

A Quick Explanation:

This story uses chakats, a race of furry cat-taurs developed by a friend of mine, Bernard Doove. Cat-taurs are like centaurs, but using a feline build for both the upper and lower body structures. They have the lower body of a large cat, with four paws and an upper body of an anthropomorphic feline, with two hands, so they have six appendages in all, seven if you count their tail, which is fairly prehensile.

Because the chakats are also hermaphrodites, and in keeping with Bernard's universe setting, I've adopted his usage of combined-gender pronouns such as "shi" and "hir" for this story. For more information on them, please check out Bernard Doove's [introduction to chakats](#).

Turning Point

Will A. Sanborn

6/30 - 7/2/97

Ambereyes paused in hir walking as shi came upon the edge of the small playground. Stopping, the chakat looked upon the small group of children from the colony's diverse range of species that was there. As shi watched them happily playing together hir ears drooped slightly. Out of all the places to go, why had hir wanderings taken hir here? Hadn't shi wanted to stay away from things that would remind hir of hir loss? The cat-taur's tail flickered nervously.

It had been several weeks since the accident, but the pain was still strong within hir. It shouldn't have happened, but they'd both known the risks when they'd signed up for the contract. When a routine survey mission had discovered rich veins of precious heavy metals on Ceres Beta, several companies had scrambled for the opportunity to exploit it. Ceres Beta was primarily an agricultural colony, but it was possible to mine the world for its riches without disturbing the colonists too much. The settlements of the planet were small and luckily the largest veins of the precious ores were located away from the larger communities. Of course some farmers living in the outskirts had to sell their land, but at a tidy profit. The land was still plentiful, and it was easy enough to relocate farms along the planet's wide temperate zones.

A terran company had won most of the mining rights to the new world, and Ambereyes and hir mate Swiftpounce had been along with the first wave of workers sent to the colony to start the mining operations. It was their second stint off-world, moving from one colony to another. They'd left Chakona a couple of years ago to make their fortunes, hoping to return before too long, to settle down and raise a family.

Their current stint looked like it was going to provide them with just that opportunity. The two of them had been lucky in the fact that they'd been working on a colony much closer to Ceres Beta than Earth was. The mining operations on that colony were run by the same corporation which had won the mineral rights to the new claim. Because of the richness of the mineral deposits and the profits to be made, the company was eager to get workers to Ceres Beta as quickly as possible. Those to sign on at first got huge bonuses.

The setup was perfect, they could do the same jobs they'd been doing, but for close to three times the salary. They'd already collected up a rather tidy nest egg, saving most of their pay

since while living on the company's bases, most of the expenses were paid for. As long as you didn't spend your money foolishly on imported commodities, it wasn't too hard to grow a good-sized bank account.

They'd been shrewd and saved so much, and had begun thinking of going back home, returning to their family and friends back on Chakona. They were a little over a third of the way through their six-month contract on Ceres Beta when they decided they wouldn't renew their options when the time came. They'd already made a nice sum of money, and it was likely that now that the urgency to the situation had passed, the company wouldn't be paying out the same high salaries for the next season's contracts.

After talking it out, they'd finally decided on it. They'd been away for too long, and it was time to go home. As a celebration of their decision, Swiftpounce had asked Ambereyes to impregnate hir the next time shi reached the peak of hir fertility cycle. They were looking forward to using their amassed savings to retire back to Chakona and to more-normal jobs, and were both ready for the gift of cubs. The two of them couldn't wait until they'd be proud parents with a child of their own.

At the time it had seemed so right, the timing was almost perfect. Swiftpounce could easily work while shi was a few months pregnant and there were no company regulations against it. They'd already decided to return home in a few months anyway, and what better way to start a new life than with the promise of a new addition to their family.

Now of course, shi could see the bitter folly to their thinking and how careless their decision had been. Even with the latest mining machinery and the highest safety standards mandated by the corporate policies, equipment could still malfunction. Accidents still could and did happen. Shi and Swiftpounce had seen one on their previous contract, but even that hadn't been as serious as the one which had struck hir mate.

It had been another day, just like the rest of them. Ambereyes was busy helping to run the computers in the operations center as usual. That was hir area of expertise, monitoring the readouts from the sensor scans, following the mining progress and working at fine-tuning efficiency procedures. Swiftpounce on the other hand was involved in the actual mining operations, having been trained on the latest equipment the company used. Shi was in that section of the mine that day when the accident occurred, and shi'd been caught in the middle of the devastation.

Ambereyes had heard the alarm sound and was very quick to respond to it, rushing to the terminal, hir worry controlled by stoic professionalism. It wasn't until shi found out where the accident had occurred and to what extent the danger was that shi lost hir composure. Shi'd frantically tried to reach Swiftpounce on the com-link, but it was hopeless, all shi got was cold static.

Shi hadn't been able to get down to the mine of course, it was off limits while the rescue team worked so hard to try and do their job. After they'd cleared away all the rubble, only one survivor had remained. Of the human, the fox-morph and Swiftpounce who'd been caught in the accident, only the fox had survived, and even he was in critical condition for a couple of days.

Ambereyes was devastated. Not only had shi lost hir mate, but in one quick blink of an eye,

fate had taken their unborn cub away from hir as well. Swiftpounce had only been ten weeks pregnant, but the two of them could still sense the life growing within hir. They'd talked about it so much, planning what their new life would be like when they got home and could welcome the arrival of their cub.

Now it was all gone, all their dreams, all their hopes, wiped out in one single moment of disaster. Ambereyes had chosen to have Swiftpounce cremated, not wishing to have hir buried alone on Ceres Beta, so shi could take hir mate's ashes home to Chakona with hir. Shi'd gone through a simple memorial service attended by many of the miners, but it just wasn't the same without any chakats present.

Because they were part of the first wave of miners to the planet, Ambereyes and Swiftpounce had been the only chakats in their group. There were other chakats at other mining installations scattered around the planet, but even the nearest one was still over fifteen-hundred kilometers away. It was hard to arrange for a transfer to a different location, because the company was strapped for personnel as it was. They'd been understanding of hir loss and had given hir a leave from work, but it still wasn't enough.

The mourning had been extremely hard on hir without the support of family and friends. Sure shi was close to some of the other miners, and they did help to comfort hir some, but without the closeness of hir own kind shi was lost in hir depression. Communication with home was very slow and didn't even come close to a real-time conversation. It helped a little, but not enough. To make matters worse, it was still almost two months before a transport ship with a flight route going near Chakona was due in. There was a transport ship of new arrivals coming around in a few weeks, but that was from Earth, and shi didn't know what the possibility of there being any chakats on board was.

Finally shi'd returned back to work, trying to keep busy. Shi could keep hir mind occupied during the day, but the same sad, familiar thoughts returned to hir at night. Shi'd gone out walking that evening, hoping to try and clear hir mind, and in hir wanderings had come upon the playground. It was a small playground for the children of workers at the mining installation. Many of the miners of course didn't have children, but some did and given the lush setting of Ceres Beta, it wasn't a bad place to have your family stay at while you made your fortune.

The playground was smaller than one available at larger settlements and it didn't have the trappings of those in a more standard community-oriented setting, but the children still enjoyed it. Playing on the few pieces of equipment the playground had, and running along the wide expanse of grass, they didn't seem any worse for wear living in the mining colony. Most of them probably thought it was just one big adventure anyway.

Watching the cubs of a few different races play amongst themselves and then looking over to see their mothers watching them contentedly as they played, Ambereyes felt familiar stirrings of hir loss eating away at hir. It wasn't fair, shi was supposed to get a chance to do this with hir cub and to share the experience with Swiftpounce, but now that was all gone.

Shi felt the tears beginning to sting at hir eyes when shi noticed a young fox girl looking at hir from a distance. Shi watched the little vixen for a few moments before the cub starting running towards hir. The pangs of panic rumbling in hir stomach, Ambereyes froze, uncertain of what to do. Once again shi wondered what shi was doing there and how shi was going to handle the impending encounter.

Shi couldn't just turn and run, not with the cub hurrying towards hir so eagerly, hir chakat sense of amicability wouldn't let hir due that. It overwhelmed hir discomfort, freezing hir in place.

In the space of ten or fifteen seconds the cub had reached hir. Stopping, pausing to look up at the chakat, the young fox just gazed upon hir with an expression of awe that only a child could muster. Ambereyes still felt the wetness to hir eyes and shi reached up to discretely try and wipe the light tears from them. If the cub had noticed, she paid no heed to the chakat's actions.

"You're a chakat aren't you?" the fox asked hir excitedly.

"Yes I am," Ambereyes breathed out softly, nodding as shi did so.

"I knew it. Daddy said there were some of you here, but I've never seen any of you until today. Yay, you're so neat with those extra paws you have..."

Ambereyes couldn't help but crack a smile at that, even if it was only a faint one. "Well then little one, I'm glad to meet you. My name's Ambereyes, you can call me Amber for short though. What's your name?"

"Oh, I'm Sara. Pleased to meet you Amber." The little fox's smile was infectious and Ambereyes felt hir ears perking up and hir tail beginning to twitch. Just then shi also saw the cub's mother walking over to them, looking on with an expression of slight concern on her face. Ambereyes was glad that shi'd recovered hir composure and shi managed a slight smile at the older vixen.

"It is so neat how you walk with four paws like that... I bet you'd give great horsey rides," Sara hinted at innocently.

"Sara, don't be rude to the nice chakat now. That's a fine thing to ask hir for" the cub's mother blurted out. From the look on her face, her embarrassment was quite obvious.

"No, it's okay" Ambereyes heard hirself say, and before shi even knew what shi was doing hir old gregarious nature had come out. "I think I can give you a horsey ride. I've never done it before, but I think we can try it." Shi realized quickly enough what an awkward position shi'd placed hirself in. However, shi couldn't really back out of it and the expectant look on the child's face melted much of hir doubts away.

Sara giggled enthusiastically at the chakat's offer and was oblivious to her mother's concerns, her tail wagging excitedly. Ambereyes looked up at the older vixen and let hir expression show the woman that everything was alright. Once the cub's mother was convinced Ambereyes bent down to gingerly pick the eager cub up in hir arms, and place the small fox on hir back.

Hesitating, feeling a little awkward and foolish, shi chuckled softly to hirself and took a step forward. Easily getting used to the light added weight of hir precious cargo, Ambereyes began to walk forward normally. Easing into the swing of things, shi then added just a slight bounce to hir step so shi'd gently rock Sara as shi moved along. The cub's giggles were obvious feedback that she was enjoying the game.

"Wheeee, you're great at this Amber. You're ever better than Daddy... Faster please." Sara asked, with just a small amount of an order in her voice.

Ambereyes was happy to comply with the little fox's wishes. Shi was surprised at just how much fun shi was having with this little cub, it was some of the personal contact shi'd so sorely needed lately. It came from an unexpected source, and not exactly something shi would've thought of, but it was working. For a few moments at least hir mind was at ease and shi could simply enjoy playing with Sara. The fact that the little girl had singled hir out as a special playmate touched hir.

Shi continued to play the part for the darling little cub, prancing over the grass at the commands of hir rider, hir tail moving gracefully with hir body's movements. Shi even bucked lightly a few times to hear the squeals of Sara's excitement as the cub held onto on hir shoulders for support. Ambereyes kept the game going until of the rest of the children at the playground had noticed the spectacle and soon came over to get a better look it.

Seeing the small crowd that had gathered around hir, the chakat slowed hir movements. "I think that's enough for now kiddo" shi said as shi came to a stop.

"Awww, okay... Thank-you amber, that was great." The little fox hugged hir tightly for a couple of moments, then jumped down off hir back.

"Can I have a ride next?" one of the other children in the group, a human boy, asked.

Looking at his hopeful expression and those of the rest of the children, the chakat gave him a small, apologetic smile, hir ears flickering a little nervously. "Ummm, not right now. I think I need a break, but maybe later, okay?"

The boy nodded disappointedly, but accepted hir postponement without much fuss. Hesitating briefly, Ambereyes walked slowly away from the group. Leaving them, shi saw the children move onto something else, a new game having caught their attention. Sara's mother walked next to hir and they headed for a nearby bench. The vixen took a seat on it while Ambereyes sat down on hir hind legs, keeping hir head at the same level as the fox's.

"I really should apologize for Sara's impulsiveness, she isn't usually that pushy..." the vixen began.

"No, it's okay, it was enjoyable."

The fox woman breathed a slight sigh of relief, then hurriedly replied with. "Oh, I never caught your name. I'm Jess."

"Ambereyes... You have a wonderful daughter Jess."

"Thanks. She can be a handful at times, but I love her." Seeing Ambereyes' contented smile, she continued. "Have you ever thought about having cubs yourself? You'd be perfect with them."

The chakat's expression changed abruptly, and she saw hir mood darken visibly. Her mind struggling to figure out what she could have possibly said wrong Jess' own face slackened, her ears drooping slightly. "Something happened to you, didn't it... something bad?"

Ambereyes only nodded dully, and a moment later the answer jumped into the vixen's mind. "Oh no, there was a chakat that died in that accident wasn't there... shi was your mate wasn't

shi?"

"Yes," Ambereyes croaked out. "Shi was carrying our cub when it happened, and now I've lost them both..."

Jess watched as the chakat's eyes began to fill with tears once again. Hir sobs soon followed, soft and low, but still powerful. Stunned by the unforeseen revelation, her mind shaking with its implications, the vixen watched on helplessly. She felt her own eyes watering as she saw the tears streaming down Ambereyes' cheeks.

Finally, choking back her guilt, she managed to speak. "I'm so sorry... It was my husband who was the survivor from it... You must really hate me..." Her gaze dropped downward as she finished.

"Oh no... No, of course not," Ambereyes whispered. "In fact meeting you has been the closest contact I've had with someone in quite some time..." Reaching out, shi gently took the vixen's hand in hers, looking back at Jess as she looked up at hir.

They stayed like that for several minutes, the shared silence between them easing the situation. Ambereyes' crying died down slowly and shi wiped the tears from hir cheeks, drying hir eyes. Looking at hir, Jess could still see the sadness shi carried within hir, but she also felt that their shared warmth was doing the chakat's heart some good.

Eventually the children got interested in the new arrival once again and wandered over to where the two adults were sitting. Jess glanced over at Ambereyes to try and get a grasp on hir feelings for the situation, but she couldn't read hir face. The chakat watched the group approaching with what could be a mix of both longing and nervousness, hir lips curling upward ever so slightly.

"Can Amber play with us again now?" Sara asked enthusiastically as she and the other kids approached. The rest of the children smiled hopefully up at the chakat.

"I don't think that's such a good idea right now honey," Jess answered, the nervousness evident in her voice.

"Awww Mom, please...?" the cub pleaded.

Seeing the little fox's needy expression, which was mirrored on the faces of the other children, Ambereyes gave in to the request. "It's okay Jess, I'm up for it... and I think I'd like that." Shi gave hir new friend a bittersweet smile, then focused hir attention on the kids in front of hir.

"Come on, I'll race you guys to that tree over there," and with a shout shi was off. The children took off after hir immediately, running to catch up as shi led them in the chase. About halfway there shi slowed hir pace, letting them catch up to hir. Giving them a good race to the tree, shi let a couple of them, the human boy and a slightly-older raccoon girl, beat hir.

It was soon decided that their new friend should play a few rounds of tag with them. As shi was caught up in the game, Ambereyes felt hir smile growing a little wider across hir muzzle. Hir happiness still tinged with hir loss, shi also knew that shi could not deny herself the possibility of experiencing those joys cubs of hir own in the future. Shi couldn't let it cripple hir for the rest of hir life, Swiftpounce wouldn't have wanted that.

Perhaps the next transport ship just might have a few chakats on board it after all. The members of hir race were highly sought-after as off-world contract workers, since their strength and versatility were perfect for this and many other types of jobs. It would take time to get over hir loss, and shi'd never forget what shi'd had with hir mate, but it was time to move on. Shi needed to make new friends who could help hir through the grieving process.

As shi played with the children on the playground, shi felt the faint glimmer of hope flicker to life within hir once again. Chasing after the kids in their game shi felt hir eyes watering lightly once again, but was content to ignore it as shi focused hir attention on the task at hand.

Copyright 1997, Will A. Sanborn - was1@shore.net

The Chakats copyright 1997, Bernard Doove