**Title**: Close Encounters of the Bun Kind

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Sunshine flooded the porch on a clear blue mid-December afternoon as Apricot and her brother Peach egressed the house and arrived on the scene. Peach took a quick hop around the enclosed porch, inspected the perimeter, and found two humans. They wore muzzles made of cloth or a strange paper and seemed to be trying to keep away from each other. One of them was Susan, their faithful servant. But the other smelled of strangeness and other rabbits, and Peach didn’t recognize him. Still, all seemed well enough.

“Hey, Appy,” Peach said, “all’s clear here, but there is a weirdo sitting on the floor looking at us. He’s not doing anything. We can go back now.”

Apricot looked around cautiously from behind the wicker chair in a corner and nodded. “Yeah, let’s go back. I don’t even know why we came out here in the first place.”

That’s when Susan picked up Peach and set him down on a wicker couch on the west side of the porch. Before Peach could blink, Apricot was sitting next to him.

“Now what?” exclaimed Apricot, none too pleased by this turn of events. They both looked at the stranger, horrified by his proximity, and tried not to show their distress. Their mouths betrayed no trepidation, cloaked in the permafrost of disapproval.

They sat up, keeping one eye on the stranger and one on the door leading back to the house. As the sunshine washed over them, their coats glowed amber and honey. The man reached out and tried to rub Peach’s nose. Peach ducked at first but then relented a little.

“Hey, Appy? Maybe this lunk ain’t so bad?” mumbled Peach, trying not to grit his teeth or show that he enjoyed the nose rub. But when the man offered them a digestive cookie, they knew better than to touch it.

“Peach, are we just gonna sit here, or are we gonna make a run for it?” whispered Apricot. She was getting impatient while Peach, warming in the sun, grew drowsy watching the human.

“Peach! Peach!” Apricot sounded alarmed.

Peach perked up. “What’s wrong?”

“What if he’s gonna take us away? Did you know Susan has us listed as ‘looking for their forever home’? I’m telling you, I’m worried. I didn’t want to say anything before, but I don’t like this.”

Peach became quiet and furrowed his brow. After a while, he thumped and said, “Oh, no, no sir, no way. That’s crazy; why would she do that? Do you think this guy will abduct us or something? I think he only wants to sit here and stare at us. Do you see one of those carrier things anywhere? Because I don’t.”

The human picked up a small, black contraption. He pointed it at Peach and Appy and it started to make occasional clicking sounds.

“What the thump? Peach, what is that? What’s he doing now?”

“Um, I don’t—wait! He’s scanning us! He’s scanning us, I tell you! I bet you a mint leaf it’s for our spacesuits!” Peach said excitedly.

“Peach, you’re off your rocker.” Apricot sighed, and tried to calm her brother. “I know what he’s doing. He’s just taking pictures.”

“I’m serious, Appy. A hundred miles to the east of here humans fly rockets into space. Alpha Centauri, here we come!”

“Oh, Peach, do you need a nap? Are you hungry?” asked Apricot, transforming into the perfect loaf and resting against the back of the couch.

The human’s contraption kept on clicking; sometimes he leaned toward them, then backed away, or shifted right or left. It went on and on like that, making minutes feel like hours. At least it was nice and warm, sitting in the sunlight, yet not getting too hot.

“Peach, ignore him and try napping,” suggested Apricot, her eyes closed. But Peach, whipped into an adventurous frenzy, couldn’t sit still and tried climbing all over the couch.

Apricot kept quiet about the stranger. She realized now he was the one who had chatted with Susan about coming over, and there was nothing to worry about. Keeping tabs on Susan’s phone was paying off now.

She knew the human was only taking pictures and would turn them over to Susan and the rescue. Yes, Susan was indeed trying to find them a new forever home, and this guy was trying to help. *Thump!*

The human man was a bun servant; that was true. Over time, buns had grown on him more and more. He had a website—a just-for-fun kind of thing, attributing unhealthy amounts of sarcasm to lagomorphs from all hops of life. They were random buns at first, but then he began featuring rescue buns looking for forever homes, or rescue success stories. Before the pandemic, he would go to those meet-and-greet events that two local rescues were organizing. He would prostrate himself in the X-pens, pretending to beat the ground with his thick forehead. But when no bun was looking, he would sneak in those clicks and steal the buns’ expressions when they were at their cutest. He would make up stories about how the buns fly through space and live free of humans and other maladies.

Here he was again on the floor, pointing the clicky thing up at them, making them look greater than life, grander, taller, sky-bound. Peach—he took a particular liking to Peach. Was it because Peach was missing his right front leg? Was it because that didn’t slow him down one bit? That was Peach—he adapted very well. He binkied on, he overbunned, and if given half a chance, he would set out for Alpha Centauri in a heartbeat!

Appy looked at Susan. She’d been with the rescue forever and carried on with the day-to-day grind, the caring routine only a special few could handle. Take Binks, for example, the elder bun in residence. One day he’d had a good forever home, and the next, he didn’t. But it all changed when he arrived at Susan’s. She’d slept on the floor next to him when he was going through some rough patches, and saved him from the Great Beyond.

The clicking sounds stopped; the human set his apparatus on the ground. Apricot, disturbed by the silence, woke up from her nap.

“What’s he doing, Peach?” she asked.

“I don’t know. The humans are yakking away again. I can’t read their lips through those muzzles, you know.” Peach was pretending not to pay attention to the humans.

Out of the blue, Susan got up and whisked away Peach and Appy, one by one, taking them back inside the house. You could barely hear Appy briefing the other buns about the encounter:

“No, don’t worry, AJ; they just sit and look at you. What? No, you silly bun! They’re not gonna kidnap you; they’re not from Alpha Centauri. They’re only humans.”

A moment later, AJ Cannon, a dashing, permanent resident, took over the couch on the porch and basked in the late afternoon sun, whiskers twitching in the breeze.