably wouldn't fly. You should go see Oreo and make up with her. I'll take care of the cleaning. Don't worry about me."

"O... okay."

Once more, she was right. That was the thing that made me feel the worst, the way I hurt Oreo. I didn't want her to hate me, and also, I knew how fragile she was. The minute I left the costume room after scolding her, I had felt guilt. I had never treated a pet this way before, and it was a horrible feeling.

I exited the kitchen and ran up the stairs.

"Oreo?... Oreo?"

When I entered the costume room, it was empty. She wasn't there anymore, and her costume was gone too. My stomach twisted at the thought that she may have left the café without me noticing. If that were the case, Lucy would never forgive me. A heavy feeling of dread weighed on my small shoulders. I have always hated those catastrophic scenarios that I built inside my head, but I seemed to do everything right to feed them.

"Oreooo? Where are you, Oreo!?! Please! I want to talk!"

"... here... I'm here."

A faint girly voice came from outside the costume room. I looked both ways in the hallway.

"Oreo?"

My ears caught a small noise. It sounded like... someone was sobbing. Silently, I followed the little cry, and it led me to the capsule room. The bottom pod had its door half-closed, which was a bit unusual. So I approached it and slid it open before looking inside.

A small girl partially wearing a black and white rubber suit in the far corner of the pod hugged her knees and cried quietly.

"O... Oreo? Can I... come in?"

"I couldn't... I couldn't put it on... by myself. My costume."

Seeing her cry like this made my eyes well up. But I found enough courage to crawl inside the pod and sit next to her, in the same miserable position as she was. I didn't know if it would have been okay to wrap my arms around her small body, so I didn't do it. I didn't feel like I deserved to cuddle, not after what I had done to her.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Oreo. I... I didn't mean to say those things to you."

"So... you don't think I'm a... liar?"

"...No, Oreo. No. I should have said that. It wasn't nice."

"You know, I... I just wanted to help. I wanted to replace Trixie and help with the clients."

"Yes, I know. I... I forgot you were a pet... and I am not. We don't see things the same way, I suppose."

"So, you are not mad at me anymore, Clara?"

"... No. You are my friend, and I don't want you to be sad. I panicked and said mean things."

Oreo, who was dressed up in her rubber pet costume except for the mask dangling over her chest, looked at me with her mesmerizing eyes. While her gaze froze me, she crawled in front of me, and then, in the most unexpected way, she pressed her lips on mine.

"Mmm!"

"Mmm!"

For a very long silent moment, she stayed there, not using her tongue, just applying enough pressure to make us feel better, to make us reconnect. I placed my two hands on each side of her head and scratched her black hair. It was like yesterday when I met her for the first time. Why was my heart beating so fast when she kissed me? Why did she smell so good? Why was it so different than with the other pets?

The impromptu kiss ended, just to be replaced by an equally long one. But this time, Oreo started pressing a bit more, trying to wrap her paws around me.

I really wanted to... really wanted to...

But the café! I was in charge of the café. It wasn't a good time. I had to snap out of it.

"O... Oreo. Stop... Please..."

"..."

"I... I have to go back downstairs... Elizabeth is doing my job... It's wrong."

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes... The artist who created your costume. She is helping me."

"Really? I've never met her. The same woman Misti and you went to see a while ago?"

"Yes. Her friend is here too. She is playing with the pets... I think."

"Okay, I'll go see them. But, can you help me with my costume?"

"Yes. Of course."

Having put an end to this oddly romantic scene had been the right thing to do. I felt much better and motivated than a few minutes ago. I didn't feel I had correctly apologized, but somehow this long kiss had made me feel like I did.

Relatively confident that Oreo was okay with how things had turned, I helped her put her mask on and zipped her in, which put an end to any additional discussion. We made a short trip to the costume room to install her locks, and then she was good to go. Her little arms wrapped around me for a long hug. It made me feel weird not having an idea when I would have an

opportunity to see her out of costume again. I would have loved to spend a bit more time with Oreo and get to know her better. This little bondage creature had left a strong impression on me.

"Alright, Oreo. Let's go take care of that café. Okay?"

Oreo nodded.

As we walked downstairs, we saw Elizabeth mopping the hallway.

"Oh, Clara, Oreo. So, everything is good now?"

"Yes. Thanks. I will go clean the kitchen."

"That's done already. I cleaned the fridge, the cabinets, and now I'm just finishing mopping the cake trail. It was really not that bad. Oh, but I did go see how Kitty was doing in the lounge. She was in heaven as expected. But the pets kept pointing at their own belly. Do you think they are hungry?"

"Oh nooo... I forgot to feed them."

"Okay, the food bottles are on the countertop, still. I'm sure there are enough for them all."

I trotted back to the kitchen with Oreo in tow. At least that cute cat already had breakfast, so I just needed to get bottles for Vix, Asha, Meeka, and Misti. I was pretty sure they wouldn't be too picky, except Meeka, who was a hardcore vegetarian.

After grabbing a serving tray, I inspected the remaining bottles. Elizabeth had wiped them clean already; she was working very fast.

"Okay... I have the bottle for Vix, Meeka, and Misti, but none for Asha. Do you think she will be okay if I make her eat Trixie's food?"

Oreo nodded.

I placed the four food bottles on the tray and filled a couple of water bottles as well. I had no idea when was the last time they had something to drink. Probably the pets would let me know.

In a hurry, Oreo and I headed back to the lounge.

As soon as I opened the door, I expected a tidal wave of pets rolling over me in a battle to be fed first, but the opposite happened. None of them even looked at me because they were all in the corner, cuddling with Elizabeth's friend. All I could hear was this Kitty girl repeatedly saying

how cute and warm the pets were. Was it possible that she had a thing for latex and petgirls as much as I did?

Nevertheless, this scenario turned to my advantage. I would not have to converse with her or battle with the pets. Instead, I sat on a couch and placed my tray on the table.

"Oreo, can you get one of them and bring her here. I think Misti was really hungry."

Oreo nodded.

The black and white cat fast-walked to the pile of pets and wrapped her arms around Misti's waist, who didn't want to follow. After gesticulating something, Oreo convinced her to come to eat. As if she was in a hurry, Misti jumped on my couch and laid down on her back, ready to be fed.

Usually, I took the time to play with them a little bit, but since she rolled her paw to make me accelerate the pace, I plugged the bottle's tip in her under-chin hole right away.

"Are you okay, Misti?"

She nodded and danced a bit like a bacon strip on the couch. For some reason, she was in an excellent mood. It seemed that she had enjoyed playing with Kitty a lot.

Then the lounge door opened, and two young women walked in. I forgot that the café was open for business. Elizabeth must have welcomed the clients and let them in. They looked friendly enough, so I dared address them from a distance.

"Welcome... to the Cakes & Pets. I'll be with you... in a minute. Okay?"

"Oh, yes. Take your time... and... Ooooh! Can we pet the black and white cat? She looks like that character from the TV show."

"Oh, yes. That's Oreo. But don't compare her to that character. She doesn't like it very much."

"Haha. Okay. Good to know. Come here, little kitty."

Oreo unhesitantly skipped to their booth and climbed on them. She was one of the crowd's favorites since this famous series aired on TV. It had angered her at first, but she got used to it and now appreciated all the attention it brought her.

The food level of the bottle went down quickly. Misti was sucking very hard, probably so she could go back and play with her new friend.

"Do you want a bit of water too, Misti?"

Misti nodded.

Once I released Misti, I went to see the clients and took their order. Fortunately for me, it was simple enough; two milk glasses and two cheesecakes.

I ran out of the lounge and rushed to the kitchen. Elizabeth said she would take a look at the crushed cakes, but I was still a bit worried that we would have none to sell.

"Oh, Clara. Did the clients order something?"

"Yes. Two milk glasses and two cheesecakes."

"I put all the cakes back in the fridge for you."

"Were they... okay?"

"Some of them, yes, but I fixed the others. It was really not that bad. Except for the one you had dropped on the floor. That was not salvageable. Okay, since everything is under control, do you mind if I fix Kitty a little breakfast? That's why we came here in the first place. I will pay, of course."

"Oh, sure. No problem."

Was that it? Were all my problems magically fixed? Had Elizabeth saved the cakes and the day? No matter what it was, I was happy to see things finally going in the right direction. The kitchen was clean, I had started feeding the pets, the cakes were apparently not too damaged, and I had resolved my little conflict with Oreo. I could now do what Lucy had asked me and would try to take care of the clients until her return.

While Elizabeth prepared a snack for herself and Kitty, I prepared my order with a renewed confidence that I could do this. Serving cakes wasn't that hard, after all, and I should be able to keep up unless I got swarmed with new clients.

I returned to the lounge and served the cakes to my customers. Vix and Asha were waiting in front of the food bottles, probably starving. I could hear their little stomachs rumbling from a distance, so I hurried and sat between the two of them.

"Alright, who is next."

Vix pointed at Asha with her cushy paw, wanting to be nice to her friend, or maybe she just wanted to spend a bit more time with me. Asha didn't argue one bit and laid down on my lap so I could give her her food.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth came back with her breakfast plates and called Kitty over. As much as Kitty had scared me the first time I met her, it was kind of nice to see how happy she was today. She almost looked like a child in a candy store this time around. It was obvious that she had fallen madly in love with Meeka, the rubber raccoon as I had never seen someone hugging her this hard, to the point where Elizabeth had to scold her. Meeka's body language didn't seem to indicate any problems, though. She was hugging Kitty with the same rib-cracking strength.

For the next two hours, I took good care of the clients and the pets. Thankfully, it was a quiet day. The only real problem I bumped into was that I didn't know how to use the cash register. But when I explained this to the clients, they all tried to accommodate me by either giving me the exact money or telling me to keep the extra change. Only one man didn't have any paper money but he left me his contact info and said he would come back in the afternoon to pay for his cake if Lucy wasn't back before he left.

Around noon, though, Elizabeth announced that they had to depart, or else Kitty would stay here all day. A fierce battle took place when she tried to separate Kitty from Meeka, but she managed to regain control over her friend with some brute force and sweet words.

I walked with them outside the lounge to thank Elizabeth properly for all her help.

"I... I want to thank you... Elizabeth. Without you, I would have been in big trouble."

"Oh, it's nothing. I only did a bit of cleanup. You handled the clients like a pro. I understand why Lucy put you in charge. so don't be too hard on yourself."

"Yes. I'll try."

Kitty, on her tiptoes, looked through the vertical window of the lounge door to observe her new friends one last time. I could see a bunch of cushy paws waving at her. The pets seemed to have adopted her pretty quickly.

But all good things had to come to an end, and Elizabeth recalled her.

"Alright, Kitty. Come on. We will come back another day. I promise."

For once, Kitty wasn't shouting or arguing. It's seemed that the animal café had left its mark on her heart. She had discovered something magical, a little bit like when I had first visited this

place myself, and now she was very sad to leave. I could see her eyes watering. She pressed her small hand in the window one last time, and Meeka, on the other side, did the same.

"Okay, Kitty. Thank our host, and we will be on our way."

"ACK!"

Instead of talking, she jumped into my arms and gave me a giant ribs-shattering hug. I returned it as much as my nervous system allowed me to. She then approached her mouth from my ear and whispered something.

"Goodbye, Clara! Thanks for having lied to me! I'm so glad you did."

She let me go and rejoined Elizabeth's side before they turned around and headed toward the exit. As Elizabeth was about to walk out, she told me one last thing.

"Oh, and don't tell Lucy we were here. I wanted to surprise her. I will come back another day."

"O... okay. I won't."

"TRIXIIIE! You are alright!"

"Yeah, kind of. My arm is broken."

About two hours after Elizabeth left, Lucy arrived at the café with Trixie and Accalia. Trixie had a fresh white cast, but she didn't look sick or in a bad mood.

Lucy hugged her from behind.

"Four to Six weeks. You'll have to be patient, Trixie. I'll give you some nice cake so you heal faster."

"That's a good treatment. I'll take all the free cakes I can."

"And you'll get to spend all that time with Clara at the pethouse. See, things are good."

"Yeah, but I can't really cuddle right now. And my arm is all itchy."

The poor rabbit girl went to sit on one of the available couches with Accalia while Lucy walked back to the kitchen with me to get my report.

"So, Clara. How did it go?"

"Well... good."

"Ah, I knew I could count on you."

"I made... some mistakes."

"Mistakes? Like what."

"I dropped a cake on the floor... and lost a few food bottles."

"Haha. That happened to me as well. So embarrassing. I hope it was not the triple chocolate cake, though, because it's Trixie's favorite."

"Uh oh..."

"Oh no! Was it the one? Ah well. She will live."

I couldn't tell Lucy about my little meltdown and how Elizabeth had saved me because she had asked me not to. Perhaps one day, the cat would get out of the bag, but it wasn't a priority at the moment. At the end of the day, even if I had received some precious help, I was still proud of myself for having run the café, even if only for a short time. I wasn't nearly close to being a super owner like Lucy, but I had gained enough confidence for wanting to try this again one day. The only big thing would be to learn how the cash register worked.

For the next few minutes, I gave all the money I had made to Lucy and explained that some clients would come back later to pay. We discussed back and forth about how I served the clients, and she gave me some useful tips for the next time I would be put in that situation. Overall, she seemed to be very satisfied with my performance.

Another unexpected thing she was happy to see was that Oreo was wearing her costume. She said that she had forgotten to tell me that it was what she had wanted me to do and was happy that I had taken the initiative. Shamelessly, and without going into too many details, I explained that Oreo had decided to do that on her own. I just couldn't get credit for everything.

After hugging Lucy, I returned to the lounge to get Accalia and Trixie. It was time for us to return to the pethouse so Trixie could rest.

Before leaving, I hugged all the pets tightly. I squeezed Vix really hard, I kissed Asha on the muzzle, I scratched Misti's ears, I rubbed Meeka's neck... And Oreo... I took her in my arms and whispered something in her ear.

"Thanks for everything, Oreo. And thanks for the kisses. I'm sad I won't be able to spend the next few days with you, but we can do more things together when you are off again. Okay?"

Oreo nodded and hugged me just a bit harder. I just didn't want to let her go.

But then some high-pitch mocking voices came from behind me!

"Acca... Is it me, or they seem to like each other a lot?"

"Oh yes, Trixie. Oreo is Clara's special person."

"I see."

My face turned beet red again, and Oreo and I just separated right away, embarrassed of having extended our hug for a bit too long.

"Heeey! It's nothing like that, okay! She... She just helped me a lot today!"

Trixie smirked.

"Yes, Acca... Oreo is definitely Clara's special person."

"Yup!"

"But we are still going to go on dates with Clara, so whatever. Let's go home now. I want to sleep. Those pills they gave me make me feel all wobbly."

And just like that, with me pointlessly arguing that Oreo was not my special person, Accalia, Trixie, and I exited the animal café and walked together back to the pethouse.

Every single day at the café was a challenging experience. But I was really starting to enjoy it.

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