

# Different Worlds, Different Skins

## Humanity's Encounters with Other Races



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## Editor's Notes

I first learned about anthropomorphic animals when I discovered the furry fandom while browsing the internet at college in the early 1990s. I found a treasure trove of content on an FTP archive and then later the fanzine *Yarfl*, which introduced me to a world of talking animals outside of cartoons.

Having grown out of funny-animal comics, the fandom had a heavy influence of visual artwork, but there was a fair amount of fiction around as well. I was lucky to discover several wonderful stories early on, including Watt's Martin's dramatic horror novella "A Gift of Fire, a Gift of Blood" which had a vampire bat as sympathetic character. From that point I was hooked; I searched to find more tales, and eventually gave writing a try myself.

I liked the mix of the exotic and the familiar with anthropomorphic characters and I also appreciated how much of a meta genre it was, pulling in ideas from many sources. There were stories ranging from diverse backgrounds, besides the starting points of fantasy and science fiction. Animal characters made obvious vehicles to discuss issues of race and culture, and while some stories handled that better than others, there were several good and ambitious works to be found in the fandom.

The writers in the fandom have continued to play with these ideas over the years and there is a good amount of quality fiction and compelling stories to be found, if you know where to look. It is for this reason that I wanted to produce this anthology, not only to serve the fandom, but in hopes of offering these stories to a wider audience outside the furry community. The ideas of talking, thinking animal people are not so strange that they can't be enjoyed by lovers of fantasy or sci-fi, or even of classics such as *The Wind in the Willows* or Aesop's Fables.

This anthology has been a fulfilling project to work on. I've been lucky to have received so many wonderful stories and have been able to assemble a good collection of dramatic fiction on the theme. I wanted a book with the kinds of stories which first introduced me to anthropomorphic animals. The idea of a world of mixed races, human and furry, both mundane and exotic, fired my imagination and offered a doorway into new lands to be explored. It's my goal with this project to offer those ideas and dreams to a new group of readers and I hope you'll enjoy reading them.

– Will A. Sanborn

## **In the Shadow of the Dragon by Chris Goodwin**

She could not help but see the Dragon glittering in the distance as she approached, and she considered leaving the road which ran near it to avoid an encounter.

However, she had been walking for days now in strange territory. Her provisions were waning and the prospect of encountering an unknown challenge in the open desert seemed somehow less attractive. At least she knew something of dragons. But her knowledge was only what everyone knew:

Ages ago real dragons did not exist, and so a grand dreamer decided to bring them into being. This without understanding the consequences. This without seeming to grasp that the dragons of myth were monstrous and monstrously powerful. Even in the legends that cast them as benevolent, the dragons were too powerful, too arcane and too close to reptile for any mere mortal mind to fully understand. To create them was as for an ant to fashion the child that crushes it without thinking.

And this particular dreamer was not wise, merely able; so the dragons were made. They were made with such clever artifice that both the living and the dead would not know them to be machines. And the first few beasts did not know it themselves. But they knew they were powerful, more so than their creator. And they left her keep without a second thought. Those that felt themselves to be evil did evil. Those that felt themselves to be good did good. But what distinctions are these to small, wet, human minds? The snake is unknowable, and the cold clockworks, ultimately incomprehensible.

In fact, it was the most clever and benign of the goodly dragons that turned back while the others scattered over the earth. It turned back and destroyed their creator and her means of creation. In its eyes, she had done her life's work and heaven awaited. This great beast sacrificed itself to her destruction, and in its eyes this was a great honor to be humbly pursued. It cracked the earth asunder beneath her fortress; the dreamer and her dreams were lost, along with the best and brightest of her creations.

As for the rest of them in small ways, daily ways, the dragons acted out their parts and it was as if the old tales had come to life. The goodly dragons brought rain where needed, protected travelers upon the road and so on. Those that were evil, did terrible things indeed. Knights did battle, virgins were sacrificed. No dragon was ever defeated, only driven off to fly another day. The dreamer would have been pleased were she not dead, for there were dragons upon the earth for a thousand years, as if they had always been. Balanced, unchanging and eternal.

But these brilliant creatures were afflicted with a developing, cunning, clockwork logic. And over time those that did good began to see that their efforts did not matter; life was painful and suffering inevitable. Those that did evil came to realize that to spare the living was to condemn them to being alive amongst each other. So in time, the goodly dragons became

those that killed newborns to spare them life's sorrows, while those that did evil fought to save them. It was a twisted age, and there were dragons still upon the earth for a thousand years more.

This was what everybody knew, as well as that in recent memory their numbers unaccountably dwindled. Perhaps the dream was beginning to fade. Perhaps it was a sickness among them. Regardless, it was not through human effort, for no dragon had ever been defeated, only driven off to fly another day.

She held up her eyes against the glaring sun. In the distance it glittered and she was certain it was aware of her. There was nothing around for miles, just flat dried earth, the road and the sun. It would have seen her coming long ago. So she did not try to hide, she did not leave the road. She walked on sore feet and sipped from her waterskin and made her way to the Dragon that remained.

She was told it would be there. Those in the last village warned her.

"If you follow that road much further, you will meet the Dragon on your way."

"Will it harm me," she had asked. They shook their heads in fear.

"No, it is evil."

But she had no other choice. Along the road was her path. Within a stone's throw she paused to collect herself. The ancient creature studied her curiously, clicking loudly enough for her to hear on the wind. Its wings - once glorious - were now tattered stumps, but she had no doubt it could cross the distance to her quickly enough if it wanted to. It yawned and writhed its great tail, stirring up dust that slowly drifted up as a cloud.

She squatted and pulled some dried meat from her pouch, nibbling it and looking around. She waved away a fly that had been following her. There was no shade except for a patch of rocks behind the beast and she could not put it off any longer.

It watched her with eyes that irised open and closed like crisp, bladed flowers. She stood before it silently, looking up. It looked down at her. Neither said anything for a long time. She could see that its hide had been eroded or flayed off over most of its body. It had one good talon left that looked quite capable and wicked; the other was a mass of tangled mechanism.

"You are a machine," she finally said.

"So are you," it replied without a pause, in a glassy choral tone. But it did lower its head to her level, turning to focus a large round eye upon her. The broad lens was clear as a dewdrop, bright and wet. She saw herself reflected upon the surface.

"Is it far from here?"

"Not for me. For you, another day's journey."

"Now that I am close, it will be dangerous when night comes, won't it?"

"Not for me. You will most certainly be eaten or worse."

"I should camp here then."

"Because I will protect you."

“I was warned about you,” she said, unslinging her sack and walking closer. She entered into the shade of the Dragon with relief. It was cooler here, and closer still she felt the beast radiating an uncanny chill, humming.

“And with good reason.”

It did not touch her, not once. And in conversation it only responded to her, but it did so readily, quite willing to talk when prompted.

“I don’t want to leave,” she said the next day. And she meant it; there was stability and certainty here that she would not know anywhere else, under any other circumstance, with anyone else, at any other time. The Dragon was devoted, safe and could be trusted.

“But you must,” it replied, “If you stay, you will wither and starve.”

“There is nothing here for me but you. Nothing,” she said, to which the Dragon was at first silent. It watched her intently and then perhaps smiled.

“And you are always welcome, here.”

Later in life, in hard times, during moments of deepest doubt and hopeless dismay, she would remember this and regret her choice in some small way. And at her happiest, in the company of friends, family and those she valued most, she never again felt as safe and as certain of the people around her as she did under that bright creature’s gaze.



## Le Roux's Love Center by Phil Geusz

Going to the drive-in with your family can be pretty uncool when you're a teenager. But for a were-rabbit, it can be pretty special. After all, it beats sitting in a cage the whole night of the Full Moon, or being hidden away in a back closet like happens to some 'weres whose parents can't deal with it. And it's kinda nice to know that my folks care enough about me to drive two hundred miles every twenty-nine and a half days so that I can undergo my Change in what they consider to be positive surroundings.

I'll never forget the first time we went to Le Roux's Child Lycanthropy Prey-Species Love Center: I was only thirteen, and still just a kid myself. It was converted from an old drive-in theater, which seemed kind of weird at first. But the arrangements made perfect sense, once you saw them. Drive-ins have always been good places for families to get together, and with a few minor changes the setting was ideal for Change night. We were-kids could socialize and be together, yet be kept safe from all the various sorts of predators. And safe is cool for us prey-types. Even as teens, we tend to be rather cautious.

The place looks kinda spooky from the highway. There's this utterly humongous movie screen, and double sixteen-foot-high cyclone fences all the way around. They used to be fourteen-footers, but that was before one of us kids – a were-kangaroo who goes non-sentient when he Changes – escaped by leaping clear over the fences. Usually in a drive-in the cars all line up for tickets, but here you had to park and get evaluated in a little hospital-thingie before they let you in. I'd been evaluated lots of times, but I guess they had to see for themselves. Probably it's an insurance thing. My parents had called ahead, so we didn't have to wait a long time like some families did. But still, it seemed to take forever.

A lot of kids with lycanthropy are hidden away by their parents, but I'm lucky. I got mine from Aunt Judy when I was still little. It happened before she even realized that she was infected herself, and since then she hasn't spread it to anyone else. I think that maybe my family is more understanding than most because of this. They know it wasn't anyone's fault. Most of the parents who were waiting with their kids looked ashamed, though. Like they'd done something wrong. And the kids themselves seemed sad and nervous.

At least the nervous part was easy to understand. It was the day of the Full Moon, after all, and I was on pins and needles myself. You see, Le Roux's Love Center specializes in working with herbivorous were-kids and their families. Prey types, in other words. Deer. Impala. Rats. Mice. And rabbits like me. Were-wolves and such love the full moon, but for us it's a time of danger and fear. If a prey were-kid is careless – or even just unlucky! – he can get eaten. Perhaps by a classmate and friend, caught up in the mindless bloodlust.

Finally, we were shown to an examination room in the back. A doctor came to check me out. He was wearing a yellow button that read 'Love Center Volunteer' in red ink. Dr. Yen was his name.

Mom had filled out a little folder about me, and the doctor studied it with great care. Then he asked me a few questions.

"Scott," he asked, "Are you a vegetarian all the time?"

"Well," I replied, "I like to drink milk. And sometimes at school I eat a piece of ham. Just to prove to the other kids I can."

"Mm-hmm. And does it make you ill?"

"Well... Yeah. Sorta."

"I see." Dr. Yen scribbled something on his chart, then continued. "Don't be surprised if you lose the taste for milk as you get older." Then he smiled. "You know, were-rabbits are very rare. I've only met one other."

My eyebrows rose. "Really? I've never met any at all. Even my aunt who gave this to me is a were-fox. She hadn't Changed yet herself when she infected me, so it was one of those cross-species things."

He nodded gravely. "Well, it just so happens that the other were-rabbit I know owns this place. He dreamed up the whole thing, then turned it into hard reality. Heck of a nice guy." He closed the little folder and scrawled his signature across the front. "I think it'd be best if we put you in with the shy species, Scott. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah," I replied reluctantly. "I stay sentient, but I can get awful..."

"Scared?" he asked, looking me in the eyes.

"Yeah," I agreed, looking down at my sneakers.

Dr. Yen reached out, grabbed the top of my head, and gently lifted my face until our eyes met again. "Don't you ever be ashamed of being afraid, Scott?" he said. "Not ever! Do you hear me? It's very, very important."

I tried to pull away, startled. But he maintained his grip.

"Have you ever been in a fight, son?" he asked, smiling a little. "A real dustup, I mean."

My brow wrinkled. What did that have to do with anything? "Well, no. Not that I can remember."

"Of course not," he replied. "How about a really violent argument?"

"No. None of those, either." I didn't understand where this was going.

Dr. Yen turned to my parents. "If you had to describe Scott in a single word, what word would you choose?"

My parents looked baffled for a second, then turned towards each other. "Nice?" my mother tentatively asked Dad. "Good?"

He nodded and turned back to Dr. Yen. "Good. That's the best single word. Though I might add pleasant, clean, conscientious..."

I blushed a bit, but no one noticed.

"Precisely my point," Dr. Yen continued. "Were-rabbits are always good people. You won't find that written in the textbooks anywhere, but we practitioners know it to be true. Were-deer and a lot of other were-grazers are pretty nice folks, too." He turned back to me. "Scott, you might be afraid sometimes, sure enough. And sometimes you have every reason to be

frightened. It's a dangerous world for good people, the ones with pure hearts who don't seek to hurt others. But what you get in return is beyond price. Never, ever be ashamed of being a were-rabbit. Or of being afraid, either."

Then he scratched me behind the ear, of all things! How did he know I like that even in human form?

The receptionist gave us a green ticket on the way out. We piled back into the station wagon, then lined up at the entrance. When it was our turn to squeeze through the gate Dad handed over our ticket, and the neatly uniformed attendant gave us directions to a small, separately fenced-off area. She had soft, dark eyes, and as she pulled back from the car I caught a burst of some sort of cervid scent from her. Moonrise must not have been too far off, if she was emitting pheromones already and I could pick them up.

The shy-species area was easy to find, as it was separately gated and marked with green placards. We still had a little time before dusk, and Mom spent it setting up our dinner while I explored a bit. All the gates were still open, and it was fun trying to figure out who was what. The gray-ticket zone had a low fence, a big sandbox, and fine steel mesh underfoot; obviously it was designed for were-moles and other prodigious burrowers. None were present that night, and the area stood empty. I'd never met a were-mole and was disappointed, though I've gotten to know a few since. They usually wear thick glasses, even in human form. There was also a corral where were-equines could run and play together, and a big area of turf fenced off for the different sorts of were-cattle. The first enclosure was marked with red, and the second with orange.

My own green-ticket neighborhood was much smaller. There were little doghouse-shaped thingies that felt friendly to me right off. They'd obviously been provided as cover for us shy ground-dwelling types. There was also a network of poles and swings and such for the enjoyment of squirrely folks, and patches of brush that must have seemed very attractive to deer-kids; there were several young ones already bedded down there when we arrived. They looked very calm and happy.

Almost before I knew it evening was upon us, and we green-taggers were laughing and playing together. Dad had found another father who was also a software engineer, and they talked shop while Mom and a group of other mothers reassured a single lady whose son, Robbie, had just become a were-chipmunk. He was only eight, and this would be only the second time he'd ever Changed. I played cards with him and tried to calm him down some.

"I was so scared last time!" he exclaimed tearfully. "I didn't know who I was or what was happening or anything!"

"It can be scary," I agreed. "But this looks to me like a pretty safe place. When you don't have to worry about stuff, it's a whole lot easier. In fact, it can even be fun!"

“Fun?” Robbie asked. “Being little-bitty and maybe getting stepped on or eaten can be fun?”

Frankly, I was sometimes pretty frightened myself. But I wasn’t going to let this little kid know it. “Of course it’s fun! You can explore all kinds of things, different foods taste good, you can smell neat stuff –”

“But you can’t see!” wailed Robbie.

I sighed. “No, you can’t see very well. On the other hand, you’ll find you don’t need to. That is, if chipmunks are at all like rabbits. Which I guess they probably are.”

“Stay with me, Scottie!” Robbie begged. “Please, stay with me! Don’t make me be alone, like last time!”

“Of course I’ll stay with you!” I agreed, hugging the poor little kid. “We can explore together. Okay”

“Okay,” the little kid replied. He seemed a bit happier to me.

As darkness approached, the world grew more and more electric for us were-kids. It became impossible to sit still, and the understanding parents in the green-ticket area didn’t even blink when we all stripped naked just before dark. Since the Full Moon was already up – we could feel it straining at our very bones – the Change came upon us as the last bit of sun vanished beneath the horizon, at precisely 8:22 PM.

Kids like Robbie usually greet the Change with screams of primal terror, and admittedly there were a few of those to be heard across the theater complex. But mostly we were well prepared for what was to come, and took it fairly easily. That was what the Love Center was for, after all.

Robbie was one of those who screamed, at first. He wrapped himself around me like a boa constrictor, hollering madly into my sensitive ears. But I held tightly onto him in turn, as we writhed and rolled across the turf. Robbie’s mother tried to separate us once, I think, but someone pulled her away. Which was just as well; one or the other of us would probably have bitten her if she hadn’t left us alone just then.

People always ask me what it’s like to Change, but I can’t explain it better than anyone else can. You might as well try to explain color to a man blind from birth, or the difference between rock and blues music to the deaf. The best way I can put it is that everything in the universe becomes fluid. You don’t seem to shift, so much as the rest of the world seems to shift around you. I think it’s because you see the world in a fundamentally different way when you’re an animal; your brain actually rewires itself to fit the new senses. I know that as a bunny I don’t depend on my eyes much, but without my nose I’d be totally helpless. You just see the world in a whole different way while Changed.

But right then, I wasn’t worried about explaining. I was worried about Robbie! He howled like a banshee until finally his throat reshaped itself. Then he whined in piercing tones that I knew his mother’s ears were not designed to hear. I was still able to talk; the bigger you are the more slowly you Change. “Smell me, Robbie!” I cried in tones that already sounded more like rabbit wails than my normal voice. “Smell me! It’s important! You

have to know my scent!” And finally he buried his nose into the soft deep fur that already covered my shoulder and breathed deep.

We Changed silently after that, because it is generally the nature of prey species to be quiet and discreet. And as we Changed, we hugged each other until when we were through we looked like a single mass of fur.

I turned into a very young rabbit, naturally, not being yet fully grown. And Robbie was an even less mature chipmunk pup. I pulled away from my friend, sat up, blinked and sniffed around. A bunch of humans were arranged around us; I knew Mom and Dad by smell so I hopped over to reassure them that all was well. They stroked me a bit, which made me feel warm and safe. I couldn’t understand their words, of course, but the expression of love crosses species lines. Then I heard an anguished chittering and saw a human, presumably Robbie’s mother, chasing her poor, terrified son across the turf.

Even juvenile bunnies are pretty quick. I was on Robbie in a flash, crouching over him and protecting him from the adult that just didn’t understand. My folks came rushing over and led the sobbing human away while I hugged my chipmunk friend for what seemed an endless time. The first movie started while we lay there, a cartoon featuring talking animals. But neither of us cared. The film was more for the humans than for us, anyway. Since there’s no such thing as scent recording, films seem shallow and unreal while you’re in animal form. Even with scents, however, it would’ve still been a frustrating waste of time to try and watch it. We could neither understand the words nor make out the images with our weak eyes.

Instead, I eventually got Robbie to play with me. We scuttled off into the little ‘safe’ places, and to our utter delight discovered tunnels inside connecting them into a secret warren! Other secret passages led to the brush-piles, and we visited the fawns who insisted on remaining immobile there all night long. Talk about your strong instincts! I chewed delicate clover and sampled some new weeds, while Robbie, finally gaining a little confidence, chomped rather noisily (to my ears) on various seeds. Eventually, he fell asleep in a little side tunnel. An attendant came and woke him just before dawn so that he could climb out and have enough room to Change back to human. Otherwise he would’ve been stuck for the month. And do you know what? He fought the attendant, he was having so much fun being a chipmunk!

I felt really good about myself as we began the long drive back home in the early dawn light. My parents were proud of me, too. They called up Dr. Yen to tell him how I’d helped, and now every month he assigns me a new were-kid who has some kind of troubles to Change with. My family gets in free, I get a neat yellow button to wear, and I feel really good about being who and what I am.

Who says being a were-bunny isn’t cool?

## Moon, June, Raccoon by Renee Carter Hall

Hoping no one could see me, I placed the little package under the tree, bowed three times to the full moon, briefly pretended to be looking for something in the withered grass, just in case someone was watching, then ducked back into the house. The screen door screeched as I yanked it closed. I had three new mosquito bites on my legs.

In short, I was itchy, embarrassed, and completely desperate.

I had found the spell – complete with step-by-step color illustrations – in a book in the New Age section of the local megastore. I hated buying the book, but I was afraid I wouldn't be able to remember all the details, and who knew what would happen if you messed that sort of thing up.

So I'd followed the directions to the letter, saying the words, carving the two hearts into the apple, wrapping it up in pink paper and ribbon like a little gift. The directions said to take it to a "natural place, like a park or the woods." There weren't any woods nearby, and the closest park was a twenty-minute drive away, so I'd figured that under any tree was natural enough, and the one in my own postage-stamp backyard was going to have to do.

Try to understand, I had already been to two weddings that June, both friends from college. An engagement party was coming up, another friend just had her first baby, and another one was trying. And I was sick of being happy for everyone else, sick of blind dates and stupid matchmaking websites, sick of drinking coffee I didn't like with men I could never like, let alone love.

And anyway, they say the full moon makes people do crazy things. Of course, they say love makes people do crazy things, too, but I wouldn't know anything about that.

So I did the spell, and I tried to laugh at myself, and I geared up for another exciting evening watching stupid sitcoms and scratching my mosquito bites and eating mint chocolate chip ice cream.

And I didn't think about the spell again. At least, not until exactly twenty-four hours later.



When I heard the scratching at the screen door, I thought it was the neighbors' cat, a scruffy orange tom who sometimes forgets exactly which townhouse he belongs in.

I turned on the outside light.

It was a raccoon.

We looked at each other. I noticed it was sitting up on its haunches, holding something.

"Hi," it said.

I took a step backward. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. He, on the other hand – the voice was definitely male – kept talking.

"Nice night, huh? Not too humid. Good breeze."

I saw then what he was holding: my apple, the two carved hearts turning brown.

"Listen," he continued, "I'm, you know, flattered and everything. But... well, I just don't think it would work out in the long run. So I thought – it's really a sweet gesture, and you're not all that bad-looking for a human, but I really can't accept this." And he held out the apple with both paws.

"Raccoons don't talk," I managed, finally.

"Actually, we do. Everything does. You just don't listen."

Slowly, his words started to sink in. I looked at the apple. "That wasn't for you."

He eyed me skeptically. "You left it under my tree."

"It was..." Why was I explaining myself to a raccoon? "Never mind. It was a mistake. You can keep it if you want."

The raccoon shrugged and took a bite. "Y'know, there's a produce stand about two miles from here where you can get apples that actually taste like something."

I stared at him while he finished the apple. Was this the first sign of some kind of nervous breakdown, seeing talking animals on your back porch? Or maybe it was an early warning sign of a stroke. Did people hallucinate with those? Should I call 911?

I considered my options. I could close the door, go back to the empty laughter on TV for another night, and try to dismiss this as some bizarre stress-induced episode.

Or...

Curiosity got the better of me, and I took a deep breath. "Would you like to come in?"



"Nice place," he said, glancing around.

"It's kind of a mess," I apologized. "I wasn't expecting... guests."

"I've seen worse." He held out a paw. "Name's Krispy Kreme, by the way."

I blinked. "Your name's Krispy..."

He held up his other paw to stop me. "My mother had a sweet tooth, okay? Considering that my sister is Sara Lee and my brother is Ben&Jerrys, I think I came off all right. Call me Kris."

I shook his paw. "I'm—"

"Karen Sheffield, thirty-one, bachelor's in English, works for Taylor & Bradshaw, and you write some pretty decent poetry even though you keep getting rejection slips." He paused. "You might want to think about buying a shredder." With that, he loped off to the fridge.

I followed. "Wait a minute. How do you know how to read?"

Kris sampled three different flavors of protein shake, wrinkling his nose at each one. "The Martins down the street have a kid who watches all that educational stuff. They keep their windows open a lot. I can read, count to

twenty, sing 'C is for Cookie,' and figure out which thing isn't like the others. I think my education's pretty much complete."

I couldn't argue with that.

"Speaking of education," he added, tossing the shake cans into the trash and moving on to the freezer, "we need to teach you a thing or two about eating. First off," he squinted at a frozen dinner, "disodium inosinate is not food. And neither is that third-rate Chinese takeout stuff you get twice a week."

"I'm supposed to take culinary advice from an animal who eats out of dumpsters?"

"Hey, I don't have much of a choice. And don't turn this around. We're talking about you here, not me." He left the kitchen and settled himself on the couch in the living room. "You don't have company over very much."

"How can you tell?"

He gestured to the couch. "Just your scent. Nothing male – or mingled," he added with a wink.

"Don't tell me you learned that on educational TV."

"Yeah, well, the Robinsons never close their blinds." He stretched. "So why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why aren't you out with somebody tonight instead of leaving lousy apples in your yard?"

I started to give some kind of glib answer, but then I stopped and actually tried to think of the best way to explain it. "I'm tired of being with people and still being lonely."

Kris studied me a moment. "Hm. Well, being lonely with people still seems better than being lonely by yourself. At least it has more potential."

"Maybe." I shrugged.

"So what are you looking for?"

I had used up all my energy for introspective answers. "I don't know. The same things everybody's looking for."

"Honest, caring, loyal, sensitive, good sense of humor?"

I cringed. Those were the qualities I'd written on the pink paper used to wrap the apple. "Yeah. So?"

"The perfect guy."

"I guess."

Kris shook his head. "Listen, when you spend as much time as I do going through people's garbage, you find out more about them than you really want to know. And the first thing you learn is, nobody's perfect. I can tell you, everybody's just as messed up and scared and unsure as you are, just in their own way."

"You must have watched Mister Rogers, too," I said dryly, and turned on the TV.

"I'm just saying," he replied with a shrug, then settled down to watch. "You got any popcorn?"

I sighed.





A few nights later he was at the back porch again, dragging some wrinkled bundle of paper behind him.

"This is your idea of a hostess gift?" I asked as he handed it to me.

"Just take a look."

We went inside. It was a sketchbook, the spiral kind. About half the pages had been torn out, and the rest were wavy and stained with things I didn't want to think about.

I opened it to the first page, and my jaw literally dropped. It was a portrait, precisely rendered in pencil, of a man roughly my age, with a thoughtful expression and bright, childlike eyes that defied the lines beginning to form around them. The subject was not entirely what most people would call handsome, but he had an interesting face that welcomed closer study. The page was half torn out, but otherwise intact.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

Kris shrugged. "Ran across it. I figured, you know, you were into the arts and all, so..."

The next page was a quick sketch of a dog, probably no more than ten lines and a bit of rough shading. But it looked so alive I expected to see it breathe.

There were other drawings, some simple, some more elaborate, even a study in ink that had turned into more of a watercolor thanks to what looked like a coffee spill. All were sensitive and real, as if the graphite lines were trembling with life, itching to release the form into the world. Even a still life – two pears, a vase, and what looked like a dog toy – had personality.

Then the drawings became sketchier, the paper scrubbed raw from erasing. One half-completed drawing had a dark scribble of charcoal over it, as if the artist had gotten frustrated with the attempt. The next page was a ragged scrap of paper clinging to the spiral wire.

The rest of the pages were blank, but I looked at every one, pausing, as if something would appear there if I willed it. I felt disappointed, even angry. The person had incredible talent; how did this end up in the trash?

I looked for any identification, hoping for at least a name, but there was nothing. Then I looked back at the portrait and saw the tiny scribbles in the corners.

"Self-portrait," I read on the left, and on the right, "SJR."

"Not bad, huh?" Kris said when I looked up.

"Not bad? This is incredible. Why would somebody throw this away?"

Kris rummaged in the fridge for a soda. "Jeez, what d'you need diet for? You're what, a size five?" He cracked open a can, sipped, and winced.

"You didn't answer my question."

"I'm a raccoon, not a mind reader. Maybe it's the same reason why there are so many poems of yours that wind up covered in teabags and takeout cartons."

"Yeah, but... this is different. These are," I fumbled for words and couldn't find any, "good."

"One man's trash, I guess. So what's on TV?"

I handed him the remote and sat down on the couch. While Kris flipped from a game show to a documentary about elephants to a rap video, I sat with the sketchbook in my lap, turning the pages slowly, over and over, consumed by wonder.



The doorbell rang on my day off, in the middle of the afternoon. And, like a complete idiot, I opened the door, never mind that the guy on the other side wasn't anybody I was expecting and could very well have spent the rest of the day raping and torturing and killing me.

And then, like even more of an idiot, I stopped and stared at the guy for what felt like two days.

Because it was the guy from the sketchbook.

He was wearing a white polo shirt with "Scott" embroidered over a line of marching ants. "Hi," he said awkwardly, "um... Mrs. Sheffield? I'm Scott, from Pestbusters. Your husband called about the raccoon problem."

My husband?

Scott consulted his clipboard. "Kris?"

"Oh," I said, thinking fast. "That's... my brother, actually. Technically he owns the house, so he... takes care of things like that."

Scott nodded. "No problem. Let's take a look and see what we can do."

He advised the usual: tight-fitting lids on the trash cans, bungee cords, closely-spaced lattice work under the porch to keep them from getting underneath. "I can try setting a trap," he finished, "but some of these guys are just way too smart for it."

What was I supposed to say? "Um... okay."

"I've got one in the truck; I'll go get it."

"Wait." He stopped. "It won't... hurt him, will it?"

Scott smiled. "Only his pride. If we can catch him, we'll give him a dose of rabies vaccine and take him down to the wooded areas by the park. There's plenty of real food to forage for there. Raccoon paradise. I'll be right back."

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed the sketchbook from its place on the coffee table and stuffed it under the couch cushions. I was dying to ask him about it, but I couldn't think of any way to bring it up without sounding psychic – or possibly psychotic. Anyway, it seemed so... so personal, like asking somebody about a prescription bottle you saw in their medicine cabinet.

Scott set up the trap and baited it with a handful of peanuts, then handed me his card and said to call if anything showed up. If my fingers tingled a bit when they brushed his as I took the card, and if our eyes met a bit longer than was strictly necessary... well, I told myself that was just my imagination.

The next morning, the trap was empty, the peanuts untouched. I didn't see Kris that night, either.

Scott called me at work the next day. "Nothing yet," I told him.

A pause. "Well, if it's all right, I'd like to stop by and make sure everything's still set up. Is around seven okay?"

I could feel my heart pounding. "I thought you guys closed down at five."

"Well, officially, yeah. But my apartment's just two blocks over from your place, so it's not really out of my way." He sounded almost embarrassed. I loved that.

"Oh. Well, okay. That'd be fine," I said, hurriedly. "I mean, if it's not too much trouble." I was babbling like a teenager.

I hung up and stared at the gray wall of my cubicle, then opened the manila folder on my desk. I tried to look like I was reviewing paperwork, which was difficult, seeing as the folder held the self-portrait from the sketchbook. I'd felt a little strange bringing something so personal and true into the mundane surroundings of work, but at least I'd gotten over my first insane impulse to tack the sketch up where anyone could see it. Instead, I was sneaking glances at it like a girl with a pop-star pinup hidden in her algebra book.

Stuffing the folder back in my bag, I reminded myself that love at first sight was a ridiculous myth based on physical attraction, or concocted after the fact to give the relationship some feeling of destiny. I had always said that, and I had always believed it.

And I still did.

I thought.



I offered Scott a soda, which he accepted (at Kris' urging, I had stocked up on a wider variety of beverages). I made small talk about the weather, as well as the cleverness of raccoons in general and our suspect in particular. (If he only knew.) I laughed at his genuinely funny jokes and was flattered when he laughed at my halfhearted ones.

But I still couldn't find a way to bring up the sketchbook, or anything even close to it.

On my way home from work the next night, I bought a sketchpad, an assortment of pencils, and a few sticks of charcoal. Then I cleared off my coffee table and arranged the supplies so they looked as if they'd been casually scattered there. I tried to do a drawing or two to complete the effect, but they ended up so hopeless that I crumpled the paper into balls, and, after a moment's thought, left them on the floor. Certainly anyone who had thrown away a sketchbook would be able to relate.

And it worked. "You're an artist?" Scott asked lightly when he came by a few nights later to check the trap.

I shrugged. "Not really. I thought I'd give it a try, but I think I'd better stick to writing poems."

“Poems, huh?” His voice took on that tone of slight awe, the one people who don’t write get sometimes, as if I were having my verses chiseled into polished marble instead of published on obscure websites and in photocopied literary zines that no one’s ever even heard of unless they’ve been published in them.

“Yeah,” I said finally. “I mean, it’s nothing major. What about you? Do you do anything... you know, creative?”

He glanced back at the coffee table and ran his hand through his hair. “I used to draw,” he said slowly. “Painted a little. Mostly watercolors and inks. I... haven’t for a while.”

“Why not?” My mouth was dry.

“Mostly time, I guess.”

Liar. People who say they don’t have time for art usually mean that it isn’t enough of a priority for them to make time for. These are the same people who will then spend two hours in front of the TV every night, because that isn’t as demanding – or terrifying – as facing a blank page. I know, because I’ve been one of them.

“And I guess I just got frustrated,” he added. “Nothing ever seemed to come out right.”

Good God. What had he been envisioning, that drawings so good could still fall short?

“Do you, um...” I tried to swallow. “Still have any of your stuff?”

A shadow passed over his expression. Regret? “I threw most of it away. But... maybe I’ll get back into it.” He smiled. “If you’ll show me some of your poems.”

“Uh, sure.” He might as well have asked me to take my clothes off. The thought of him reading my poems made me feel about as exposed. And yet, there was also that odd little flutter of excitement somewhere between my chest and my stomach, and already I was mentally rummaging through my files, trying to decide which ones to give him.

The trap was still empty, though there were some peanut shells inside, carefully arranged in a little pile, the raccoon equivalent of an obscene gesture.

Scott chuckled and shook his head. “I think this guy’s worth a limerick or two.” He cleaned out the shells and added another handful, then stood and turned back to me. “So... same time tomorrow?”



I spent so much time re-reading and shuffling through my poems that I had to print out fresh copies by the time I decided which ones I was least embarrassed by. I wondered if he was sketching away furiously at home, trying to draw something worth showing me.

The next night, he came in carrying a new sketchbook. He glanced at the trap, then sat down next to me on the couch, and I handed him the six poems I’d picked out, nothing too long or complicated, nothing too simplistic or silly.

I never know what to do while someone's reading my work. Part of me wants to stare at them, so I can pounce on every little nuance of facial expression. And part wants to leave the room, or possibly the country, to get away from the suspense.

He was on the last page now. And then it came – the little intake of breath, the pause, the slight sigh. When you're at a reading and the audience pauses and sighs that way, it's better than the applause. It means they're not just being polite, not even just being appreciative. It means they got it.

"These," he said softly, "are really good."

Then he handed me the sketchbook.

The first page was a softly-shaded sketch of a robin, his eyes bright and feathers glossy. He'd added a pale red-orange wash to its breast. It was, of course, perfect in every detail. I felt as if I'd never seen a robin until that moment, as if it were some fantastic creature from an ancient bestiary.

Then I turned the page, and I saw my own face looking back at me.

I must have appeared surprised, because he said hurriedly, "Some of the details might not be quite right. I usually work from photographs..."

I remembered hearing once that the point of art wasn't to portray what the artist saw, but how the artist felt about what he saw. And it was all here: the uncertain but thoughtful expression in my eyes, the faint lines here and there that I'd only recently begun to notice in the mirror, the hairstyle I'd had for the past eight years.

And through his eyes, it was beautiful. All of it. All of me.

I looked up. I had no idea what to say. He looked at me, and the silence warmed between us.

Snap!

A harsh metallic sound from outside. The trap had shut.

When we reluctantly went to look, I recognized Kris. And I could have sworn the raccoon winked at me as Scott loaded the cage into the truck.



I wrapped the last of the dishes carefully in newspaper and laid them in the box. My whole life sat around me, packed in cardboard, taped and labeled.

No, I corrected myself. Not my whole life. My old life. In just a few days— this with yet another admiring glance at my engagement ring – a new one would start.

I went out to the back porch, watching the summer's first fireflies winking in the grass. The moon was full and golden, and I laughed to myself, remembering the night almost a year before, when I'd tried to cast a spell, tried to summon love as if it were something I could give orders to. I had never told Scott anything about it. Maybe someday.

I almost tripped over the little package.

It was an apple, small and dusky red, wrapped in one of those lined pieces of newsprint that kids use in school when they're first learning how to write. The front side was some kid's story about his grandparents, with a

gold star stuck at the top. On the back, I found a note written in wobbly crayon.

*Just to prove there's more to apples than those grocery store things. Nice place your fellow took me to. Nice little stream with great seafood. And I met someone, too. I think being able to count to twenty really did it for her.*

*Keep a light on for me at the new place. Maybe I'll bring the kids by sometime. Braeburn, Jonagold, and Nittany. Cute little furballs.*

*- Kris*

I polished the apple on my nightshirt and took a bite. The tangy sweetness sparkled on my tongue, familiar and new at once, and I ate the rest standing in moonlight, the June night warm and sweet around me, a poem I was living instead of writing down.

## Down to Cathuria by Ken Pick and Alan Loewen

*Throughout the ages, most human critics assumed life outside the solar system would forever leave permanently corrupt humanity behind as it irrevocably evolved toward transcendence. Having your pocket picked on Cathuria by a Thalendri will disavow you of that conceit forever.*

*– The Travel Diaries of Father Heidler*

*Kerenai Highport, Cathuria*

*Tulsal System, Tiara Cluster*

The observation deck was empty, except for an upright sable ferret in white satin and black leather.

Jill Noir tried not to think of the hard vacuum, waiting just on the other side of the pressure windows where the landing bays, docking cradles, pressure domes, and surface structures of Kerenai Highport stretched over the crater floor. Moving specks of power-loaders and handlers moved amid the stark shadows; bright dots of ships and shuttles came and went against black sky; approach markers flashed and pulsed halfway to the beacon tower on the horizon, the rebound peak underneath its flashing strobes hidden behind the curvature of the small moon.

And behind the upper row of viewports, a half-Cathuria hung in the sky amid its other four moons, mocking her. In the weeks she'd spent beached on this moon, Jill had come to the viewports to watch the Thalendri homeworld – its whirling clouds and storms, its blue oceans, the snowline expanding from its mountains and marching down the single S-shaped supercontinent as winter approached. From new to crescent to half to three-quarters to gibbous to full and back again, over and over amid its ever-changing array of moons, shifting slightly in the sky as Kerenai librated in its five-day orbit.

So close... Only sixty thousand clicks after all those parsecs from Califia and Alorya Prime, and she couldn't get a ticket or entry visa...

"Wowowon, Seshai Noirai?" a voice from behind asked, in a Thalendri species-accent.

Thalendri are elf-slim upright humanoid foxes, like a cartoon Reynard come to life. This fox had been crossed with a cadaverous coyote and stuffed into an open-necked vest-suit with the aroma of the Nameless Guild, the tolerated and sometimes-useful face of Thalendri organized crime.

The skuzzy fox-yote was around her height and gaunt enough to pass for a Zero-G Kthymri, his fur a tawny-red, his head wreathed with the smoke from a bengal cigarette at the end of a pearl-black holder, its cinnamon-clove-incense aroma covering any possible scent-clues his body could be broadcasting.

"Over there, where we won't be disturbed." Jill nodded at a sitting area by a closed concession stand, away from the viewports and mocking

Cathuria, under the ventilator plenums whose white noise should mask any casual overhearing.

“Not *The High Moon*?” The gaunt fox pointed up with his cigarette holder.

“No.” *If I had the money to meet you there, I wouldn’t be meeting you here, would I?* She stalled for time, digging through her thighboots for her own cigarette case of Silverfox Argents and the holder she’d picked up on Wintersea. The broker lit it for her as befitting a Thalendri gentlefox.

“Now how can my associates and I be of service?” he asked, slipping the lighter back into a vest pocket.

Freshly-burned benga prickled and burned inside Jill’s chest, joining with her meds in stifling the ferret within. Turning to exhale the plume, she glanced at the half-ball of Cathuria hanging in space, its brightness washing out all the stars. The Continent was mostly in evening, its shape traced by city lights on the night side. “I need a ticket down. I don’t care about the particulars. I don’t even have to go in style. Just get me on-surface.”

“Surface” as in the big light-cluster on the southernmost coast, close to the evening terminator, just above the large island – Shallivarden, Cathuria’s largest city, main surface-port, and offworld-affairs capital. Five million Thalendri in over three dozen city clusters, its “alien quarters” alone filled with almost a million offworlders and potential marks, its Underside large enough for a nimble ferret thief to ply her trade and live high. Especially with someone like the Nameless Guild as patron and protector.

“Easily done.” The skuzzy fox gestured with his cigarette holder, one of those theatrical gestures that were a Thalendri species obsession. “Five... six hundred WebCreds. You may be traveling with some cargo, but if all you want is surface, I can get you down.”

Jill sneered, discreetly baring teeth worthy of a fifty-kilo mustelid predator. “I could have myself shipped down in a box for only 500. But I have a small problem. I only have 200 with me.”

She’d left Alorya Prime with what little she could scavenge from that travesty aboard the Coventry; hustling the three stops along the route had netted her small sums of cash, but not enough for a badly-needed entry ticket with proper chitwork attached. And now even that cash was all but gone.

The broker’s ears tucked back; with a motion too smooth for a human, he got up to leave. “Wait,” Jill said quickly. “I’m sure there is something we can work out.”

“No,” the broker said. “Nothing is to work out. I have the ticket. I have the associates to clear the chitwork. All you need to supply is the money. My associates and I don’t do charity.”

“Surely, you’ve helped others in the past who couldn’t come up with the monies right away.”

The broker tongued his nose pad, thought a moment with ears twitching. “Come to think of it? No. I never have.”



“Then what would you recommend? I am ‘business’ for you and your ‘associates’ after all.”

He shrugged. “There’s always escort service. Play the game for awhile. My associates connect with the Port Casino, and the Guild there is always in need of vixens to escort offworld guests around while persuading them to spend their *shildri*. Not necessarily *besherai*, but even then... Whatever you are, *nimseshai*, you don’t pair-bond like we do...”

Jill cut him off with a sneer, fangs bared, growl rising in her throat and hackles rising underneath her wig.

“I wouldn’t follow that line too much farther.”

“Why not? My associates and I are, after all, the only game on Kerenai. Gekkering me automatically puts you in an Underside hole where you’ll fight every night for a place to sleep. A young pretty like you will end up in the escort service eventually; or *besherai*; or being sent back to some Shuuth’s Embrace of a planet in freeze.”

Jill was already reduced to low-end transient quarters, a small pod barely big enough for the circular Thalendri-style bed alcove in one of the semi-industrial habitats, deep and rough enough to where she’d already had to use her shock-wand twice and claws once. When – not if – she lost that, her only alternative was carving out a homeless squat amid the machinery spaces on the Underside, and that would last only until a sweep of Undersiders landed her on a one-way ticket out-system in freeze.

Or worse. If that meddlesome priest had been able to sneak his book into her luggage as she fled Alorya Prime, professional bounty hunters would have no problem tracking her. Tachyon cable or courier run, with attached promise of reward; Califian aristo-celebs always got their own way, especially with a former piece of animate property. She had to get down to surface, where she could lose herself amid Cathuria’s billion-plus population; Shallivarden’s alien quarters alone numbered close to a million.

The gaunt fox-yote took a shallow puff on his bengastick, blew the mouthful toward the ceiling in a grey coil that turned blue in the Cathuria-light. “Of course, you might find a wealthy *humaan* consort. They don’t pair-bond either, and they like Artificials.”

Jill’s lips peeled back in a snarl that made the Thalendri quantum back, ears down and quivering, white-tipped tail tucking forward between his legs. “I’ll kill one of them first,” Jill spat, in a voice more like a rabid wolverine than a ferret.

The broker quickly regained his composure, his tail untucking. “No matter.”

Pulling a cheap earbud-phone out of yet another vest pocket, he offered it to the ferret-woman. “When you have the *shildri*, call me. But one word of warning, *Nimseshai*. Be careful about killing anyone while you’re here among us.”

He put out his bengastick, returned the holder to yet another vest pocket.

“Thalendri tribunals hang for murder. I would hate to see that furry little neck crushed in a noose.”

Backing out into the elevator lobby, he left Jill and her smoke alone in the deck, with the port stretching below and the mocking globe of Cathuria above.



Ivan Curtission stared about him in ecstasy, his fingers twitching in a nervous habit he had acquired in childhood. The two-thirds-gee of Kerenai’s habitats was just different enough from his native Korranion’s that he’d taken the better part of an hour to get his local legs; now he wandered the “Citadel” of the dug-in port city, killing time before his trip down to Shallivarden.

*Oh, if Mum could see me now*, he thought to himself and he sniggered out loud unaware of the stares around him from the various races that made up WebFed. He had celebrated his hundredth birthday – a hundred of Korranion’s four-month years – by leaving the protection of his mother’s home, booked a passage aboard a packet liner, and made Insertion to Tulsal System.

His leap to independence had not been made on impulse. An entire Korranion year of allowance had been carefully, even if reluctantly, put away until he had enough to purchase no-frills passage to fabulous Cathuria, foxcat homeworld and jewel of the Tiara Cluster. He licked his thick lips with a thicker tongue. With the cash-stash he’d brought through the currency exchange – normal swipe-card exchanged for exotic gold and silver coinage – he should be able to spend several weeks on-world providing he didn’t do anything *really* extravagant.

Counting trip times, he had escaped his mother for over two months, most of a Korannion year; though he’d surely be berated severely when he returned home, he knew that being her only child, her fury would die down quickly enough to a sullen anger until it disappeared altogether from lack of energy.

After his fishery-manager father’s death in the Great Tsunami fifty Korranion years ago, his mother retreated into their house on Firstlanding Island and her survivor’s pension; Ivan couldn’t remember the last time she had walked under the sky of Korranion, ring-bisected Gauth hanging blue-and-white at the zenith, flanked by the tiny marbles of Evansion and Dralion. But now free from his mother’s unending censure, Ivan could sit back and enjoy the delights of travel out-system, to the exotic places he’d only been able to visit in VR simulations.

Like Kerenai Citadel, the downtown of the lunar city – a domed-over bowl of a crater a quarter-klick across, with a Cathurian forest in the bottom growing towards the sky-blue Lunacrete of the illuminated overhead dome. “The Only Forest on Kerenai”, according to the audio guidebook playing in his earbud, flanked by terrace after terrace of ornate architecture in charcoal-brown basalt.

Ivan wandered the park paths beneath the tall bronzewoods and nut-bearing tressierdrai and scented hadathdri of the Citadel Forest, his earbud describing the details of the Cathurian conifers in Freehold English with a cute Thalendri species-accent. Like the Sequoias of Earth, the bronzewoods topped a hundred meters in the low gravity, a multi-layer canopy dense enough to shade the floodlight arrays on the dome despite the lanky appearance of trees grown without wind. The vixen's voice on his earbud segued into Thalendri landscaping; reaching to his ear, he muted it and concentrated on the moving scenery – baroquely-dressed Thalendri vixens and near-nude Selkie jills.

Ivan ogled the man-sized vixens and child-sized otteroids, completely oblivious to the irritated stares – complete with flattened ears and gekkering deep in the throat – he received in return. The occasional human woman he ignored, as they had always done to him; the bejeweled saurian Larant were curiosities, dinosaurs come to life; and the octopus-like Quellan weaving through the tree-trunks on its lev-floater was just *weird*.

Oblivious to the uneasy looks and fang-tips of the Selkie jills, he waddled towards the edge of the forest, to the rings of terraced buildings. His shuttle down to Shallivarden wouldn't leave for four hours, and he had time to kill.



Jill spotted the potential mark as he came up the escalators to the terrace and made his way to one of the line of shops facing the Citadel Forest. Fat, dressed in the tacky pseudo-local fashions sold by Port Row hustlers, and wandering aimlessly.

She chewed her bottom lip in conflicting emotion, antipathy for humans battling with her need for cash and a way off this rock and down to Shallivarden.

"Continue on to Evergreen," her cabinmate on the trip here had recommended. "They're still a growing colony, so it should be easier to immigrate. Cathuria's an old, old homeworld. You'll have a lot easier time gaining entry." Not if it meant sharing a world with that ditz of a rabbit-girl; forty days jammed into that makeshift stateroom on the *Greatwings Pride* had been more than enough.

Jill watched the pudgy human exit the shop and continue aimlessly down the terrace. Grimacing in a final decision, she made sure her wig and bib cravat were in place, tugged at her blouse to make sure what breasts she had stood out tight against the white satin, and made her move.



Ivan had stopped before the slide-show of a theater marquee – *A theater? They don't have direct video feeds or interactive VRs?* Sensing him, an announcement in Freeholder English scrolled across the bottom, to tune his earbud for the translations while the marquee continued showing trailers for various features interspersed with ads.

The marquee windowed into a Silverfox ad; the head and shoulders of a silver-grey vixen, her furred feminine form elaborately draped in sheer fabric and jewelry, presenting a long “vixen stick” cigarette holder loaded with the product – an overly-long cigarette – into the foreground. Behind the unlit bengastick loomed the Silverfox corporate badge: a serrated bengaleaf shape in green, with a stylized silver smoke wisp forming the profile of a fox’s head.

Ivan winced a bit; *Why do the foxies have to smoke? Still, she does look good with it...*

The stems, curls, and vowel-marks of Davvashi script scrolled over the corporate badge; Ivan reached up to his earbud, killed the mute function in time to hear in a Davvashi accent “Silverfox *Platindri*; fine Wintersea-grown, naturally-cured benga; light, fragrant, and mild. When you want to Make an Impression. Taste-blends only...”

Then, as the marquee cut from the ad to some sort of period-dress music video, a real female voice overlaid the one in his earbud.

“I see you’re a connoisseur of Thalendri video-theater,” said a voice at his elbow in an odd Freeholder-like dialect. A sharp, musky odor drifted into his nostrils, felt more than smelled in his nasal passages.

Ivan yelped in shock, and spun about to see a creature that he had never seen before.

She came up to his chin, a talking animal in a tight white silken blouse and matching lace bib-cravat over tight black pants tucked into gleaming thighboots. Thalendri-slim, but definitely not Thalendri.

Cup-like ears peeked through long locks that fell about her shoulders and down her back in a cascade of ebon ringlets. A black mask covered shining dark eyes, in a muzzled face that tapered towards a prominent pink nose pad; except for the bright white fur at the front of her throat, the rest of her was sand yellow, ticked with darker brown strands, a contrast to the stark black-and-white of her costume.

She extended a hand towards him, pink palmpads amid soft black fur extending out of a lace-trimmed cuff, with prominent fingertip claws.

“Uhhhhh...,” Ivan responded; his usual response to anything breaking into his internal monologue.

“I’ve been looking for some companionship. I have a few hours before my trip down to surface. Should we enjoy each other’s ... company?”

Ivan gulped, the baggage of forty years of fear and rejection and fantasy freezing his mind.

“Uhhhhh ...”

“Oh, I like the shy ones,” the creature purred, then let out an eruption that sounded like “Dook!”. “Let’s say a little dinner? Maybe a drink together? I know just the place, with Cathuria shining in the sky...”

With a move as natural as life, she wrapped her arm through Ivan’s. Plucking the still-murmuring earbud from his ear, she placed it in his nerveless fingers and put it back on the rack and steered him toward the escalator-ramps. She knew the place; *The High Moon*, a prestige *klesch*-lounge

above the observation deck with a surface-and-sky view from shielded pressure domes. And she knew a roundabout way to get there while she checked out the mark and potential rolling sites.

Jill blinked in shock at the ease of her performance; since she'd fled her owners, she'd never rolled such an easy mark, not even those Thalendri before she'd used up the last of her Yiffy-Lube making that escape on Wintersea.

Within fifteen minutes Jill had the gist of Ivan's story; within thirty minutes she'd heard it twice and she felt her fingers twitch in anticipation. Fate had supplied not only a ticket down to Cathuria, but an all-expense-paid dinner and source of income for at least a couple weeks while she explored all the options open to her.

"Excuse me," Ivan stuttered nervously as they ascended the last spiral stair to *The High Moon's* entrance, "but I don't recognize your species. I've never seen your like here in the WebFed. If it's not too forward can ... uh ... could you tell me what planet you come from?"

Jill fought down the knee-jerk reaction to backhand him, but she gritted her teeth. "You've never met an Artificial before?"

Ivan blinked at her. "Um ... no. Somebody made you?"

Jill gritted her jaws together so tight, she thought she'd crack her molars. "I was born in an artificial womb fulfilling certain genetic requirements," she said.

"However," she lied, "I've earned my freedom." *Though my ex-owners would definitely not agree.*

She led the tongue-tied Ivan through the entrance, passing beneath the holosign with its glowing stems and curls and vowel-marks; after her time stuck here, Jill could actually pick out the words fairly well; the fat human on her arm kept babbling about something inane.

The entry doors were pressure doors, with the emergency semiotics of depressurization-shelter instructions; Jill shuddered at what they implied. They opened onto a waiting area/vestibule paneled in real wood, with video frames showing a slideshow of Cathurian scenes and landscapes, subtle music Jill recognized as Thalendri Chambertronic losing a fight with the fat human's voice.

Ivan blinked at the dim lighting; the antechamber was lit for Thalendri eyes, the only brightness the bluish Cathuria-light coming from the main *klesch*. Jill led him towards the reception desk, which seemed deserted – until a musteloid head popped up from behind it with a loud "*CHURP!*"

Ivan jumped, yelping like a Thalendri; Jill bared fangs for a moment – "*Dook?*"

The receptionist wasn't Thalendri, but Selkie – *Ry/ii*, as they were called in the Web – a child-sized small-clawed otter colored and patterned like no otter on Earth, dressed in an adaptation of Thalendri semi-formal dress. Dropping to all fours, the small otteroid led them into the bright Cathuria-light of *The High Moon*, from dome to dome separated by more emergency

pressure doors, past tables and booths of baroque-dressed foxes and bejeweled dinosaurs to a mostly-empty area in the back.

"Could a certain traveller buy a girl a drink?" Jill asked in a practiced voice.

Ivan's fingers twitched and kept twitching; he stared at the Selkie-occupied booth opposite theirs. "Ah... Yes... I have the money."

"Tell me..." She looked at his pudgy face, bright dark ferret eyes shining in a dark-furred mask. "Have you ever had a Maladar Spritz?"

"Ah... No... What's that?"

*Dook! Didn't recognize the name.* "Just a local specialty I'm especially fond of."

Jill ordered the drinks while Ivan concentrated on the two Selkies in the booth opposite, blue and silver otters in miniature pseudo-Grecian gowns, chittering away.

Jill stared in the same direction – not at the Selkies, but at Cathuria hanging in the sky above and behind them. The terminator was starting to curve, on its way to a waning crescent, and the Continent had passed behind the planet; the night side was dark, and the dayside unbroken blue ocean and white clouds. One of the other moons was passing behind the dayside, a shrinking white-and-grey pimple.

"So what brings you to Cathuria?" Jill asked as they waited for the drinks.

Shifting his stare from the Selkies to the Thalendri serving-vixen, Ivan mumbled something semi-coherent about his mother, in excruciating detail. Jill rolled her eyes; Ivan, oblivious as ever, started on about how Cathuria looked like "Gauth without the Rings" and how Korranion was a waterworld too, with only small islands breaking the surface.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?"

Ivan nodded, looking rather relieved.

The instant Jill passed through the first set of pressure doors and out of sight, she pulled out a cheap earbud-phone and punched in the broker's contact number. A moment later, the gaunt paravulpine's voice came through the earbud.

"Ah!" he purred in Sentic, "*Seshai Noirai*. I have not yet ..."

"Listen," Jill interrupted. "I've found a way down, but I need your help for the details. Meet me at..." Jill gave him a location where she knew the security cameras didn't cover, one of the back-access corridors near *The High Moon*.

"I'll insist on payment up front," the Thalendri said.

Jill took a step back, craned her neck around the portal jamb to where she had line-of-sight on her mark. In the distance, Ivan mumbled nonstop to a puzzled Thalendri waitress.

"I'll have it." Jill nodded and disconnected.



Back at the table, Ivan shivered with nervousness. He found his new friend exciting, but the suaveness he affected in his fantasies disappeared in the reality of the moment. He licked his lips and in his imagination he saw himself as Jill's new owner. Maybe his mother would allow him to keep an indentured servant/neo-pet.

The genetic construct came back to the table and smiled; Ivan didn't notice the fang-tips gleaming. The waitress had already placed two large glasses – Thalendri-style snifter-goblets – of a sparkling green liquid before them; not knowing what to do, Ivan took a tentative sip.

"Whoa!" he said, and shook his head.

Jill laughed, a musical note. "Oh, my," she said, "this isn't the first time you've had a Maladar have you?"

"Oh, no," Ivan said. "Um ... I've had them before. I just thought this one was a little strong."

"Really?" He watched as Jill took a tentative sniff. "This seems regular strength to me. Maybe they serve them weaker back on Korranion."

"Maybe," Ivan agreed. He took another sip and giggled at the feeling of warmth as it went down his throat. He remained oblivious to the fact Jill had not yet so much as sipped hers.

"You know," Jill said as she stirred her Maladar with one clawed finger, making the emerald liquid scintillate in the light. "Maladars have a unique chemistry." She lifted her finger from the snifter-goblet, sucked her finger-fur dry as erotically as she could.

Ivan hiccupped as he took a larger swallow. He gasped as the liquid slug ran down his throat to slam into his stomach. "Fascinating," he said, immediately forgetting what he found fascinating.

"Yes. You see, in Humans they have psychotropic effects. It takes a while to get used to them, but the first time can be a real mind-blower."

"I'm going to buy you. I'm going to own you. My own – whatever you are," Ivan said and tried to blink away the blurriness to his vision.

She seemed to like that, *of course she would*. She was even smiling, showing two great fangs in a grin that somehow looked rather evil on the mustelid face.

"Of course," Jill said, fighting down the urge to ribbon his fat human face, just like she had her first owner. "And I promise to be a good girl. I promise to do everything you say." She gritted her teeth. "That's what every human – *Every one of your kind* – has ever wanted me to say. Shall I do a trick for you?"

Ivan giggled and nodded. With a swift movement in the low gravity, Jill took Ivan's arm in hers after throwing the last of her money on the table for the waitress.

They took the elevator down, to one of the access levels Jill had previously cased in her wanderings around the lunar city, where she knew a

dot-cam had been removed and never replaced. The gaunt fox of a broker was waiting for her; apparently he knew of the gap in security coverage, too.

Ivan stared ahead at empty air, his lips moving without sound; Jill reached into his front pocket and pulled out his trip kit.

“Hack this for me. Get me on his shuttle, with his entry visa.”

“My associates do require payment in advance...”

Jill felt in Ivan’s other pocket, pulled out a handful of Thalendri coins, including large gold Twenties and gold-and-platinum Fifties. The broker’s eyes went wide, his ears came forward, tail high as Jill counted off three hundred WebCredits.

“The going rate is eight hundred...”

Jill cut him off with a wave of her free hand. “Don’t try it. I know the market rate. Six hundred, including ‘associates’ fees’. Three hundred in advance, three hundred when I get the kit.” On her other hand, Ivan mumbled aimlessly, his fingers twitching.

“Six hundred,” the broker yipped. “Shuttleport entrance, concession area, under the Bucket-o-Bodashi sign...” He studied the ticket-chit. “Three hours. How long until ‘globster’ here –” he indicated Ivan with his muzzle-tip – “Unwipes?”

“Long enough.” *The way he chugged that Maladar, he’s good for at least five hours – longer if he really sleeps it off.*

“Ari. Three hours. Be there, *Seshai*.” Then the skuzzy fox was gone, back to his “associates” on Kerenai’s Underside.

What Jill had said was true. Humans could eventually get used to the effects of Maladars, which was why there was no problem in serving them, but that first time was always a killer. Like a Mojo Mix or Z-Bomb, but without the reputation. *Fatboy’s so clueless, I could have ordered him a Mojo Mix and he wouldn’t know the difference. No, he’s so out of it I didn’t even need the Maladar.*

“Don’t you throw up on me,” she said. Ivan did not respond but stared ahead, his lips moving in a slow mumble. Still talking to her nonstop, if only in his Maladar-addled mind.

Going through the rest of his pockets, Jill found his port locker key, his other ID, and more Thalendri coinage. *Now to dispose of the body...*

She found a niche farther down the accessway, about the size of a bathroom stall with old signs it had occasionally been used as such. *Dunks...*

She steered Ivan to the niche, sat him on what looked like an equipment housing, waited a few moments until he passed out completely. He snored.

Quickly, Jill undressed him, her fingers twitching at the touch of his pale, clammy skin. Taking his clothes and pretty much everything that was on him, she left him sitting there, carefully timing her departure to avoid any security cameras.

At the first opportunity, she pitched the clothing bundle down a disposal chute and headed for the address on the locker keys.



Fifteen minutes later she stared with joy at the contents of Ivan's locker. *Dook!* A large suitcase full of Terry clothing would accompany her down to Cathuria. Then she saw the extra coin purses, still sealed with currency-exchange markings.

*DOOK!* Over five thousand WebCredits! Untraceable!

*DOOK DOOK DOOK DOOK DOOK!*

Two and a half hours after that, she met the gaunt broker under the Bucket-o-Bodashi sign and slipped him the remaining three hundred. He introduced her to the Thalendri version of "victory celebration" before taking his leave.

A few minutes after that, a bewigged ferret in black leather and white satin entered the shuttleport, her "victory celebration" jauntily in her mustelid muzzle, its expensive smoke stifling the ferret within.

By the time Ivan awoke with his head coming apart, she was cutting atmosphere over Shallivarden.



The transition tunnel between the port and downtown was deserted at this hour, except for a synthetic voice repeating a smart-selection of WebFed languages. Davvashi joined Sentic and Freeholder/English in the cycled gravity-transition warnings as the slim paravulpine figures of Thalendri appeared in the distance. In between the recordings, the sounds of a small underground city filtererd up the tunnel.

The visibly-aged human in the Roman collar had been moving in long slow Armstrong hops, hanging in mid-air for seconds at a time between touchdowns. Now, as he approached the Citadel and its Aetheric field fringe, his weight returned with each hop until he ceased hopping.

Father Eric Heidler, Order of Saint Dismas, sighed with relief as he started walking normally. Even the induced gravity in the habitats would be at about two-thirds gee, easing the wear and tear of his aging bones and joints before Cathuria's one-gee.

Under the wall-mounted semiotic of an emergency depressurization shelter – not a free-floating holosign like the others – he stopped and concentrated fitting the adaptor chip into his flip-phone. Sensing he had stopped, the trailing lev-pallet with his luggage grounded beside him, saving its batteries.

The Thalendri couple – two slim, man-sized upright foxes in elaborate retro-styled outfits, tailed by their own overloaded lev-pallet – passed the human priest. As they passed, the vixen noticed his habit, made a quick sign with her free hand, the Thalendri female equivalent of the Sign of the Cross: "The Goddess's Bow", a smooth arc from shoulder to muzzle-tip to shoulder.

Father Heidler nodded in response as the vulpine couple passed, white-tipped tails and a cinnamon-and-clove whiff of burned bengal trailing in their wake. The PA system sensed the smell and interrupted with what had

to be Davvashi for “No Smoking in the Tunnel”, triggering a gekkering comeback to the ceiling from the silk-bloused male.

The chip that would interface his phone with Cathuria’s comnets wasn’t cooperating, refusing to mate into the standard insertion slot. Father Heidler pulled it out, looked at the code ID on it, tried again. And again. Just as he was about to go back to the passenger concourse to get a replacement, the chip seated with a faint clack and his phone diagnostics flashed green. *Got that far; now to see if it works.*

He snapped the chip-cover closed, flipped the phone open, spoke into the voice-response dialer: “Bishop-Nuncio Marasagian, audio-only, connect.”

After a ring-tone or two, a Thalendri vixen’s voice answered, in Sentic.

“Apostolic Nunciature, Shallivarden; how may I direct your call?”

The priest paused for a moment in surprise, took the phone from his ear and thumbed the video stud. A pocket hologram of a cute red fox face with brilliant green cat’s eyes shimmered into view above the phone.

The Church had a strict policy about hiring non-humans, not out of xenophobia, but out of deep respect and belief that God is His wisdom created salvation paths indigenous for each sentient race of the cosmos. With the differences in biology and psychology, converts from one species’ revealed faith to another often drifted into strange syncretic heresies – the reason Father Heidler was now on Cathuria. Or more accurately, its innermost moon.

“Father Eric Heidler, calling for Bishop Marasagian. Is he in?” He winced at the sound of his own voice. With a reconstructed throat and vocal cords, the originals torn out by a temporarily insane genetic construct he had to deal with on a previous flight, the timbre and quality of his voice had changed and it still sounded strange to his own ears.

The miniature holovixen toyed with a floofy neck-scarf at the bottom of the image.

“Allow me to connect you with his aide.” Then a dark-skinned human face in the brown robe of a Franciscan replaced the vixen’s mask.

“Father Heidler? Francis Dimowo, Nuncio’s secretary. Welcome to Cathuria. He’s in meeting right now, but I will tell him you’re at... Kerenai Highport as soon as he is available.” He glanced down out-of-frame at something. “I trust everything is ready for you to make your shuttle down in, let’s see ... nine hours?”

Father Heidler nodded in the affirmative. “Yes. Please tell the Bishop I look forward to meeting with him.”

A few pleasantries, then Brother Dimowo signed off and the holo-image vanished. Flipping his phone closed, Father Heidler continued down to what the holosigns said should be “The Only Forest on this Moon”.

No sooner did the corridor open into a thick stand of scraggly conifers under a Lunacrete dome than the priest heard a human voice. A very loud, very blubbery human voice.

“Another human! Thank God!”

Father Heidler spun around in alarm, his cyborg left hand armed and ready.

The speaker was a red-headed man who looked in his late 30's, his soft pear-shaped build bursting out of a jury-rigged Thalendri-style shirt and improvised sarong. He ran up to the cleric, nervously plucking at his own fingers; two Thalendri in what looked like high-tech Napoleonic Hussar uniforms ran behind, keep up with his sudden burst of speed. "Thank God!" he said again. "I want to get home and that furry freak stole all my money and my clothes and ..."

Suddenly, he burst into tears while a ring of paravulpine onlookers formed, staring and sniffing and yipping side comments.

It took a while for Father Heidler and the two policefoxes to calm the man down.



Ivan Curtission of Korranion, as Father Heidler discovered was not the most shining example of human intelligence. Socially and emotionally retarded, he had fled his overprotective mother to explore WebFed, but he'd been played for a fool – not especially difficult – and stripped of everything he had. Even the clothes on his back, judging from his current wardrobe – one of the fox-cops who spoke Sentic said something about "starting a new fashion craze".

Finally the two fox-cops signed Korranion's "Ivan the Terrible" over to Father Heidler, ear-perked happy to make him into someone else's problem.

"Have you talked to the Embassy?" Father Heidler asked as Curtission hungrily slurped down some human-compatible fast food at a sidewalk café, oblivious to the ears-askance stares of passersby and patrons. Or the scent of *badath*-wood drifting in from the accent trees in the Citadel Forest.

"They only have offices on Shallivarden," Curtission replied. "I didn't have money to call down planetside, let alone take a shuttle."

"And," Father Heidler said, "You did report the Thalendri that stole your property."

Curtission shook his head. "It wasn't a Thalendri. It was some freak. Something manmade."

"A genetic construct?"

Curtission took another lusty slurp. "It was this long-haired animal. She wore all sorts of frilly clothes... Um, what's the matter with you?"

Father Heidler stared at the man with his mouth open. "Did she tell you her name?"

Curtission blinked owlishly. "No. Come to think of it, I never asked her."

The priest gritted his teeth in exasperation. "Did she have yellowish fur? Face like a Selkie's except sharper, coming down to a point of a large pink nosepad and a dark band of black fur across her eyes? Black fur on her

hands? Long black wig, almost down to her waist in little ringlets? Smelled like a musky incense burner?”

Curtission nodded in the affirmative and was surprised when the priest suddenly laughed out loud, the harsh sibilance of his strangely altered voice making it sound almost as a croak.

“Well, the Lord certainly moves in mysterious ways,” he said with a grin. *So she DID make it to Cathuria!* “And if she’s using your ID, even hacked, she’s going to leave a trail. *At least for a time.* This is the ultimate *deus ex machina.*”

Father Heidler pulled out his flip-phone, flipped it open with a *Queep!* “Now. You, my friend, are going to wait here while I make some arrangements. I may not have means of my own, but I still have discretionary funds courtesy of Mother Church. Let’s get you home.”

Curtission responded by immediately bursting into tears again. “Really? You’ll send me back to my mother?”

Father Heidler smiled. “Of course. Now wait here.”



When putting to sky from Cathuria’s highport, Captainess Third-Class Eyessa Ratiriai of the free-trader *Proud Tail* always spent the last few hours in *The High Moon*, relaxing with other ship-captains under the Cathuria-light before setting off in an Aetheric- and-Astral-propelled can so tight the *kesbi* life-support didn’t even allow smoking benga – or anything else – on board.

Alone at her table, the grey-and-black cross-fox vixen in black wig and gold-trimmed maroon uniform fitted an Autumn Leaf taste-blend into a long cigarette holder of an iridescent ivory. She’d picked up the elaborately-carved “vixen stick” five years ago, at Jankarra Val downport on the Skreeln homeworld, the only time she’d ranged as far as the Trigon Cluster and the Big Three home systems.

Captainess Ratiriai flicked her lighter, exhaled the thick fragrance, and let the mouth-absorption buzz tickle its way down her spine to her tail. Above her, on the other side of the *High Moon*’s dome and sixty thousand clicks of hard vacuum, the thick crescent of Cathuria hung amid his moons, the Continent just coming into view on the edge of the dayside.

Lapping her snifter, she waited for the *Humaan* Holyfather to bring her the promised prey.



The priest led Ivan into *The High Moon*, Ivan reminding him repeatedly that this is where “that furry freak” had slipped him the Maladar. The two humans – the older one in the Roman collar and younger pudgy one in his improvised wardrobe – wandered towards the back, where an older grey-and-black vixen in baroque maroon-and-gold and ponytailed black wig nursed a snifter and cigarette holder.

“Captain Ratiriai? Father Heidler.”

The piratical-looking vixen set her cigarette down, rose to give the priest a female-to-male greeting embrace. Gently embracing him with black-furred hands, she slid her benga-scented muzzle down his cheek until the human's nose almost bumped the peruke bow that ponytailed her wig, a formal greeting warbling softly in her white-furred throat.

Ivan kept staring at her thighs and legs, grey fur between the maroon-and-gold apron-skirt and high black thigh-boots, a second peruke-bow accenting the root of her formally-coiffed, white-tipped tail. His fingers started twitching in anticipation.

The vulpine Captainess released the priest and turned to Ivan; instead of the expected greeting embrace, her ears half-flattened and grey cat-eyes narrowed. "This is him? The working cargo?"

Father Heidler nodded as Ivan looked back and forth between the two – the black-clad priest and the maroon-and-gold vixen. "Working cargo?" he stuttered. "I don't understand. You said – you said you had a ship lined up to take me home."

"And I do; Captain Ratirai's *Proud Tail*, a Thalendri free-trader with an all-female crew."

"A Free-Trader!"

Captainess Ratirai's ears flattened all the way; her fang-tips showed. Resuming her seat, she puffed benga smoke, chewed her cigarette holder, and watched the two *humandri* argue. Finally she caught their attention with a loud *Yip!* that perked up ears all over the *klesch*.

"I shall explain, slickskin." She jabbed her cigarette holder at Ivan. "I offer 'working passage'; you're signing on as part of my crew, not as a paying passenger. IF I decide to accept you."

"But there's got to be some other way! There's got to!" He turned back to the priest. "You said you had money!"

"No, I said I had discretionary funds. Not mine, but my Order's. I'm only a poor priest, not WebTAS. Unless you want to ride home frozen in a box, your only hope is working passage with a willing captain. I contacted every ship in port with Korranion listed on their itinerary, and Captain Ratirai is the only captain willing to take an apprentice with no shipboard experience."

"And so far, I am not impressed. The Holyfather," she nodded again at Father Heidler, "Requested a working passage to Korranion, a secondary *humaaan* world well outside my normal territory. We are bound there, but after several intermediate stops – outpost systems in-between. I captain a Free-Trader, not a limousine. And with Astral engines, we are limited to the First Manifold. Mate the pair, and we reach Korranion in seventy days, Cathurian."

Ivan thought a moment, converting seventy Cathurian days in his head. Both priest and vixen could see the results return.

"Eight weeks!" Ivan fought back tears.

Father Heidler put his hand on whimpering man-child's shoulder. "It's your only way home, unless you want to be frozen down. I've had to be frozen down once, and I don't recommend it."

"But that's not Fair!"

"Neither is Reality. That avenue got closed off long ago – unless you think you can argue down God about getting back into Eden or your mother about going back into her womb. Or," he glanced for a moment at the vixen-captain, "Go back to four legs like before the Thalendri Adam and Eve rose to walk on two. And win on all counts."

Ivan's lips moved like a beached fish for a moment, then his whole body sagged in defeat. "W-what do I have to do?"

"Here are the rules," the vixen began, her voice completely cold. "Aboard the *Proud Tail*, we're on a personal-name basis. My personal name is "Captainess", and once aboard, I am your goddess. You will do as I say, you will do as my vixens say – cleaning out the hold, moving containers, galley cleanup, male-maid, flushing the sewage, everything. Without hesitation, without complaint. You might even learn to cook. Understand?"

Ivan looked back at Father Heidler for support; the cleric was oblivious to his pleading eyes.

"And you'll have to be 'chemically castrated' – antiaphrodisiac implants, not pills. I am NOT letting a sight-aroused human around my vixens unless he is 'fixed'."

"WHAT?" Ivan screamed, hands instinctively grasping for his crotch. Completely speechless for the second time in his life – this time without the aid of a fist to the jaw – he tried to plead with Father Heidler, took one look, and gave up without a word, mouth moving randomly.

Around *The High Moon*, every serving vixen and patron in line-of-sight – man-sized fox, waist-high otter, man-sized dinosaur, torso-sized octopus – stopped and stared at the spectacle like feeding time at some surreal zoo. Ears canted forward, tongues ran over nose pads, mouths flehmened, heat-pits dilated, tentacles quivered, cephalopoid skin changed colors and patterns...

Captain Ratiriai's "*Yip!*" brought Ivan's attention back to the vixen. "If you agree to this..."

"I want to go home."

The vixen-captain reached down into her thigh-boots, brought out an enameled brooch pin, twin to the cameo at her throat – a Thalendri/fox tail curled around a world-and-constellation. Setting it on the table before Ivan, she leaned back in her seat. "Then take, or leave."

Ivan's hand hesitated, reached out, stopped a few centimeters above the brooch. "Preacher," he stuttered through growing tears, "Isn't there another way?"

"No. Not unless you want to get frozen down and shipped out C.O.D. Take 'The Queen's Shilling', boy, and get yourself home. Think of it as an adventure, except not in Virtual."

Hesitantly, he grasped the brooch and slowly pinned it on his chest. The priest and vixen exchanged looks, her ears coming up, her expression straight out of the stories of Reynard.

Father Heidler clapped the whimpering man-child on his back. “Good boy, Ivan. Long ago, when ships were made of oak and moved with sails, fathers would often send sons like you ‘to sea’ for training and shaping up.”

Captainess Ratirai crushed out her bengastick, ejected the spent filtertip from the holder and looked up at Ivan with a predator’s expression – a fox in the hencoop. “Also known as ‘Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash’.”

Ivan’s lips started quivering, his whimpering getting louder; Father Heidler stepped in.

“Except Thalendri don’t drink rum, and they have a taboo on homoerotica hard-wired into their brains.”

“We do, however, still use the lash.” She caught Father Heidler’s eye with a flick of her ebon-furred ear. *No need to tell him that with the difference in pain thresholds, Thalendri lashes are light cords, only mild stinging for a human.* “But do as I say, do as my vixens say, and you shouldn’t have a problem.”

She rose from her table, stashed the cigarette holder in a special thigh-boot pocket, brushed the hem of her apron-skirt over its tip. Extending a Thalendri-style pocket-phone to reach between her muzzle-tip and ear, she spoke in clipped Davvashi for a moment, then turned to Ivan.

“Welcome aboard, ‘cabin boy’. Now to get to the doctress and get you ‘fixed’; we put to sky in two hours.”

She took her leave of Father Heidler with the same embrace-and-cheek-rub as before; he gave her a blessing with the Sign of the Cross, she responded with The Goddess’s Bow, then she grabbed the sobbing man-child by one elbow and started walking him out of *The High Moon*, her wig and tail-root bows bouncing with each swish-tailed step.

Slim vixen and fat human reached the exit portal; Ivan stopped and stared for a moment as though Dante’s famous line over the entrance to Hell was floating on the holosign.

“Ears up, slickskin! You’re going to the *Proud Tail*, not the gallows.” Then she led him out of *The High Moon* and out of Father Heidler’s life.

“Remember the bargain,” Father Heidler whispered after the two vanished through the portal. “Make a man out of him.” *If he doesn’t blow himself out the airlock first.*

He remembered his first meeting with Captain Ratirai, two hours before, in the low-gee of the landing bay with the *Proud Tail* looming at the other end of the pressure tunnels, a small ship that had seen better days.

“He’ll know how to work hard when we’re done with him,” she had said, after a crack or two about how *humandri* were infamous for incompetent aristocrats and before he’d handed her a credit chit. “I’ll have my vixens guard him at some of the tougher ports. We’ll make him streetwise as well as teach him how to make an honest living by getting his *humaan-vanth* hands dirty.”

The priest's nagger chimed with the first warning for his shuttle down to Shallivarden. *Two hours... maybe Captain Ratiriai and I will see each other lift...*

Clicking the nagger off, he started for the exit portal with no twinge to his conscience.

Being Good did not imply he had to be Nice.



## **The Reluctant Reindeer by Will A. Sanborn**

“How did I manage to get myself into this situation?” Jeff wondered aloud, as the deer morph regarded himself in the mirror. Yes, he had agreed to do this, and it was a nice thing to do for the kids, but there was a world of difference between thinking of doing something and actually going through with it. For one thing, his shyness was kicking in again, not to mention how ridiculous he felt, as he looked down at the little jar of stage makeup Kathy had given him. Did she really expect him to wear that?

Sighing, he realized he'd have to, if he was going to look the part. He still couldn't believe he'd let her talk him into this though. Love did make you do some pretty strange things sometimes. She'd mentioned the idea a couple of weeks ago, thinking he'd make a wonderful addition to the Christmas party she was helping to throw at the youth center. She'd been a little disappointed when he didn't want to do it, but she'd understood. It was only the day before, when the plans for the party had hit a snag, that she'd asked him again. She'd been a little more persuasive that time, and had finally gotten him to agree.

Yes, it was something nice to do for the children, and he knew that they could use a little joy in their lives, but he wasn't all that excited at the prospect of playing Rudolph for their little party. He did like kids, but still felt a little awkward around them, not knowing exactly what to do at times. Kathy on the other hand, really enjoyed the time she spent with them, and was quite at home helping out at the center. He sighed as he opened the makeup container and started his preparations. He figured he could do this to help her out and make the kids happy.

As he dabbed the bright red makeup on his nose, he thought back to his own childhood. Animal morphs were still a minority in the population, but when he'd been growing up they'd been even more scarce. Most of the kids he'd gone to school with had been good to him, but there were always the bullies who'd teased him. When he was in middle school, a couple of kids had even made mean jokes about how he'd better stay out of the woods during hunting season, and other things of that nature. Before that, the first time he got to play Rudolph in the school play he'd been quite excited about it. However, after doing that role a few years in a row, the luster wore off, especially as he grew older, and some of the kids started teasing him about it.

He sighed again, blinking his eyes to keep them from watering up from those memories, and forced his mind back to the present. That was long ago, and he hadn't had to face anything like that in years. He'd grown up to become a handsome buck. He had a successful career, and he'd found a beautiful human woman who loved him for who he was, just as he'd learned to love himself.

Looking in the mirror he examined his handiwork and felt his face warm up. He twitched his ears back slightly at the red-nosed deer peering back at him; as he stood there observing himself, his lips pursed into an

embarrassed little smile. At least nobody would be making fun of him here today. He hoped that Kathy wasn't going to be taking any pictures of him though.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. "Are you almost ready?" Kathy's voice called in.

"Yes, I'm ready" he answered back a little gruffly.

"That's good" she replied as she opened the door. When she saw him she added "oh Jeff, you look wonderful," her voice singing with delight.

"Thanks hon, but I feel kind of silly doing this... I'm nervous too."

"Oh, you'll be fine. Come on, the kids are waiting. Oh wait, you need this," she added as she wrapped a red and green scarf around his neck. "There, now you look perfect."

If she saw the quick flash of a frown cross his muzzle, she didn't acknowledge it; instead she led him down the hall to where the children were waiting expectantly for their surprise visitor.

When they first saw him, their voices hushed and their eyes grew wide. Jeff had to admit they were a cute group of kids, all sitting there looking up at him with delighted amazement shown on every face. The charming scene was lost on him though, as he looked out at the group of children, mostly humans, but with a few morph cubs mixed in there as well. Even if this was supposed to be an informal performance, his stage fright was still present. He also noticed the children's parents sitting with them, which added to his self-consciousness.

"Um, hello kids" he managed to speak out, as he sat down in the chair before them, trying to swallow the lump in his throat.

Kathy tried to cover for him by making his introduction. "Now we know you were expecting Santa to visit you this afternoon" she said, "but you know how busy he is this close to Christmas. Everyone was so extra good this year that there are more toys to get ready than usual. That's why he asked good old Rudolph here if he could come and see you instead." She paused, and then added "now this is his first time at a big party, and he's a little nervous, so why don't we all give him a big welcome, okay?"

"Hello Rudolph" the children all replied in unison, their voices coming together in a chorus of marked excitement. He cracked a smile at the sparkles dancing in their eyes as they greeted him.

"Thanks guys," he spoke, his voice sounding a little less tense, "now as this is my first party, I'm a little unsure of what goes on, so what would you all like to do?"

"Let's sing some songs" one child called back, to be followed by several other voices happily endorsing that suggestion.

"Alright, what should we sing then?"

"How about your song?" one little girl, a ferret cub, asked.

He swallowed nervously once more, but tried to maintain his composure. "Um... okay, my dear, but you'll have to start it."

She eagerly accepted his proposal, and started singing without any hesitation. "Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose..." The other children were quick to join in with her.

He twitched his ears self-consciously, but looking over at Kathy, he saw her silently urging him on. Waiting for the chorus to come around again, he took the plunge and started singing as well, though not as loud as the children were. Looking back at Kathy, and seeing her smile, he flashed her a little one of his own; by the end of the song, his singing had grown a little louder.

They continued singing Christmas carols, and as they worked through "Jingle Bells" and "Deck the Halls" and started in on "Frosty the Snowman" he was surprised to find himself feeling more at ease. As long as he didn't think of what he was doing too much, it wasn't that bad. It was fun singing the holiday songs again, and he remembered how he'd enjoyed them when he was a kid.

The rest of the afternoon was quite busy, with crafts, games, snacks and all sorts of activities for the kids. When they took a break for juice and cookies, Ashley, the little ferret girl, brought him his food and introduced herself properly to him. She then talked to him for several minutes while they enjoyed their snack. He'd made a few other fast friends there as well, as several of the children vied for his attentions.

He did his best to not play favorites and try and give them all equal attention, but Ashley was quite charming to him. Perhaps it was the fact that she was a morph herself, so he felt some special kinship there. She was just so adorable as well, very energetic and happy, but also very polite too. Most of the kids were well-behaved in fact. They were a good crowd, and it was nice seeing them having a fun time.

He managed to enjoy himself as well. The games were silly, but fun. Even when it was time for him to hand out presents to the kids, he didn't really mind them sitting on his lap. Kathy had brought her camera out too, and had surprised him with a few candid shots, but he just shrugged it off. He smiled back at her, and then even started mugging for the photos a bit.

The time passed quicker than he'd thought it would and soon it was time for the kids to leave. He stood by the door and gave the children all candy canes as they were leaving, getting hugs from several of them. As they left, their parents all thanked him, telling him what a wonderful job he'd done. He couldn't help but smile enthusiastically, wishing everyone a merry Christmas.

After everyone had gone, he retired to one of the back rooms to sit down and rest, while Kathy and the other volunteers cleaned up. He hadn't realized it, but the excitement of the afternoon had tired him out a bit.

Kathy found him awhile later, nudging him gently awake from his light nap. "Wake-up sleepy-head" she chuckled. "They wore you out didn't they?"

"A little," he replied with a nod, and then smiled at her. "They can be a handful, but it did go pretty well."

“Yes, you were great. The kids loved you.”

“I could tell. I’m glad they enjoyed it.”

“Thanks for stepping in for Santa when he got the flu. I know you didn’t really want to do it, but you saved the day for us.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought it’d be. It was kind of fun really” he said, his smile growing slightly.

“You did seem to be enjoying yourself, once you loosened up.”

He nodded, “well, the kids are pretty cute.”

“Uh-huh, that’s why I like it here. Glad to see you had fun with it... Rudolph,” she said, as she touched a finger to his nose affectionately. “Come on, let’s go home.”

“I don’t know,” he said, as he licked at her finger, and winked at her with a twinkle in his eye. “Would Santa want me going home with someone I just met at a party? Have you been a good girl this year?”

“Oh, I’ve been very good, Rudolph, and I’ll be good to you too” she chuckled.

“Okay,” he answered as he took her hand and got up. Stepping closer, he reached around to give her a hug. “Love you, hon” he whispered in her ear.

“I love you too, and thank you” she whispered back.

Slowly breaking from the hug, they grabbed their coats and, then walking hand in hand, they headed outside. As they were walking towards the car, he realized he was still wearing the makeup on his nose, but he simply smiled at that, thinking of how he must look. He was feeling too good to worry about it just then.

## One Night at the Furs-Only Club by Jason Gillespie

It was a modest gathering that evening, Aaron noted, as he stepped through the double doors into the club room. Cassandra was as usual leaning over the back of the couch, her feline tail twitching in the air behind her as she reached for who knew what back there. Marcus and Tim sat opposite each other at the checkers board, their yellow eyes transfixed on the red and black pieces between them. Amber sank into the couch a few feet away, her muzzle stuck between the pages of a book, while her glasses continuously slipped down her ursine snout. Carl sat across from her and tried to chat, but she kept returning to her book. Even Sean was there, which was unusual; he sat alone by himself in one corner, munching on a small candy bar of some kind, chewing thoughtfully as he watched the others.

Aaron grimaced, and chocking back a bit of bile, crossed the threshold and met Carl's piping voice. "What ho, Aaron! Glad you could join us tonight!"

It wasn't that Aaron didn't like their club President, it was just that the ferret's cheerfulness tended to grate on his nerves. Sitting down opposite the two checker fiends, he leaned back and asked, "So, is this it for tonight?"

"Well, it's seven o'clock, but I figure we can wait a few more minutes for the rest of them."

Aaron looked over at the Siamese and called out, "Hey Cassie, find anything down there?"

She gave him a mischievous look and then waved with one paw. "Why don't you come take a look yourself."

Aaron shook his head. "No thank you!"

Marcus grinned as he looked up from his game. "Are ya afraid of a cat?"

Aaron glowered at the wolf morph, trying not to think about the joke. Why the Hell did his parents want to become mice? Wolves and cats and deer he could understand, but mice? Sighing, he curled his tail up behind him on the couch and leaned back. "So what are we going to do tonight to forget that we're freaks?"

Sean turned his head at that, nearly smacking his growing antlers into the wall. "You're in a cheery mood tonight."

Crossing his arms in front of him, Aaron tried to ignore the others while he sat in the chair, his legs dangling before him. The others quickly forgot his snappishness and got on with their business. Tim continued taking more and more of Marcus's black pieces on the checker board, Amber read her book, and Cassandra did whatever it was she did back there. Carl got up and crossed the room to try and get Sean interested in doing something, anything other than just sitting there.

When the door to the Furs Only Club shut suddenly a few moments later, all heads turned to see who'd entered. Aaron climbed up the couch

and peered over the top at the odd looking fellow standing there. "I take it this is the Furs Only Club?"

Carl nodded and walked over, his sinuous body bursting with energy. "That's right! I'm Carl, the President. Who are you?"

The figure that stood in the doorway was of medium build with a slight paunch and a short tail. His fur was a ruddy grey, and there was a playfulness to his dark eyes. Yet his oddest characteristic was his face. It tapered down into a six inch long narrow snout that wiggled about as he talked. "My name's Roy. Good to meet all of you. I just transferred here, and was hoping to find a club like this. Is this all there is?"

Carl shook his head, inviting Roy into the room. "Nope, there are about twice this number, but not everybody can come all the time, tests and all that."

"Not all of us want to come either. What are you?" Aaron asked, thanking his parents for not being so crazy as to become something like that!

"Aardvark," Roy said with a bit of aplomb. "And who are you?"

After the introductions and they'd gotten Cassandra to actually sit in the couch it was time for the club business. Not that they ever really had any, but the other members did like to make a show of it.

"So, what do you guys normally do here?" Roy asked before Carl could start off his soliloquy for the evening.

"Well, I was just about to get to that," Carl replied, but Aaron cut him off.

"We sit here, stare at the walls and talk about how much our life sucks usually. Why, what did you have in mind?"

Roy seemed quite taken aback by the hostility in the mouse's remarks. His snout twitched a moment, as did his ears, but the playfulness was still there in his eyes. "Well, we usually went and did something together as a group that was fun. My favorite was bowling night. I was never much good at it, but we always had a good time there. Do you guys have a bowling alley anywhere near here?"

Marcus nodded. "Yeah, it's a short drive from here."

Amber shook her head. "Our club charter doesn't allow us to spend our money on nights off campus."

"What kind of stupid rule is that?" Roy asked.

Carl grimaced. "We had to include it in the charter so the School Senate would let us make a club."

Roy just shook his head. "Well, that's no fun! Hey, why don't we go anyway? It's something to do. So we have to spend our own money, so what?"

"People will stare at us," Sean murmured quietly. Aaron nodded his assent, crossing his arms in front of him.

Roy laughed at that. "So? People always stare! You know why, because they're jealous; that's what my Dad always says."

"Oh give me a break, how can they be jealous of that," he pointed at Roy, "or this," he pointed to himself.

"Doesn't matter if it's true or not. It's all about attitude!" Roy said, rising on his hind paws. "I say we get out of here, go bowling, and have a really good time. What do you all say?"

Cassandra nearly jumped from her seat. "Sounds like fun, I'm going!"

Marcus and Tim were quick to join, the two wolves always in the sport for a game of some sort. Carl was on his paws next, trying as usual to lead them to the bowling alley, even though it hadn't been his idea. Sean begrudgingly seemed to accept the idea, glancing at his three fingered hands and muttering about how he was going to even roll the ball. Amber silently joined the others. Only Aaron remained where he sat.

"Aren't you coming, Aaron?" Tim asked as they all stood by the doorway.

"Come on, Aaron, it should be fun," Marcus chided him, his yellowed eyes sparkling mischievously.

Roy looked at the others and said, "Hey, you guys go wait outside, I'll talk to him a minute okay?"

Carl nodded. "Okay, we'll figure out which cars we're taking. I guess I'll drive one. Come on you furs, lets go!" Pretty soon, the only two left in the room were Roy and Aaron. Only the lingering scent of his companions remained to remind the mouse that they'd even been there.

"Aaron, what's your problem? Don't you even want to go out and have some fun with the rest of us?" Roy asked, his eyes filled with concern. He sat down next to the mouse, his snout dangling comically from his face.

Aaron didn't look at the aardvark, but scooted away, and accidentally sat on his tail in the process. "I'm perfectly happy by myself, thank you."

"You don't seem happy."

"Look, just leave me alone okay! Go have your fun, go pretend you're normal, and pretend that everybody else isn't laughing at you. I'll just go back to my room and read a book or do my homework."

Roy grimaced slightly, blinking for a moment. "You think it's hard being a mouse? Try being an aardvark sometime. The shit I've had to put up with is unbelievable. But when I lay down to go to bed, I want to do so happy about myself. I'm proud of what I am, despite what anybody else says. You should be too.

"I would like to have you along to go bowling. It'll be a lot of fun. They may jeer at us, but so what if they do? No seriously, so what? We are special, you have to believe that. I believe it."

Aaron stared blankly at the wall, trying not to let Roy's words sink in. "What if I don't want to be special? What if I just want to be a human being, and not a fur?"

"Well, you do have that choice, if you have the money and if you qualify for the procedure. They don't seem very interested in reversing it from what I hear."

Aaron turned away from Roy again. "Look, just leave me alone, okay?"

Roy stood up from the couch, and nodded. "Okay, I'm sorry. I would like to have you come bowling with us though. Can't you try at least this once?"

Aaron sighed, his teeth yearning to gnaw on something. He pulled a bit of tough fabric from his pocket and chewed on that a moment to calm himself before he stood on his hindpaws. "All right, I'll come," he muttered between bites. Roy visibly smiled, and escorted him to the door where the other furs waited outside. Marcus and Tim both gave the much shorter Aaron knowing winks while Cassandra flicked her tail in his general direction. Sean just stared off into space as usual, while Carl lead them toward the parking lot. Amber carried her book in one paw, and didn't seem to notice.

The mouse breathed deep and walked along behind the rest, trying to ignore the stares that passing humans levelled at them as they went.



"Gee, another gutter ball," Amber remarked as she watched Carl gape down the alley in disbelief.

The ferret pointed at the lane where all ten pins stood defiantly, "Did you see that? It robbed me!"

Roy laughed as he got ready to bowl in the other lane. It was a pretty quiet night at the bowling alley, one of the few nights that they didn't have a league. So the eight of them had requested two lanes. Aaron had to admit that it was kind of funny to see the receptionist's face when she asked what shoe size they all wore. Still, it was also a bit embarrassing to have to use one of the six pound balls!

"Hey Carl, are you going for a perfect game or something? You haven't hit a single pin in the first four frames!" Tim chuckled heartily, as did his brother Marcus.

"Hey, we're on the same team! You're suppose to root for me!" Carl objected, though he was having a bit of trouble hiding his mirth. Even Amber, the fourth member of their team couldn't keep her ursine face straight.

Roy only knocked down a few pins on his roll, and then it was Aaron's turn. Tim was bowling in the other lane, and managed to leave only one standing. The mouse watched him for a moment, hefting the six pound ball in his paws. To the cheers of the others on his team, the wolf slowly approached, sending the ball forward with a graceful swing of his arm. It rolled slowly, but steadily heading straight for the last surviving pin. And then the ball hooked to the left at the last second and slid past by the barest breath.

"Oh! It was so close!" Marcus wailed as his brother shook his paws in the sky in mock defeat.

Aaron looked down the lane, and knew that he would probably only manage to get a few pins like he had the past three frames. It was inevitable. Cassandra was the best on their team so far, knocking down all but one or



two pins each time. Sean did about as well as Roy and Aaron normally did, though he did seem to be more interested in how he was doing than normal.

Stepping onto the lane, Aaron scuffed his sandals on the floor. Since the quality of the lanes are paramount to the bowling alley, they had to be kept in excellent shape. Since their footpads came equipped with automatic scratch and dent devices known as claws – or in Sean’s case hooves – they had to be fitted with special shoes. Unfortunately, the only ones his size that Aaron could use were his sandals, and those tended to slip.

Taking a few jerky steps forward, Aaron tossed the ball onto the lane, shuddering at the crash as it struck the center of the lane and kept rolling. He watched it for a moment as it wove a bit off center, heading straight down in the most perfect path he’d ever seen. It struck just to the right of the head pin, and suddenly, all of them tumbled in a noisy crash! Aaron stood there staring at the spectacle, his mouth agape, and his tail curling about his legs. Whoops and cheers from the other furs caught his attention and made it clear what he’d just done. He’d bowled a strike!

“All right, Aaron! You did it!” Roy cheered, his long snout waving back and forth.

“Oh, there’s more than meets the eye to that mouse!” Cassandra snickered as her tail flicked back and forth.

Sean came onto the alley and patted him on the back, “Great job, Aaron. That was so cool!”

Marcus and Tim both gave him a wag of the tail and a competitive grin, while Amber was picking out the mouse’s ball in her large paws. “I think I’ll use the lucky ball this time,” she murmured, to everyone’s delight.

Aaron sat back down, his whole body filled with the excitement of having bowled a strike when he noticed a group of college students approaching them. He could smell the beer on their breath as they drew closer. He even recognized a few of them from his classes at the university.

“Hey, who said you freaks could come here and bowl?” one of them, a freshman named Derek, called out to the delight of his cronies.

Roy and Carl both stood up, staring the freshman down. “Who said you freaks could come in here and drink?” Roy shot back, his face completely calm. Carl looked at Roy with a bit of admiration. Aaron watched the aardvark, and then looked down at his own grayish pink paws.

“What the fuck are you man, an elephant?” one of the others asked, pointing at Roy’s nose.

Marcus let out a low growl beneath his breath, as did his brother Tim. Amber began tossing the six pounder back and forth between her paws. Cassandra idly examined the claws on one of her paws, her slit eyes glaring at the drunks. Sean took off one of his shoes and began tapping his hooves on the hard tiled floor. Even the staff began to take an interest in the confrontation, but remained at a distance. Roy shot back after a moment’s pause, “I’m an aardvark. If you spent your time in classes instead of making asses out of yourself by getting drunk, then you might know that.”

“Are you messing with us?” Derek shot back glassy eyed.

Aaron stood up and walked over to Roy’s side. “Why don’t you all just climb back under the rock you came from.”

“Ooooooh, the little mousey talks tough!” Derek jibbed. “What’s your fucking problem, Mickey? Want us to show you what a real man is?”

“I know what a real man is, and I certainly am not looking at it!” Aaron called out. He then glanced up at Roy who stood impassively at his side. A smile crossed the rodent’s muzzle. “Y’all are just jealous!”

Derek blinked at the words, his mouth opening to say something else, hanging there for a few moments, and then closing again. He glanced to one side and saw the broad-shouldered man dressed in a security uniform tapping the baton in his hand. Derek glared at him, then turned on his heels and grumbled, “Let’s get out of here.” His cronies were quick to follow suit. The security man watched them leave, but paid scant attention to the furs.

Roy turned to Aaron and grinned, his long snout sniffing at the air. “Thanks! You sure told them!”

Aaron wiggled his whiskers after a moment. “Let’s get back to our game, shall we?”

“Absolutely!”

Later that evening, the eight of them returned to the college campus and to their regular club room. They were chatting, hooting, and making quite a bit of noise as they clomped and padded their way down the hall. As they finally returned to the room, Aaron felt a bit of regret that the night was over. Amber sat back in her usual spot, but didn’t pick up her book. Cassandra sat on her haunches, chatting with Sean, who seemed quite animated for once. Marcus and Tim howled into the air as they celebrated their narrow victory. Carl was fawning over Roy the entire time, as Aaron sat down in his usual spot chewing on his piece of fabric.

“Look,” Carl said as they came through the door, “I think you should be the club President. You have way cooler ideas than I ever had.”

Roy shook his head, patting the ferret on the back with one paw. “It’s okay, Carl, really! I just want to come here and spend some good time with my new friends.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely!” Roy said as he sat down next to Aaron on the couch. “I still can’t believe the college won’t let you do that with your club money!”

“Well, I’m sure we can think of something,” Sean pointed out.

“Why not use it to buy shoes for ourselves?” Aaron pointed out. “I mean, they won’t let us use it to pay for the games, but if we have our own shoes, that takes care of most of the cost anyway.”

“Hey, now that’s an idea!” Marcus grinned. “Still, it’s kinda expensive to go bowling every week don’t you think?”

“We can make it a once a month event,” Roy suggested. “I’m sure we can think of lots of things to do together at the next meeting!”

Aaron grinned. “I can’t wait!” They all were in complete agreement about that!

## Dance of the Fox by Kris Schnee

I tell of three hazards, and the fox that found my village in our hour of need. There had been droughts, bandits, and a cruel samurai lord who took what little rice we had for taxes. I was a young temple-maiden, so I knew well how hard the people were praying. Just as yours do in this time of misfortune – and so I must warn you. The fox came to us at twilight under a half-moon, strolling along the stream with two paws in the water. And then he spoke.

“Good people!” he said to the rice-farmers in their terraced fields. His voice yipped and purred. “The gods have failed you. Why don’t you dance with me? I’ll make your troubles go away.”

We had never met a fox-spirit old enough to have the cunning and speech of a man, so the farmers of course were startled. But the fox smiled broadly and said, “Dance! It’s such a little thing to ask, isn’t it? If most of you will do it, I’ll fill your granary.”

I was not there, and only learned later of how the farmers ran off to their families, to the elders, to their children. They gathered in the village square beneath my temple, and they danced. The fox sat nearby and watched our weaving, hand-clasping dance. “Oh, there is one other thing. Dance for me, and you’ll grow the ears of mice. For my amusement.”

The farmers paused, puzzled by this caveat, but in a minute most were dancing again. The crop was that poor. The fox joined in, bounding along on four paws and wagging his tail as the sun set. When everyone was exhausted, the fox took a bow and said, “That’s quite enough. Look away from your granary tonight, and by morning, see a miracle!”

It was that night that I became involved. I lay with my head on a wooden pillow, curled up on my straw mat, when my ears grew. I woke up with a start and found them huge and swiveling on my head. The ears of a giant mouse! I thought it a dream, but they were there in the morning. When people came to my temple they had mouse-ears too, and chattered excitedly about the granary that was now stuffed with rice. The village was saved! The people left offerings of beans and rice and bottled sake at my temple, not for our gods but for the fox.



And so a peaceful year passed. Passing traders and bards and bureaucrats saw our ears and thought us strange, and we told them the story of the kindly fox. All was well until the next year, when storms destroyed our crops.

The fox came again at dawn, under a half-moon, playing with half a broken mirror in his mouth. I saw him standing in the threshold of my temple, ogling me. “Miko!” he said. “A pet of the gods! How lucky you are to have a better friend than them.”

I knelt by the fox, grateful for last year. “We’re starving again. Can you help us?”

"Of course. The gods have failed you, so why not dance with me? Gather your people and if most will dance, I'll fill your granary." He trotted away, but paused to look back and add, "Oh, and you'll have the tails of mice. For my amusement."

I walked down to the village, starting to doubt the fox's kindness. If this went on we would be mice altogether. But I told the people what he had said, and when they asked my advice I said nothing. It was not my place to question farmers, any more than it was the farmers' place to question the gods. The most popular part of my temple now was the shrine to Inari-sama, god/goddess of rice and wealth and foxes. The people knew which deity's minion had saved them.

And so they danced. The fox watched with obvious delight, rolling on the ground and bouncing around like a madman. The dancers laughed and included him, celebrating until the fox lay there panting. "That's quite enough. In the morning, a miracle!"

I couldn't sleep, knowing what was coming. Sure enough, in the night I found myself growing a tail, a serpentine thing that crept out from my robes. It was no awful thing to me, in its own right. But how many years would pass before I was nothing but the fox's prey? Until we all were?

In the darkness I crept towards the granary, wanting to see the fox delivering rice. As a temple-maiden I could be forgiven a little blasphemy, if Inari-sama took offense at my action. For a long time I lay in the grass upwind of the granary, fearing snakes. My patience was rewarded when I saw great bushels of rice flying, tumbling down through a rift in the clouds! Unseen hands caught them and arranged the bushels neatly, silently, to fill the granary. They were fresh and marked already with our village's name. Miracle, indeed!

In the morning all the people had their tails, but they also had more koku worth of rice than they knew what to do with. We traded for fish and tools, and became known far and wide as Mouse-Folk Village. People came to us to share in our bounty.



There came a day when people began praying to the fox and not the gods. Our stone-cutter brought me a fox statue with its face locked in a smirk, one forepaw raised like a good-luck cat's. He told me it was a present for Inari-sama. But the villagers who came to it left their offerings by the statue, and not by the Inari shrine itself.

One day, insects descended on our fields like a cloud of demons, stripping the plants bare. We stared in awe and horror at how our work, our very means of survival, fell to this plague. Or at least I did; others seemed far less concerned. Some farmers had not even planted as much as usual, for why should they bend their backs?

I myself had planted a little garden of rice and beans by a pond behind the temple. My faith in the gods had wavered in the face of so many disastrous harvests. But I believed that if I kept to myself and worked

diligently, all would be well with me. Indeed the insects spared a little of what I had planted. Only a little, but enough for me to share a few grains at Inari's shrine.

The fox came to answer our prayers once more. He came at sunset on a half-cloudy day, playing with half of a broken sword. He came to me. "What good are all these gods of yours? Why don't you dance again with that lovely tail of yours?"

I turned to see him at the threshold, entering to nibble the offerings by his statue. I said, "What's your game, fox? What will it be this time? Whiskers?"

The fox wiped his smiling mouth with a paw. "Perhaps whiskers, perhaps noses."

Were we helpless against this decline into beasthood? In frustration I stepped closer, taking up a nine-ringed staff. "Tell me what you're doing! Aren't there mice enough in Choshu for a scheming fox?"

"Of course, mousy pet-of-the-gods. But how many will practically walk down my gullet?" The fox grinned wider than I thought possible. "I will never lift a paw against you, or say one false word. It's so much fun to play by rules! Why don't you go tell your people that I've returned for another dance? I'm busy snacking." The fox resumed eating the temple offerings, pointedly turning his russet tail to me.

I left the temple and its stink of fox, going downhill to tell my people. This time I could not keep myself silent when asked for advice. The grin had seemed too confident, too evil to ignore. "Don't do it," I said. "One day soon, we'll be nothing but his dinner."

The stone-cutter jabbed a finger at me. "And what does our useless Miko suggest? Should we lie down and starve? Your gods are a lie!"

Some other villagers joined in, saying to me, "False gods! Fine in theory, absent in practice! Which of them has offered us even a radish for nothing?"

I shouted them down. "Which of them has been after your soul!"

They fell silent for a moment, but then they clamored again. "Nonsense! We're still men. We're giving up nothing but a bit of our good looks. There's plenty to go around, eh?"

A child tugged at my tail. "Miko, can demons really steal your soul?"

I stared down at her innocent face with its rodent ears, where part of her humanity had seeped away. "I don't know," I said, and thumped a fist against my heart. "But keep it close to you, just to be sure."

The stone-cutter said, "If the fox ever demands our souls we'll trap it and cut its throat like a bandit. Come on, everyone, are you afraid of getting rich for no work?"

Not everyone wanted to dance. I stayed out of it, and the child's family, and some of the others. I took the dissenters up to the temple to pray instead. The fox passed us on his way down, giving us a how-do-you-do nod of his head.

Our refusal did us no good. Most of the village could be heard below amid the glow of paper lanterns. They danced and played music and drank sake for hours. We pious few on the hill tried to ignore them. Even so, the music wafted up, and some of the faithful wandered down to join the party.

To keep my group together, I had us wait in the grass to see the delivery of rice that night. Once again great bushels of grain swooped down from the sky, tumbling into place in our granary. We crept close and saw the bushels were marked "Mouse-Folk Village."

Again I felt the heart-soaring of witnessing a miracle, of seeing divine power create wealth from nothing. But I was a fool! It was the child who saw my mistake, by asking, "Were they ours already?"

My mouth fell open. Each year our crops were somehow destroyed, and each year the fox brought us rice marked as though it had come from us! I murmured, "This is our own wealth, stolen from us by magic and sold back!"

I would have said more, but just then the fox's curse strengthened, hitting even us pious ones. I shivered and felt fur creeping over my skin, covering me from neck to wrists and ankles. Fine white hair, under my robes, so that I could pretend nothing had happened but an itch. The others grew mouse-fur too in various shades. "What do we do?" they asked me. "Even if we don't dance, he wins."

I said, "There won't be many more rounds of this game. We have to stop it."

A voice from the rafters said, "It's too much fun to stop!" And the fox hopped down to grin at us.

I snatched up my staff and swung it. "Thief! Begone in the name of Inari-sama!"

"Sticks and stones," the fox said, and hopped out of my way. The other villagers blocked the entrance and took up brooms and bamboo rods from outside.

I said, "This is sacred ground. You're no servant of Inari-sama. You're just here to change our bodies and steal our souls."

The fox was a rusty blur, too fast to strike. "You mortals don't understand the nature of souls," he lectured as he dodged among us. "Ha ha, close one! Your people are on the right track, but you still just don't get it. You can't steal anyone's soul. Whether they call me fox or Loki or Satan or something else again, no tribe ever quite figures it out. Hey now, that tickles; you almost nicked my tail."

With all my strength I swung the nine-ringed staff down at the evil fox's head. Air whooshed as he swirled around it and ran up the pole towards my face. He was a hairy, stinking demon full of teeth and slitted pupils. I covered my eyes and swung my other hand wildly, dropping the staff.

The fox grinned up at me from the floor as though falling with the staff had been his intent. Casually he ducked a broom someone swung, and flicked his tail away from a stomping foot. "Not bad, fuzzy little Miko, but you closed your eyes. See you next year for more fun!"

He was gone in a puff of grey smoke, leaving behind pieces of garbage. There were bits of broken blades like men's swords, bits of broken glass like women's mirrors, and shreds of paper. Maybe souls, too, could be shattered and the pieces collected.

We hurried to the village and woke everyone to tell them of our fight. But their reaction was not what I expected. "Lies!" said the stone-cutter. "We've got all the food we need for the third year in a row, and now we've even got warm coats for the winter."

I said, "Listen to yourself! Do you want to be a mouse, and die in the jaws of a fox?"

"What do you think we are to the samurai lords with their great big castles, who take our grain for their tables and our boys for their armies? We have to have one master or another. And I say we're better off with this spirit's games than with your worthless gods."

I glared up at the big man and jabbed a finger at him. "Did you ever have any respect for the gods? When you brought me a statue and said it was for Inari-sama, were you lying then, or are you lying now?"

Torchlight made even his shadow tower over me. "Girl, we have a good bargain going here. We're rich and famous and don't have to work any longer. Your silly superstitions have no power, and we almost died trying to live by them instead of learning to call for the fox sooner."

"He's stealing from us," said one of the children who'd followed me. The other pious folk clamored in agreement, drawing scorn from the others. In standing there we'd formed two clusters of mouse-folk, with my own group poised like a rice-ball against the crescent mouth or hand of the fox's many followers.

The mason gestured at his swath of supporters. "You said yourself that he'd never hurt us, Miko. It's your stubbornness that endangers us all, and the fox who brings us hope. Make yourself useful and tear down all those other little shrines of yours."

"I won't," I said, turning away from my people so that they wouldn't catch me crying. "You'll see! Next year, we'll have the sense not to dance for that thieving fox."



A year passed. I tended my own garden, but I spoke to anyone who would listen about the need to respect the gods. Those who had come to us last year had caught up, with their ears and tails and fur. Now more people came to share in our bounty, to play all day and feast all night. Mouse-Folk Village was the happiest place in Choshu Province. I crouched by the statue of Inari-sama and cried, alone in caring about the theft. Even if we were not becoming mice, we had lost something. We were no longer sowers of grain.

Most of us, that is. I was one of the last to transplant rice shoots to the fields, growing food of my own and trying not to eat the stolen grain. Over the months I had tried to keep people at their fields, but they drifted away when they saw no need. Gradually the people of neighboring villages crept

into our abandoned fields to take the land for themselves, and we did nothing. Why raise a fuss, my people thought, if those fools wanted to work while we played? I was glad to see men and women working in the distance, but not so pleased that they were outsiders.

One day a swarm of hungry crows visited us, but there was nothing for them to eat within our remaining lands – except for our little field behind the temple. They came while I stood in my garden, watching doom descend. They blotted out the sun, bringing darkness on me and the staff in my hands. My heart sank. There was no chance to fight them all off. The birds' feathers slew all light that reached them, and their voice was a chorus of moans.

"Miko!" someone called out. I turned and found a dozen men, women and children armed with rakes and nets, bows and brooms. For a moment I thought they had come to attack me, but they rallied to me and fought as though the sky itself were their enemy. There was no time to argue or pray or ask why they felt my field worth saving. We stabbed and swung at the crows. So many swirled around us, screeching and flapping, that we were lost in shadow – but we stood and fought.

And then the fox came. We saw him strutting brazenly up the hill, not skulking alone by half-light but at the head of a parade. The people had come with empty hands to dance. We at the temple would not throw down our tools. Instead we fought the crows, until the fox barked a single strange word. The dark swarm swirled off into the clouds.

The stone-cutter called out, "Miko, the fox has saved you! Will you give up your silly fighting now?"

I pointed my staff at the fox. "That beast is the one who brought these demons."

The fox's ears drooped. "Tsk, ts, Miko. I don't do that sort of thing. It's not I who warps your bodies and blights your fields." He turned to his followers and said, "I'd like you to harvest the last garden yourselves."

They started for my field, but then the stone-cutter hung his head. "Our tools."

I knew what he was thinking, and laughed at the fool. Such tools as we had left were stored in my temple. I said, "You couldn't reap what I'd sown if you wanted to! You let your tools rust, or sold them for sake. Do you even carve anymore? Could you make another statue if the devil-fox demanded it?"

The fox was at my side with a wagging tail. "She's quite perceptive. You mouse-folk are helpless without me. Very well; I'll feed you for just a little entertainment. Go back to your village and –"

The stone-cutter interrupted him. "We're not selling our souls." His people murmured assent; there was a limit to what they would do. But in that moment I saw that it didn't matter. To my eyes they truly were what they appeared to be, something that the fox confirmed in a moment.

The fox saw my expression and smiled. "That won't be necessary. My dear people, I don't buy souls. You already have the spirits of mice, not



men, and it's by your own choice. You are weak and stupid and you need my help – don't you? You'll do whatever I ask."

"No!" I said, at the head of my little group. "Begone, demon!"

The fox feigned misery and began to slink away, tail between his legs. But the stone-cutter's people clamored, "Wait, come back! We'll do what you want!"

"Faces and paws of mice," said the fox. "Or you can starve."

"Yes, anything!"

I called out over their pleading. "Don't you see what he's doing? He'll destroy us all, turn us into – no. You've turned yourselves into beasts."

The fox grinned, looking back and forth at us. "Well, little mice? I don't see human souls in most of you, and I doubt your Miko would deny it. What does each spirit here want? My offer stands."

I gasped, now seeing more than what was there. It was as though the sun had broken through clouds, though the true sky was no different. I saw a tribe of squeaking mice before me, with the only humanity being in the folk who had fought beside me at the field. A hundred and eight tendrils of darkness coiled from the mouse-folk's bodies, drifting through the air and converging on – on –

The demon's true form was a fox-shaped hole in reality, a twisted ladder, twinkling dots of green starlight, written symbols in a thousand tongues, ancient and shifting – and so familiar that I knew him to live in my own heart. And he smiled at me, knowing that I saw.

"No action from the lot of you?" said the fox. "Ah, yes, that shouldn't surprise me. Here's your order then: burn the temple. You remember how to burn, don't you?"

The stone-cutter gaped. "But it's our temple. A holy place." Perhaps he remembered that his father had helped build it, and that the statue he made still rested there. Furious, I braced myself in the temple doorway with my nine-ringed staff. They would have to burn the temple while staring at my face!

My people looked to me with pleading eyes. "Please, Miko, let them have their fun. We can't fight them." The pious ones were mice in the face of the fox's game and the desperation of their friends and families. And this wavering came just as the stone-cutter's group began to have doubts!

The fox said, "Burn it, I say, to seal our bargain and protect yourselves from this dangerous world. For just as there are mice enough for all the foxes in Choshu, there are foxes enough for all the mice." There came a darkening of the hills and masses of fire-bright eyes in the seething dusk. Demons, everywhere, with the teeth of foxes.

"Take shelter in the temple!" I said.

The fox said, "Walls mean nothing to them, I warn you. They're not even mine; they're opportunists. Start the fire and I'll protect you."

The people wavered, until the stone-cutter said, "We have to!" Then they broke and ran for the village below, where they snatched up torches that flared against the dim sky. Demons milled on the hilltops, converging

with leisure. Some of the villagers pleaded with the fox, some argued with the torch-bearers, and others simply cowered. I stood in the temple doorway, fighting back tears, and saw that I, too, was a helpless mouse. The phantom chains teased even my own tail, for I had stayed in the cursed village and denied myself only its benefits, not its demonic rule. Should I give in, then, and make merry as the fox's plaything? If the people needed guidance, why should I not be the one to provide it? I could have power. I could be the most respected mouse in the village, until the day the fox grew tired of toying with us.

No! That way was death! While my people dithered and brought themselves up to the point of wrecking their own temple and all their gods, I dashed inside it. My only choices were to submit or dare the flames. Such tools as we had were stored in the temple, and the temple had begun to burn.

Past statues and paintings I ran, down stairs to a dark space carved from the hill. There on the floor was what I needed: a shining scythe. I could see the dark tendrils everywhere, hear fox-demons yipping on the hill. When I had fought the fox, trying to smack him with my staff, he ran right along it and was about to reach my face. Only throwing the staff down, breaking that connection, had saved me. With the vision of spirits I had been granted, I saw that I was still bound to him. The fox's power over me was a dark ribbon extending from my tail.

Now I snatched the sickle and my nails dug tightly into my palm. I couldn't close my eyes; I had to see what I was doing. The blade felt sharp and cold against the fleshy tail and made me want to vomit. But there was only one way to cut myself free of his power. To reject not only his tainted gifts, but the very thought that he controlled me. To break my chain would hurt, but was within my power. I hated the fox, hated what he had done to me, rejected his promises and our curse – and brought the blade down hard, twice, screaming as it tore through meat and bone alike. I fell to the floor bleeding and weeping, and felt claws digging into dirt. Claws? I thought, blinking back tears and trying to breathe. Had the curse grown already, so that I was doomed to be a mouse in body?

I staggered upstairs to find the temple trembling. The god of fire burned; Inari-sama's gold paint melted. Fire took our meager offerings. Smoke rolled around me and flames licked my robes, yet I felt no pain besides the bleeding stump of my tail – which had been replaced. Instead of mangled flesh, there now twitched a white-furred tail like a fox's. It was hideous for its resemblance to our tormentor's, and yet it was something new and strange that held my attention for a moment. Even in the midst of flames and smoke. My robes had turned moon-white, untouched by soot, and no phantom rope tied me to a master. Too stunned to think, I hurried from the burning temple. I found my people cheering the destruction they had caused, as though they had decided it was right and good to burn.

And then they saw me, throwing down the blood-stained tail of the mouse I had been. The demons had closed on us, leaving little space between their horde and the shelter the people themselves had destroyed.

The fox gave a barking laugh. "What a fine look, Miko. Everyone, behold your temple-maiden. She sacrifices her own blood to try buying your way out of your own stupidity. How original!"

I hadn't cut my flesh for them at all, only for myself. The fox gave me a smile and a wink.

The stone-cutter stared at me, with a torch trembling in his mousy paw. His face was a rodent's, with dark eyes and twitching whiskers. "Miko, you're a fox?"

I pressed clawed, white-furred hands to a muzzled face, full of sharp teeth. I had a sight they couldn't see, revealing the sparks of their shrunk souls and the hundred and eight chains they had forged by choice. I was one who had descended into flame and blood and emerged with a new shape and snowy robes. "No! I'm not a demon!" I said.

But the fox danced at my heels, enjoying my confusion. "Not a mouse, nor a man, nor a fox, nor a demon. What, then?"

Had I been selfish? Had I become a fox because I was just as much a monster as the evil one – for turning away from my people? No, I decided. Even if I was alone, it was right to chop off my mouse-tail. Better to live mangled and alone than to burn intact with friends.

All around me were flames that didn't burn me, men who had the souls of mice, and demons that I could see – as illusions, as lies the fox had made us tell ourselves. None of it truly threatened me if I would fight. My nine-ringed staff was in my hands again, gleaming. I threw off his taunts, his labels, and the guilt and temptation I had felt. When I did, my voice sounded clear and loud. "Your only power comes from tricks and false promises. Nothing you can do can hurt me. I'm the one who chose to bleed rather than accept your control. So bring on your demon army and try to kill me first!"

Ten thousand shadows poured themselves at me. They weren't real; they had no power over me. I prayed to Inari-sama anyway, swinging my staff and feeling them nipping at my hands, my robes, my tail. Though they formed a thunderstorm of darkness around me, I slashed at them and felt them tear like silk. Voices moaned and howled; claws slipped harmlessly off me. Finally the cloud thinned and with an outraged scream swirled away into the sky. I stood with white robes tattered but unstained. The afternoon sun shone and a divine wind had left the temple smoldering but still.

"Behold!" said the fox. "Your champion, the mighty Miko, spoke where you would not and acted when you would not. On your behalf she has rejected our bargain."

The people broke from their astonishment to protest, "No, please! What have we done wrong? We still need you!"

“Perhaps you do, but I have business elsewhere. Why don’t you try planting seeds this year for a change? I have reason to expect fair growing weather in the years to come.”

“If you stop sending disasters!” I said.

“I get blamed for everything. So unfair. Have you learned nothing? Would you like to reconsider my offer?”

“No!” I said, before others could answer.

“Very well,” said the fox. “Miko, as you may notice, you have the form of a lovely fox, and certain powers to match, for molding your soul into something rare and perceptive. Think of it as a blessing, and tell your future fox-children of me.” He turned to the rest and said, “Mouse-folk you are, and so you and your kin and all who dwell here will remain. Let your form be a reminder of the stupidity you showed me, and may you think on what your Miko has done for you. I go now to play my games for others.”

The mouse-folk tried to stand in his way, to keep him among them, but they were too afraid to defy him. The fox sauntered away as the sun began to set, saying, “Good luck, my foolish prey! Good luck, fellow teacher!”

The strength went out of my knees, but I propped myself up with my staff. The fox-tail lashed behind me. I saw the chains of the fox’s power fade from the people, leaving them free of him but still frightened, helpless, and angry. More frightened, perhaps, because they were free.

“What have you done, Miko?” said the stone-cutter, a builder who now knew only how to destroy. “We’ll starve! We’ll die! You drove away the only one who could save us!”

I said, “You can save yourselves. Sell your pretty things and buy seeds and tools.”

They would hardly listen. “It’s your fault we’re ruined. You’re a monster like those demons, not one of us mice. Get out!”

I stood, wearily, and looked over the charred temple. “This is my home too. Don’t you want to honor the gods you rejected?”

“Only the fox could save us. We’ll have to become beggars or bandits. By the gods, Miko, you’ve ruined us.”

I looked each of them in the eyes and saw mice in human clothes. It was their own souls they had broken, with the fox only tapping at cracks. Could they be repaired the same way, and become men again despite having the bodies of mice? “Please, listen to me. We can start again, by rebuilding our temple and reclaiming our fields.”

All that I heard was a chorus of, “Get out! Out, demon of ruin! We cast you out!”

I left my home as the sun set, clutching my nine-ringed staff so that I would neither collapse in tears nor strike anyone. The grassy earth felt hazy with the mouse-folk’s curse. They had been my people, but they had severed me just as I had severed the mouse-tail. I would find another place, one where I might warn people of three hazards. First, the demon fox. Second, its home in the cracks and darkness in their own hearts. And last, the mouse-folk themselves. Though their bodies and souls were no longer

those of men, they knew still how to burn. Lost in thought, and with a prayer to Inari-sama who dwelt in my heart also, I set out at twilight under a half-moon.

## Relics by William Eakins

There wasn't much use for an old, grey haired doctor like me any more. No, someone could go to an auto-system and get a full diagnosis as well as a listing of medications and treatments for a wide range of conditions, from hives to scabies, to the six-tail-flu. The auto-doc had it all, and it was far better at the job than I was. I'd freely admit that, the system was very good at what it did. But it didn't have the touch.

A jab of a needle, a few samples here and there, it took care of everything without a lick of personality. Personality was a needless thing these days, who cared about wasting time just talking about your problems and fears, right? Busy busy busy! And I would cry if I could about such things - no, personality was a dying art in these days. So I was just a relic of the past. And in my small office, overlooking the city and the forest that grew out around the ancient, high walls of this beautiful place, I moldered and waited, sipping at my coffee.

"A patient is arriving, Doctor Smith." Ah, the chime of my assistant, a lovely little program which hung on the side of my door. I set my coffee to the side and stood, straightening out my clothes and pulling back my hair with a quick brush of my fingers, then saw to washing my hands of any germs, or hair follicles that could contaminate my patient. It wasn't professional to get the sick- I left that to real life. The chart scrolled up on the wall as I washed my hands, and I reviewed her files.

My patient entered as I finished the file, and I turned, facing her with a bright smile coming upon my grizzled face - I needed to shave more often. Dismissing the thought, I faced her, she clad in a rather formal business suit, and looking to be rather an attractive female, if I had any right to say so. A soft, blue scaled Alnarian, one whom hailed from one of the newer colonies. The look of her file and her presence told me she was on a business trip. Her long, slinky form was clad in a single piece suit with the formal marks woven onto her left sleeve. She was rather high ranking too.

"And what can I do for you today, young lady?" Young was subjective, of course. She was thirty eight years old - only a shy six years younger than my age, but was just entering into the prime of her life. Young, certainly, by her species standards - they may mature slow, but their minds were rather sharp, and they were cut-throat business dealers. Oh, they could sell water in the ocean, sand in the desert, and ice on the frozen asteroids orbiting Eris.

But they were immensely fair. Never could you worry about them trying to rip you off, and if they gave their word, it was as good as done. Humanity could have a lot to learn for such friends as these.

"Huh. Haven't seen one of you in a while." She stated, and I gave a brighter smile than before, and gave a soft little gestured outwards - directing that she find herself a seat while I brought up the memories of her kind - just to keep things fresh. She smiled at me, though, presenting a

nervous appearance, and gestured. Her kind liked to gesture. "Apparently you are keeping yourself in good condition though, ol' grey-hair."

I was rather proud of my hair, it had taken quite a while to get it into such condition, and the grey streak really added a lot of personality to my face, I'd come to believe. Maybe I was just egotistical. Who knew?

"Thank you, young lady. So, what seems to be the problem? Needing a vacation is probably the answer, you Alnarian's tend to work way too hard for anyone's benefit. And most conditions will end up being related to stress because you don't like to slow down. Tell me if I'm wrong."

She cracked into a smile and I knew I was helping win her over from the auto-docs, who had less personality than the parts they were made out of. Pieces of high-priced junk. I would love to just take after them with a wrench and see how they responded to that.

"No, you are correct. I've been working far too hard and could use some loosening up." She murmured back to me and reached out, running a hand along my right arm - a touch I might have found rude if I weren't as forgiving a person as I was. The touch went along the metallic flesh, and she peeled the sleeve up, getting a look. I smiled, patiently, and let her touch, let her explore. It always put the young ones off guard and helped me keep friendly. "This is some well done work. It's out of date, sure, but it's well done. Well installed too."

"Well, thank you. Yeah, after the accident I was given a replacement. The arm is just as good as the rest but, I couldn't find anyone willing to do a skin graft or even color matching. Can you believe it? Ah well, that's not important. And yes, I've had other installation work here, and here." I tapped my chest and the side of my face, where the panel was easy enough to pull down, showing the part of my jaw and the under work. It had been a rather terrible accident that should have, rightly, been fatal. I was just lucky, I guessed. She seemed to lighten up just a little more at my revelations, before drawing back to her serious face.

"Well, I've been suffering from a series of cramps in my abdominal area as of late. I've taken pain killers to try and ignore it, but I've found that it doesn't help after a few hours. I'm a bit worried since it's never been this bad before, in these last eight years." I quietly accessed the information on her species and let it display on the wall behind her, so I would not turn my back and risk offending a patient. A quick scan and keyword search began. "Normally I... find ways to take care of the problem, but this time it's just not been letting up. I don't want to end this trip. I can take a vacation in a few weeks, but..."

She let her words trail off, showing a hint of guilt and, perhaps, a little bit of worry about her condition. She was perfectly right to be, of course - anyone who neglected their body was a fool, and should have been hit upside the head. Then again, I think a lot of problems could be solved that way, but I was a doctor, not a wrench!

"Well, you don't seem to have contracted any fungal problems, as you don't display the secondary or territory symptoms. Nor do you give off any

undue heat signatures..." I said, the room having given an automatic scan of her as soon as she entered into the door - though, I admitted, there was some things it couldn't do without a more careful touch. "So, I've got to ask, have you been doing anything different lately?"

She looked away, and I did as well, looking out the window overlooking the balcony, and gazing out, across the forest and its beautiful flow of foliage and life. That sent me to wonder. Oh, how I longed to take a vacation in there. But, I couldn't, it wasn't very healthy for people like me - with electronics in them. The dampness would corrode circuits and I'd end up a wreck. I opened the window a bit to let the scent come inside - and though I knew the sensors would hate it, eh, fuck 'em.

"No, my diet is pretty much the same stuff I've eaten for the last few years, I get enough water and exercise. I travel just as much and spend a month on one planet for vacation, I mean, the only thing that's changed is I haven't had a chance to visit my boyfriend. I mean, I don't even have one anymore. He found someone who wasn't moving around as much and could take care of him better."

I detected pain, and I felt a moment of pity for her, I understood, as I didn't have the time to pursue anything besides work these last few years. Not that I didn't want to - I'd have loved to taste the forbidden fruits that I was denied. Sometimes, it sucked. Or didn't as it may be. I reached out and put my good hand on her shoulder, and gave it a squeeze of sympathy. She looked up, almost a fragile creature, as far as her kind could be, then stepped back.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You seem like a very nice young woman to spend a lifetime with." I could spend a lifetime just looking into those eyes of hers. I'd never felt this way about a patient before, and had to shake it off, reprocessing the information as I got it and giving her another look. Single, beautiful, alien. I smiled a little. "Well, if you give me a little more time, I'm sure I can find a solution. Why don't you tell me about yourself while I look it up?"

She gave me a coy smile that I could only repeat back, and she began to laugh - a look of relaxation, of relief, coming upon her face at my manner. Her hand came up to gently pat my cheek, which I knew to be a rather friendly thing to do to a stranger by her racial standards, and she leaned back against wall, her face framed by the information that scrolled quickly behind her. "Are you coming onto me, doctor?"

"No. That'd be unprofessional of me to do." I murmured back, as the information ran down to a possible solution. I took care to double-check everything and recheck it again as I watched her form seem to undulate just a bit. "But, it seems that the problem is you have been neglecting certain biological urgencies, and that's making your body react in ways it shouldn't."

"Such as?"

I didn't really want to answer that, but was compelled, for the sake of my patient, I was forced to say something about it. I hesitated and looked



out the window as the rain started to pelt across the glass, and the field automatically started up to prevent any excess rain from getting in. I looked out, the winds starting to pick up at the promise of a spring storm. I loved those storms. They were so beautiful to watch.

“Well, to be honest, it appears that you’ve been putting off your cycle for far too long, and your abdomen may be compacting with the excess. Putting off a cycle for one or two years isn’t dangerous, but eight years can even be fatal. I can recommend a certain flush of your system to remove any unwanted buildup, but it needs to be taken care of, even if to trick your body into believing it’s been fertilized then passing the extra ovum after a few days. I don’t recommend it with a male of your species unless you are looking for a large pregnancy and clutch. If you aren’t looking forward to that, I can recommend a few routines for this biological subterfuge. Or, there are those who could be hired to perform the necessary work if you desire a more personal touch.”

If I had it in me, I would have blushed, and her eyes hardened for a moment, as though she were going to yell and be insulted, but this faded into a look that could almost be called mischief. I stepped back inadvertently and leaned against the counter, as she gave me a long look over. I wasn’t sure I liked it. No, I was positively sure that I didn’t approve of it at all.

“A personal touch, hum?” She sat forward and ran her hands together, and I swallowed - her approach was setting me a little off guard and I was most definitely not used to this sort of treatment from my patients. She stood and approached a little closer to me. “Doctor, are you supposed to recommend that to your patients?”

“If it benefits them to a degree that helps maintain their over-all physical health, I am permitted and required to recommend the best avenues of long term health and support, even if it should be offensive to my patients. I am a doctor, if what I say offends, I apologize and continue on, Ma’am.” I stated calmly, while she gave a softer laugh than before. “I don’t apologize, I just treat my patients to the best of my ability.”

“Well then. Doctor.” She stated, forcefully. “Treat your patient.”

I was trapped at an impasse. I prided myself on a personal touch, but never something like this. I treated myself as better than the auto-docs, those who could relieve problems without treating the patient as anything more than a commodity. I looked on her with a look of pain - as I was both violating the oath of the physician, and yet reinforcing it. I looked upon her, then out to the rain - for this room was simply too sterile.

She stepped past me, as apparently she felt the same way, and her hand came to hold mine, as she stood outside, where the wind whipped past and she leaned against the stone balcony, pulling at me, slowly drawing me out into the rain, and the water, and what made me so terrified, and yet so amazed. Her clothing whipped in the wind and soaked in the rain, and I was drawn to look at her, and feel as I had never been able to do so before.

“If I get wet, I’ll rust. My circuits are not treated to handle that much across them. They’ll fry. I’ll be rendered incapable of performing further duties after they blow a few of my circuits. It would lead to a system wide shutdown, if I went out there with you.” I said in resistance. But I didn’t want to resist. I didn’t want to stay in this room any more. I wanted to be free. “Androids don’t belong in the rain...”

“I know. It’s okay, Smith. It’ll be okay.” her voice turned softer, as she drew me into the rain, and I felt the first sizzle, the first feeling of the water touching the bare plates on my exposed, synthetic face, and her fingers starting to pull free my shirt, my jacket, and let them flow into the air and wind. I gazed at her, as she stripped me, as she bore me to the wind and rain, and I was made naked before god and heaven. “You know it has to be like this.”

And how I relished it, as no machine had right to. How I worshiped at the alter, and could feel, even in that bundle of burnt out circuits deep inside of my core programming, I could feel my soul stir to the sight and feel of the heavens, trapped and let free from outside of that damnable, abominable box. And with her I stood as we watched, felt the lightning strike not a thousand feet away and I relished, sang, and felt my senses expand a hundred thousand times.

We made love, in the rain. I held her against a blanket and I saw to my patient, and I felt her soul, for a brief flicker, touch mine. And in that rain we were one creature, even as I was damned to oblivion for my actions. And as I cried out to the heavens with her - as I satisfied her, I understood she was giving me a chance to not just be a relic. And for a long moment, as I held her, I was set free. Even as the rain touched and got into old ports, and touched against the live lines, as I surged into her, my mind was shattered. Her fingers touched the base of my neck and dug in, and I was more than just a machine, for that moment.

And for a moment, a relic knew etern-

-Alert: Code 11587-

-Memory Core Damaged-

-Attempting Repair-

-Failed-

-Retry-

.....

-Failed-

[AI:run-/wipe/ok/authorization:\*\*\*\*\*]

-Memory Wipe Attempted-

-Memory Wipe Failed-

Reason Code: 188751: System too heavily damaged, AI corrupted,  
system damage

-Files Corrupted-

Her face is so beautiful.

Her face is so beautiful.

Her face is so beautiful.  
Her face is so beautiful.  
Her face is so beautiful.  
-Files Corrupted-  
I want to spend forever like this.  
I want to spend forever like this.  
I want to spend forever like this.  
I want to spend forever like this.  
I want to spend forever like this.  
-Files Corrupted-  
Is this love?  
Is this love?  
Is this love?  
Is this love?  
Is this love?  
-Files...-

11.13.87 - "Doctor Smith", Android 2851 has been scheduled for permanent decommission after he went on a rant about the new models being put out, as they lack the 'proper' routines for interaction with the public. Specialist is being brought in tomorrow. She will take over. I'm sorry to see the ol' doc go.

11.14.87- Smith has been deactivated. I've performed over six hundred personal decommissions, and this is the most intimate one I've had. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was alive. It's almost a shame to let go of this relic. He had such feelings. Such a soul to him. I can't get him out of my head.

11.14.87 - Memory core fried, unable to recall records. The model has been discontinued for the last twenty six years. Sixteen years late for wipe. Too much damage has been built up to history and personality recovery due to built up debris. Recommended action: Retirement of parts.

11.15.87 - I've found a small cache of still active memory. It is just thirteen seconds long, during our moment. I... <deleted>

11.16.87 - I never want to discontinue an android with this much personality again. Consider my positioned resigned, permanently.

## **The Dog Made Me Do It by Sean Silva**

Rob always hated those bumper stickers. They were like warning labels for incompetent drivers; and from the moment he saw this particular brightly colored decal plastered across the rear end of the vehicle that had just cut him off, Rob started to feel like he should've stayed home.

"Get off the damn road!" Rob shouted, glaring at the car in front of him while laying on the horn. "Your kid may be an honor student – but you're an idiot!"

"Well... that wasn't a very nice thing to say, now was it?"

Rob turned to his right, pointedly making eye contact with the mangy-looking Irish Wolf Hound in the passenger seat.

"What?" the dog questioned curtly, attempting to shrug his shoulders ever so slightly at his human master. "I'm just making an observation. That's all."

The hound was sitting on all fours with his large body hunched over in the seat. He looked extremely uncomfortable inside the small car, but his lolling tongue and the faint wag of his tail seemed to suggest otherwise. But it wasn't as if Rob really needed to see those typical canine indications of emotion. Not with his pet anyway. If Rob really wanted to know how his dog was feeling, all he had to do was ask him.

"Don't start with me, Bram," Rob replied with a grumble as he looked back at the road. "This was your stupid idea in the first place."

"Then tell me, who's really the stupid one here? Me for suggesting it? Or you for listening?"

Rob shook his head, taking a brief moment to look in the rearview mirror before switching lanes.

"You forgot your blinker."

Smart ass dog.

"Now go on... tell me. Who's to blame for this little excursion, huh? Maybe it has something to do with all that alcohol you drank last night?"

"Well, the more you keep talkin', the more I could really go for another drink."

"Oh, right – that's what we forgot to get you. A nice hefty, morning beer. It's a part of this complete breakfast, you know? Right alongside a big bowl-a-dumb."

"Shut up, Bram."

"So let's see now – hmm? Somebody who drinks, even in the morning... isn't there a scientific term for that?"

"Brrraam!"

"The word drunk seems to come to mind, but I like moron better. Has a nicer ring to it."

"Would you hush? Good Christ!"

"But then again, what do I know, right? I'm just a dog."

"Maybe you should try having a talking pet, and see if you don't develop a drinking habit."

"I do have a talking pet – you. And the only drinking habit I have is out of the toilet."

"Oh, for the love of God, why me?" Rob muttered to himself as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"And don't you start blaming me for your problems again. I didn't hold a gun to your head and tell you to get in a fight with your girlfriend." Bram looked down at the seat and wiggled his big paws. "Not with these clumsy appendages anyway."

Rob sighed, relaxing his shoulders a bit as he turned to look at the large canine. "Well... given the circumstances, I guess I should be thankful. At least you're not telling me to kill people."

"Not yet, anyway." Rob swore he heard the dog chuckle. "And besides, that's all been done before. I'm trying to be much more original."

"Could you do me a favor and please be quiet? Just for once," his owner said as he vigorously rubbed his forehead. "I got a blazin' headache, and us sitting here bickering like of couple of grumpy old men, ain't helpin'."

"I already told you, you're not suffering from a hangover, so just relax."

"I knew I should've bought a cat."

"Yeah, cause they always listen."

"Don't make me buy you a muzzle." Rob gritted his teeth and briefly closed his eyes while massaging his temples. "God! This headache just won't go away?"

"It's an old canine mind trick. The more you fight it, the more it's gonna hurt."

Rob rolled his eyes and gripped the steering wheel a little bit tighter. "That's the last time I ever let you watch Star Wars with me."

"Come on, Rob. You really need to lighten up. Have a little fun. Most people would jump at the idea of being able to talk with their dog."

"Oh yeah, Bram, you're just a barrel-a-laughs. My therapist would have a field day if I told her about you."

"You probably should. It might help explain a few things, like why you're such a whinny little pansy."

"Bram, give me a break, will ya?"

"Okay, fine. But can't you see I'm doing you a favor? A huge one, I might add."

"How? Explain it to me. Cause all it looks like you did, was get me up at the crack of dawn—"

"Oh, and that's my fault. Would you have rather that I pissed on the carpet? I know how much you love cleaning it."

Rob shifted to glare at the large dog, whose tail immediately started wagging, almost mockingly.

"Cheer up, Rob. Getting you up early forced you to make coffee and eat a good breakfast, so now you're at least somewhat sober." The dog sniffed the air. "And you smell better too. What'd you roll in last night, anyway?"

The human paused, seething as he started to make the turn onto Olive Drive. "Like I was saying...you get me up at the crack a dawn, so I can get

dolled up for a pointless drive across town that's only going to make me feel even more humiliated."

"I only suggested that you get in the car, I didn't make you do it. So apparently, you didn't think it was such a bad idea either." Bram gave his master a toothy grin before turning back to the passenger side window.

Rob could see her house now, growing bigger in his vision as they approached. He pulled up to Amber's home and parked his vehicle, staring at the front door for a few seconds as his heart started to race. He wanted to put the car in drive and speed off, but Bram's panting suddenly reminded him why he was here.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" Bram asked before resuming his heavy breathing, fogging up the front window.

Rob sighed and leaned back in the seat. "I don't know, Bram. What if she just says no and slams the door in my face?"

Once again, the dog managed what looked like a shrug. "There's a possibility, especially after what you said to her yesterday. But you'll never find out unless you stop talking to me like a weirdo, march yourself over there, and apologize to her."

Rob shifted in his seat and gazed at the dog sitting on the passenger side. "Why do you even care about this? All she does is take time away from you."

Bram's tail began to swish around, abrasively brushing against the upholstery. "Because I love you, Rob...and I know how much she means to you. That, and I think Amber smells good. Plus, she always scratches that itch at the base of my tail. You know – the one that drives me nuts."

Rob chuckled. It was the first time Bram had seen his master smile in over a day. "Okay, but what am I supposed to say to her?"

"I don't know? Tell her the dog made me do it. If nothing else, at least it'll make her laugh."

Rob looked over at Amber's house and let out a heavy sigh. "Alright. Here goes nothing." He opened the car door and stepped out before closing it behind him.

Bram watched from inside the vehicle as his master walked up to the entryway and knocked on the door. Amber was quick to answer, and the dog could see that Rob was the first one to start talking. It wasn't long before the two humans were locked in a firm embrace, much to Bram's relief.

"That's more like it, another happy ending," Bram muttered proudly to himself. "Now if I could just get him to put the toilet seat down more often, we might actually have something here."

Bram suddenly let out a faint growl as he started scratching his neck with his hind leg. Minutes began to draw out in the cramped car, and the large hound eventually jumped into the driver's seat so he could bark at the window. "Hey! Rob! Before you two go inside and make up, don't forget to let me outta here."

He pawed at the window, but it did no good, and the two humans just continued to talk. “Rut roh.”

Bram whimpered and whined, racking his claws even more vigorously against the driver’s side window, but he still got no response from Amber or his master. “Rob? Buddy? Damn.”

That’s when the Irish Wolf Hound suddenly remembered that cars have a high pitched bark all their own, if you just press on the center of the funny looking driving wheel.

## Truest Flight by Eric Luhman

Yellow-green bat-like wings spread out from her back as she launched from the tree she'd taken refuge in over the night. How lucky for her that the winds were right last night, allowing her to get to the massive forest ahead of her before her exhausted muscles gave out. The giant trees were perfect camouflage for her green hide, thick enough that she could conceal her entire body near the trunk of one, and the branches were sturdy enough that she could curl her fifteen-foot long body about one, latch onto it with her claws and tail, and sleep with no fear of falling.

It was also horribly uncomfortable. Her wings were stiff and itchy from the dozens of tiny scratches that sharp little twigs scraped into them upon her leafy landing, and she was certain that she felt a cramp growing in her tail as she unwound it from the branch. Her stomach also gnawed at her insides, reminding her irritably that it was three days since she'd last eaten.

None of this bothered her, however. For Avorina, the green dragoness, discomfort was something she had learned to live with years ago. She knew, deep down, that she ought to have a home somewhere, with dry, cool stone beneath her paws, and a male dragon with her. She knew that her male would sometimes bring her food, and other times accept food from her while they took turns watching over their hatchlings, waiting for them to sprout their wings, at which point they would leave the lair and go to seek their own fortunes.

She knew this because Mother had told her as much. While she still floated in the warm, safe haven of her egg, Mother would whisper and sing to her of the life she would live. She'd loved Mother's voice, always warm, making her yearn for the day when she'd be ready to break out of her little universe and experience the gigantic one outside the shell. Father's voice was no less loving, but more firm, warning her of the dangers of the outside world, the large agile predators that might give a young dragon a deadly fight, the dangers of overeating to the point where she couldn't fly, or of under-eating to the point where she could no longer fill her fire bladder. She learned the draconic language through the daily attention from Mother and Father, for as the musical speech filtered through her eggshell, it came with mental pictures sent by her parents.

Most of all, however, he warned to stay far away from the soft-skinned bipeds called humans. Though they seemed weak, they were anything but. They were able to fashion pseudo-scales for themselves to cover their weak flesh, and used tools that were even more threatening than fang and claw to a dragon's hide.

She knew how true his warnings were. She was fleeing two human kingdoms that she'd just driven into war with each other, and had a chance to see them close up. Just a few years ago, she had flown to human lands and had evaded the arrows of the guards long enough to offer her services to them. After lying blatantly about her ability to scout without being seen, her offer was eventually accepted. Unlike the stories so often told, dragons



were not, in fact, enormous beasts, but were often about the size of a warhorse, and with her green hide, she claimed that she could hide easily in the forests, and that her eyesight was keen enough to pick out individual riders from miles up. She gave accurate reports for months, getting them to trust her, and meanwhile visiting the kingdom she was scouting against, making the same offer, and gaining the same trust.

With her position at court in each, she subtlety turned them against each other. At first, she flavored her reports, making routine reports seem to be a military buildup. As their dependence on her increased, she slowly added more falsehoods to her reports. Soon, both kingdoms were paranoid, and all it took was a single report of an army approaching to send their armies out against each other. She stayed just long enough to see the battle joined and then fled as fast as her wings would carry her.

She wasn't sorry in any way for what she had done. The only sense of guilt that she had was because she had broken her hatchling's promise to Father to stay away from humans. But for what they had done to her and her family, they deserved no better fate than to kill each other off in a war she had engineered.

Her first contact with humans began one day when she was drifting in that pleasant state between waking and dream. The egg was beginning to become cramped, though, and she wanted very much to stretch out to her full length, if only that hard shell wasn't in the way...

A sudden deafening bellow from Father! A crash that made her egg jump! Her mouth opened to cry in fear, her first breath through the hairline crack in her egg coming from the hard impact against the ground.

Everything was noise and confusion. She turned nose over tail as her egg rolled about... soon not coming into contact with the hard stone any more as she was jostled. She heard another voice, another beating. Not the slow and steady beating of Mother or Father's heart, but a rapid fluttery sound. Where was she? She wanted Mother! Out of desperation for her parents, she started struggling madly within the shell, smashing her little body against the sides with all her might, using the single large tooth in her mouth to crack her way out of the shell, forcing her head free.

Her first sight was of a soft pink thing, tightly grabbing her egg. Whatever it was, it wasn't Mother or Father! She lunged forward and drove her egg tooth into the soft thing, provoking a howl. Her tooth broke off; her egg fell and shattered on stone below. She tried to roll to her feet, but her clumsy stumbling put her on a sharp slope. Her blurry eyes focused for an instant, seeing stone coming up hard as she tilted over. Something hit her head-

Mother held her warm within her massive forepaws when she came to. She blinked for an instant before the horror overcame her and she clung tightly to the larger dragon, wailing in delayed terror. She'd learned very quickly that the thing she'd bitten was a human.

She eventually heard from Father the entire story. They'd come to steal eggs from the two dragons, and through foul trickery, were almost able to

do so. They'd pinned Mother and Father down with nets and spears through their wings and tails, and fled with the eggs while the dragons tried to free themselves. Avorina was the only hatchling they'd recovered. Several of the humans had escaped with their stolen prizes, and after Mother and Father had freed themselves, and were bearing down on the slower remnant, each and every one of them smashed the eggs upon the ground and skewered the helpless hatchlings before they were torn asunder.

Much as the need for vengeance burned, however, both Mother and Father needed to raise her, and neither of them dared risk death and depriving her of a parent. By the time she had grown, the trail had grown cold.

She heard that story for years throughout her youth, burning into her brain just as her fire breath burned the brush that Father brought her to practice on. Father used it as an example of why she ought never to get near humans, but instead she took it as an example of why humans ought to be destroyed. When she had left the lair, she did not travel further into the wilderness as her parents did, but instead traveled towards human lands.

I'm sorry, Father, but I didn't keep my promise, she thought as she broke through the tree layer and started west again.

She was far out of sight now. If any followed her, it would take at least a day to catch up. But for now, her empty stomach told her in no uncertain terms that she needed to eat. Her fire bladder was all but empty and her entire body protested as she spread her wings.

Fortunately, there was a clearing right below her, and she saw several deer feeding in the early morning's light. Soundlessly, she folded her wings and went into a steep dive. She remembered Father's lessons. Be swift and silent. Break your target's back in a single blow because it may be the only blow you get.

With her concentration tightly upon the single doe she'd picked out, she was quite startled by the sudden burst of movement at the edge of the tree line. Long-established paranoia screamed at her and she jerked out of her dive with a loud clap of air that sent all the deer dashing madly into the forest.

All the deer but the same unfortunate doe she'd aimed for. Something had pounced on it and was in the process of madly wrestling with it. Upon closer inspection, after she'd leveled off her flight, Avorina saw that whatever it was, it was a shade of deep blue, and... were those scales?

She watched the scene unfold as she started to descend in a wide circle. Yes, it was another dragon! A very poorly trained one, she noted as it wrestled with the doe. Male too. A burgeoning anger began to rise in her chest. That dragon had stolen her meal from her and she might have to go hungry again, because there was no chance that any deer would return to this place today. After a delay that would have made Father look away with shame, the other dragon finally managed to rip his claws across the doe's throat, sending blood spurting out. At that, he backed off and let the bloody animal try desperately to stagger into the forest, waiting in order to

follow the blood trail to its body when it collapsed a few seconds later, and licking the red ooze off his scales in the meantime.

Avorina circled and prepared to land, ready to give this stupid male a substantial piece of her mind. She noted as she came down that he was smaller than she was too, only four feet at the shoulder on all fours, instead of her five feet. It was doubtful that he could stop her if she decided to take a portion of his kill. A large portion. As she came down, his eyes turned up to her, and he startled. She expected him to offer a greeting or challenge, as dragons did when seeing each other, but instead he spun on his tail and dashed at full speed into the forest.

Landings took time, especially when she was aiming for a single spot of land like that clearing. He had plenty of time to completely lose himself in the trees by the time her four paws hit the ground. With an irritable sigh, she started to sniff for the blood of the doe to follow him by.

She was again unprepared for the crashing and rustling coming from the forest. She hurriedly backed away, preparing to leap into the air once more. To her amazement, it was that same dragon, dragging the slain doe by its hind leg. Following her retreat, he dragged it to the center of the clearing, and then backed away, watching her. His head and tail were drooping in shame, and upon seeing her reluctance to approach, he started speaking in the ultrasonic tongue of dragons.

“Am sorry self took pretty green’s kill. Give food to pretty green. Am sorry.”

The abject sorrow and shame in his voice killed Avorina’s anger, giving slow rise to contempt in its place. What kind of dragon would humiliate himself like this? And the language! She spoke better Draconic while still in the egg than the terribly accented, broken mess that he used.

However, a sudden angry growl from her stomach reminded her of the feast set out for her. She moved over and bent her head down, sinking her fangs into the body and tearing out large chunks, which slid down her throat and into her aching stomach. She kept one eye fixed on the blue dragon sitting nearby as she ate, examining him.

She was even less impressed by his body than by his voice. The first word that came to mind when referring to him was scrawny. Smaller than she was already, he was also so thin that she could count his ribs under the leaf-thin scales on his body, some of which were falling out. Considering his ineffective hunting style, it was no surprise that he looked starving.

Moved by pity and the urge to get his gaze off her, she eventually tore a haunch free from her meal and flung it at him. With speed she hadn’t seen before, he snatched it from the air and devoured it voraciously, a soft, humming purr of pleasure emitting from his throat as the chunks of muscle and hide disappeared.

She continued to watch him as she finished her meal, taking the other haunch and impaling it on one of the spikes on her back for later eating. She approached the male, who had cracked open the femur and was eagerly

licking the marrow out of it. His gaze snapped up as she approached and he jumped backwards, whimpering.

“Green angry?” he asked. “Gave meat. Said sorry...”

“I’m not angry,” she said soothingly, managing to hide the contempt she felt for the wretched creature. “What’s your name?”

He gave a strangled grunting sound. Like one of the languages the humans used, but not one that she’d learned. It sounded like “Mis Terska Lees.”

“Not that,” she responded with as much patience as she could manage. “What’s your dragon name? In our language?”

He shuffled his paws and dropped his head. “Not have one,” he said quietly.

“You don’t have one?!” she exclaimed, her shock making him sink down all the more. “All dragons have one! Your parents gave it to you while still in the egg!”

“Not have dragon parents,” he responded, backing away again from her outburst, looking desperately like he wanted to run for it.

That gave her pause, the light dawning at last. The humans had attempted to steal eggs from Mother’s nest. Was this what they were doing with them? Bringing pathetic, cringing creatures into the world like this blue? For what purpose? Would they try to turn them against their kin?

Movement jolted her from her reverie. The blue, now looking confused more than frightened, was trying to slowly shift closer to her, much as he looked like he wished to flee.

“Yes... well... okay, we will give you a name later,” she said off-handedly in an attempt to placate him, not thinking. “What is it you want from me?”

He brightened noticeably at her brash proclamation, going so far as to shuffle his wings against his scales excitedly. She groaned inwardly, berating herself, as he responded to her question: “Pretty green stay with me?” he asked eagerly, then twisting his face in concentration as he tried to make his next thought understood. “Want... want learn dragon-things.”

It then occurred to her that she was probably one of the only dragons he’d ever seen. His limited knowledge of the language showed that he had to have at least some contact with other dragons, likely what he’d learned from his parents before his egg had been stolen. Pity tugged at her, tempting her to agree to his request. But did she really want to spend who-knows-how-long coddling this... this throwback? And the voice! It made her want to cringe every time he spoke!

“Wait,” she said, and then reached out with her mind, as Father had taught her, and as he had done to her in her egg. Perhaps they wouldn’t need a language.

Her hopes of easier communication died quickly. Mental discipline was also something that this dragon had not learned. His nervous mind held a chaos of images, most of them barely legible. A substantial minority of his thoughts held little but visions of green flanks and tail. Typical of a male,

she thought. However, a few scattered visions confirmed her thoughts about him. Mostly of him fleeing on foot from a pack of dogs, and their human handlers behind them. Probably recent memories that hadn't yet faded, she thought.

She came to a decision. Distasteful as it might be, this blue held information that she might need, especially if humans had taken to the practice of raiding dragon nests and training up the whelps in such unnatural ways.

"Yes, I'll let you travel with me," she said. "How fast can you fly?"

He lowered himself to the ground and once again could not bring himself to look at her. It took some time before he managed to squeak out, "...can't fly..."

It was difficult for Avorina to keep the familiar contempt for this sorry creature from leaking into her voice. "What, you never learned? Never tried? It ought to be easy as--"

Her words died as he slowly extended one wing from his body. She stared. If one didn't look too closely, his tightly furled wing looked normal, if a little small. However, extending the wing revealed the truth. Three of the fingers that were meant to support the membrane had been severed at the first joint and were covered with scar tissue. As for the membrane itself, the only pieces left of it were the shreds attached to his side where the wing should have joined his body and between the stubs of his wing-fingers. The rest of the membrane had been sliced off with chilling precision.

Avorina recovered her wits quickly, a talent she was forced to develop when faced with unexpected questions from the human rulers she was pretending to serve. "What happened to you?" she asked, slowly shifting forward herself and leaning over to quietly nip at the blue's neck, as if she were comforting a hatchling.

Her movement had the desired effect, and he relaxed, letting off a quiet vibration in his throat as she touched him. He spoke: "When wings grow, try to fly. Go over city. Make humans afraid. Large man says, must not fly. Large men hold down, take knives..." He shuddered. Avorina didn't have the heart to try to make him continue, but he did anyways, shoving down his emotions. "...cut out wings. Some parts too thick, left behind." He nudged at his wing-arms and the outermost finger. Avorina noted the scar marks under his scales there.

He re-folded what was left of his wing rather self-consciously, looking at her. "I go with?" he asked.

She hated to disappoint him, especially after what he'd been through. And she still needed the information. With a private sigh, she resigned herself to a long walk through the forest.



As they traveled, the blue dragon shared the short version of his story. "Egg hatch with human. See one human, think mother for long time. Name

Felicia. Nice human. Give food and blankets. She teach human-speak and breathe fire. Know many dragon-things.”

A possible threat, thought Avorina. A human who knew how to raise dragons combined with those who knew how to steal eggs could possibly raise an entire race of slave dragons, thinking that they were obeying their parents, if the lies held that long. “Where is she now?” she asked.

“Dead,” the blue replied sadly. “Was old when hatched. Dead before wings grow. She try... say to other humans, ‘This good dragon. Be good to him.’ Said to me, ‘Must learn fly,’ but when I try...” He gave a look at his ruined wings. “...other humans say, ‘Cut wings, cut mouth.’”

“Cut...mouth?” At her question, the blue opened his muzzle and let her look inside. His teeth seemed to be in the peak of health, except for that ugly scar on the roof of his mouth. Avorina knew what should have been there. A dragon’s fire-breath, rather than fire, was actually little more than spitting up a greasy fluid and then lighting it on fire with an organ in the roof of the mouth. But where that organ should have been on the blue, it was not.

“The brutes!” she growled, her omnipresent anger at the humans building all the more.

The blue nodded sadly and then continued, “Some humans say, kill dragon, but I find way, be useful.”

“How?” Without wings or fire breath, what could a dragon possibly do?

The blue brightened a little, saying simply, “Swim.”

“Swim?” Avorina repeated, confused.

“Swim,” the blue confirmed, beginning to look somewhat proud of himself. “In water. Use tail, move fast. Break boats with this.” He indicated the horn between his eyes. “Humans say, good. Give food, gold. Then move self out Felicia’s home and with other dragons.” Pride was replaced with a disdainful snort. “Other dragons have wings, fire. But stupid.” That caught Avorina’s attention. “How did the humans control the dragons?”

Another derisive snort. “Stupid dragons want serve humans.”

“Why?”

He paused as he tried to come up with the words to explain. “Think humans parents. Not like me. I think she mother for few years. Stupid dragons think humans parents always. Humans take eggs, teach dragons in eggs must serve humans.”

Disgust and horror surged up in the dragoness’ breast. Taking the hatchlings at their most vulnerable stage and brainwashing them? The humans were even worse monsters than she thought.

“I only swim-dragon,” the blue continued, looking forward and not noticing her expression. “Human say, swim-dragon must mate female, make eggs, more swim-dragons. I not want humans take eggs. Not want whelps get wings cut. And female stupid. Think only food, mating, serve humans. Not like pretty green.”

“My name is Avorina...” she said distractedly, her mind spinning. Breeding a whole race of slave dragons? The audacity! The insult!

“Av... Av’ina...” The blue tripped over her name as he attempted to pronounce it. A moment later, he continued, “Not want mate. Humans try make mate, put female with self in cave. Female smell almost make mate, but run. Run past humans, run here. Now here, but not learn how hunt. Hungry...” He gazed longingly at the hunk of meat on Avorina’s back spike until she removed it and gave it to him.

As she waited for him to finish devouring the meat, she considered. She couldn’t just keep calling him ‘blue’ for the rest of their time together, but she realized now that she wasn’t that good at coming up with names.

“Cezantie... Avorina... Arventine...” She hummed her own name and her parents’ to herself, mumbling each of the syllables as if each one could be expanded into a full name, but none of them really sounded proper for a dragon, and degraded as he was, she didn’t want to insult him more than the humans already had by giving him an inferior name. “Tie... avor... ven... cez... ur... ine...”

“What saying?” the blue asked, having cracked open the femur and nudging the tasty marrow-filled center towards her, close enough to hear her private musing.

“I was considering a name for you,” she answered truthfully, pondering for a moment before leaning down and licking the bone’s insides clean.

“Cez...ur... ine?” The blue repeated the last few syllables. “Cezurine? That name?”

“Not really. I just was thinking-” she started, but he wasn’t listening.

“Cezurine... Cezurine... is good name,” he declared, a purring rumble of contentedness rising in his throat. “Name is Cezurine!”



Over the next few months, the two traveled together. Cezurine was a quick learner. Avorina’s near-constant interrogation about the humans who had raised him, combined with his eagerness to learn “dragon-things” resulted in his speech developing faster than she might have guessed. Though still somewhat simplistic and accented, his speech didn’t make her internally wince any more when he spoke.

Yet he still had trouble with her name. Whether bad habit or defect, she simply could not get him to properly pronounce “Avorina.” Eventually, the green gave up trying to correct him and just started thinking of his contraction of her name as a term of endearment.

As they traveled, she also did her best to teach him how to hunt. It wasn’t easy, especially since her favorite technique required working wings, but he did know how to move quietly on the ground, and she was able to adapt Father’s ground-fighting techniques into prey-killing for him. Though she still retrieved the majority of their food, Avorina was soon satisfied that the blue could fend for himself when she left him.

He wasn't the only one who learned either. Once his vocabulary grew large enough, Cezurine told her more about the humans he used to live among and the dragons they were training. He quickly made it clear why the humans were attempting to kidnap eggs instead of continually breeding the captive dragons. Apparently the bred dragons after one generation were still strong, but after two generations of captive breeding, the whelps began to weaken, and often developed serious birth defects, forcing the humans to bring in 'new blood' every generation to stave off this effect. Cezurine was of the opinion that the whelps were weak because their parents were not allowed to mate in the air, as it should be, but Avorina wondered whether it actually had to do with the reason that Mother insisted that her mate, when she took one, not be related to her within three generations.

She also determined his approximate age, using his memory of an earthquake shortly after his hatching to do so. Any hopes she privately held of him being a lost sibling vanished as she learned that he was somewhere between ten and twenty years younger than she.

It was slow going on the ground. Picking a path through the trees large enough for the both of them was difficult at best. Things began to pick up when they reached a river, letting Cezurine slip in and swim while Avorina flew lazily overhead. He also insisted on teaching her how to swim, and soon she was able to at least move in the water without fear of drowning.

They had no set destination, moving only to ensure that they didn't overhunt an area. Avorina had a vague notion of finding a temporary or permanent place to live while she prepared her next strike against the creatures who were enslaving her kind – with luck, it would be against the same ones who Cezurine had recently escaped from.

Food was less of an issue when they reached the river. Cezurine filled his belly with fish as he swam, and often brought several to her when they came together at nights, which in turn allowed her to stretch out the prey that she brought down for a few days more per kill.

One night, the blue dragon looked ill at ease as he climbed from the water and she landed nearby. However, five large salmon still sat flopping on the bank, waiting for her. Without delay, she bent down and swallowed them, exchanging a chunk of meat from her back, which he in turn consumed.

Once that formality was done with, Avorina lay herself on the riverbank and spoke. "You seem nervous, Cezurine."

"I am... nervous," he said, very carefully phrasing his words and still stumbling a little over the last one. "We are near the humans. The ones who want me."

She gave a soft noise of displeasure. "Shall we go another way?" she asked.

"The river goes near, then away," he said, but didn't seem quite sure of himself. He reached out and attempted to scratch a crude map in the soil between them with a claw, using stick figures of humans and dragons to show positions. From what Avorina could see from the map, they were



near the edge of the forest (Which she had seen from the air that very day), and the river made a bend, also forking off into another river, the juncture of which the humans had built a city around. There were also villages flanking the land route, which she assumed to be farmland. “We go this way,” Cezurine continued, tracking a route across the same farmland and then rejoining the river after the city.

Avorina seemed unsure. “If the humans are farming that land, they will probably see us. Perhaps we should turn back and try another way.”

“They are not farming this land this year,” the blue replied confidently. “I saw it.”

Avorina agreed cautiously with him, then. “I’ll fly a short way tomorrow and see if I can pick out a path from the air. If I can find one, we’ll then travel on foot until we are away from the humans.”

He gave a few seconds of thought, and then said, “You stay far from other dragons. They serve humans.”

“I know,” she replied. “But thank you for reminding me.”

“I don’t want you hurt, Av’ina,” he said, looking pleased at her gratitude. The two then found a defensible area and slept.



The next morning, Avorina took to the skies and surveyed the nearby land. Cezurine’s map was accurate inasmuch as she saw the river feeding farmland and a city downstream, and at least one water mill. She couldn’t see any place where they might be able to rejoin the river, however, but the farmland was laying fallow, as Cezurine had said, and she thought that the two of them might be able to crawl through the area and then maybe into the faintly visible hills and mountains in the distance. The only other option was to go back and to try to find another way in another direction entirely. When she reached the ground again, the two of them briefly discussed their options.

“Slow going back,” Cezurine said. “Slow forward too. I can’t swim and you can’t fly if we go that way.”

“I don’t want to go back,” Avorina admitted. “I want to get away from humans and forests and into open air again.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Away from humans and forests. Forward, then, but we stay low.”



Game might be scarce in the lands ahead, so the two of them each brought down one large prey animal that day and gorged themselves, and then split a third between them to carry. They started out under cover of night. It was easier going than the forest, on land at least, but flying was simply better in every way, Avorina thought. Cezurine took the indignity of traveling on foot better than she did, but yet got more and more nervous as the two progressed.

Come sunrise, the two found an area of deep grass and pushed their bodies as far down as they could under it in hopes of hiding out in the open. They each ate a few bites and settled in. Avorina slept half the day as Cezurine kept watch, and come noon, he gently nudged her awake and then slept himself.

Avorina was more than a little nervous as she began her shift, but nerves wore off quickly and gave way to boredom. She tried to remain alert, but the tedium of weeds, weeds, grass, weeds, blue dragon, more weeds over and over again wore heavily on her limited patience.

About three hours into her shift, her bored trance broke abruptly as she saw a shadow approaching them. Her gaze turned upwards and she caught a fantastically familiar sight. Another dragon! A true, winged one! A longing ache arose in her breast as she saw those spread wings, powerful tail, and the red-bronze scales, showing a male dragon in the prime of his life. Envy rose in her as he soared overhead. She should be flying! She should be flying with him!

A sudden pain shot through her. She whipped her head about to find the 'hand' joint of her spreading left wing gripped firmly in Cezurine's sharp teeth and foreclaws. "You fly, I hurt," he threatened her, accenting the words in the supersonic draconic language with a low growl from his throat. She stiffened, not daring to even twitch as long as he held that sensitive limb captive. The bastard! The whelp! He would pay! As soon as he released her, she'd split his tail and tear off those pathetic remnants of wings! She... she would... would... what?

Cezurine lowered his head and backed away a few paces as he released her. "I am sorry," he almost whimpered, "But you were flying towards a slave dragon..."

"Yes... yes, I know now," she said, the fog clearing from her mind. "What happened?"

"That was male. You are female. It is hard to control yourself when that happens. I know."

"How do you know?" she asked distractedly, still trying to shake out the fuzziness from her mind.

Cezurine responded, "When the humans tried to make me mate, they put me in a cave with a female. You know that, but... I wanted to mate with her. I tried to fly with her, and..." He looked at his ruined wings. "Hurt. Made me think of my whelps, and what would happen to them."

Avorina thought about it. The concept of young dragons being mutilated and forced into slavery bestowed a frigid sobriety upon her that made the thought of any male dragon suddenly seem repulsive.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I'll know better in the future."



After several days, they reached the halfway point. If they'd been able to fly, the land could have been covered in a matter of hours, and if they'd been able to go full speed on the ground, it would have only taken a few

days. However, more and more, stealth was necessary. They had to spend a sizable chunk of time every night to cover their tracks, and to dig a sleeping place invisible from the air. Neither of them slept very well during the day. Dragons in the sky became more and more common. Every time a shadow fell, or they heard the sound of wings, both woke and stared at the sky until it passed. Avorina managed to restrain herself when males flew overhead, and she in turn was able to help Cezurine keep from getting too agitated when the dragon overhead was a female.

On the fourth night, as they were filling in the burrow that they had slept in during the day, Cezurine called her attention to something off in the distance. The rising moon had been obstructed by a visible tree-line. "We'll make it there tonight," Avorina said, and the male agreed. The moon was full and unlike the last few days, the sky was clear. Visibility was much better than it had been before. After an hour, the two could see the silver light glinting off a distant ribbon. There was the river again.

It took almost until dawn to reach the water. Cezurine seemed quite pleased, jumping into the water right away and rolling about in it like a hatchling. "We swim now, Av'ina," he said cheerfully. "Get away from humans."

"Just wait a bit, Cezurine," she replied. "Let's eat, just to make sure we don't run out of strength."

He agreed that this was a good idea, and the two of them settled out of the water, consuming what little was left of the food they'd hunted. The sun eventually appeared over the horizon, but Avorina paid it little mind; they were almost to safety, and didn't need to travel at night any more.

After tossing the inedible bits into the water, Cezurine stretched out, preparing for a long swim, and Avorina imitated him. They were almost ready to slip into the water when Cezurine stiffened. A second later, a shadow fell over the two, and the blue dragon gave off a squeak of alarm. Just behind, coming out of the sunrise, was a red male dragon, his gaze fixed upon the two of them.

Cezurine turned and made a dash for the river, but the red swooped low and landed with a thump between the blue and the safety of the water. The red dragon was much larger than either of them, approaching nine feet at the shoulder. Cowed, Cezurine backpedaled with a snarl. "Fly! FLY!" he yelled to Avorina as the red lowered himself and allowed a lightly armored human to jump off his back.

The shout broke her out of her fascinated trance. She needed to get out of here! She spread her wings and prepared to take off, only to stop short when the male dragon imitated her. "What are you doing!?" she demanded of him, but only received blank incomprehension mixed with a look that was able to transcend all language barriers.

Cezurine gave off another low snarl, his eyes flashing hatred towards the human approaching him. The human spoke in a language Avorina couldn't understand, and the blue dragon snarled back in the same. Whatever he said, it seemed to anger the human, who drew forth a whip from his belt

and snapped it in the air in front of Cezurine's nose. The blue cringed away from the snap and some part of Avorina wondered why he would do that when he couldn't even feel a whip beneath his scales.

The human slowly pushed Cezurine backwards, almost driving him right into Avorina. The dragon he had been riding approached as well, his eyes fixed on her. She didn't even need to touch his mind to know that his thoughts were full of a green dragon in a mating flight. Cezurine shot her a worried glance, halting his retreat as he almost tread on her tail. "Fly!" he pleaded with her, turning back towards the human and roaring, temporarily halting the human's advance. The blue flinched again as the whip cracked in front of his snout, but he set his feet and refused to retreat a single step more, growling and snapping at the human trying to force him back.

The human shouted angry words at Cezurine, accenting them with yet another whip crack. However, instead of flinching again, Cezurine lunged forward, his fear granting him a sudden mad strength, snarling as his teeth closed on the body of the whip, wrenching it from the human's hands and flinging it away. He then began to move forward, growling, but the human was less than impressed. He took a single step back and spoke to the dragon behind him, whose gaze flickered from Avorina to Cezurine for a moment. He took a step forward to menace the smaller blue dragon.

Avorina abruptly regained control of her muscles as she saw this happen, and gave her own roar. The dragon's eyes flickered to her for a moment, just enough time for her to spin about, flick her tail at him, and launch into the sky. Lust visibly warred with loyalty in the red's face, and lust won out. Leaving Cezurine behind, the red male launched into the air behind her.

Avorina climbed as fast as she was able, fear of the male behind her giving her strength. The large red followed, his eyes intently fixed upon her, excited by the chase. Avorina had no plans about what to do other than to try to get the red as far away from Cezurine as possible... and then hopefully get herself away from the red dragon.

The red was larger, stronger, and faster than she, and he quickly began to catch up, snapping almost playfully at her trailing tail. Avorina gave a squeak of dismay and folded her wings, sending her plummeting nose first towards the ground in a desperate bid to put just a few more yards between his grasping talons and her hindquarters.

His reactions were thankfully slower than she, and the maneuver took him off-guard. She put just enough room between the two of them before he could dive after her in order to pull off a simple midair trick, flipping nose over tail in a tight airborne loop. To her great surprise, the male was thrown off balance again as she ended up practically on his back, flailing around in the air as he tried to turn to get to her.

She was about to pull off another maneuver to get away from him again after he had followed her loop. The fact that he had not followed threw her off as well, and by the time she'd righted herself, she'd passed up a wide window of attack at his unprotected wings, and the best she could do was

to slap at him with her tail as she changed directions and went for height again.

Her wings quickly grew sore, forced to fly without an updraft to buoy her, added to the hard climbs and sharp turns she endured to keep him off her tail. She started to slow, and only a jolt of fright kept her moving as she felt his teeth on her tail. Would he catch her? Would her first mating be with this slave creature? Would she be willing to endure that humiliation just to save the crippled blue on the ground?

Pain overwhelmed her exhausted wings, making her howl as her muscles abruptly seized up, sending her tumbling from the sky. The male caught her as she fell, folding his own wings in order to consummate what he saw as a mating flight. He twisted her about in his grip, making her face him as he growled in instinctual lust.

The dull, stupid look in his eyes spurred Avorina into her next action. She was loathe to harm dragons, but unlike the intelligent gleam in Cezurine's eyes, this dragon was little more than a stupid beast, bred to serve, and a slave both to the humans who raised him and his instincts, removing all thoughts Avorina had of trying to preserve him. As his teeth went for the dominant position around her throat, she opened her muzzle. Her stomach and torso contracted, and she unleashed her fire bladder into his face at point-blank range.

Despite the fact that they spit fire, Avorina knew, dragons are not immune to flame; the face and all the organs there are especially sensitive. The burning liquid from Avorina's throat struck the red dragon in the eyes and he jerked backwards from her, yelping, giving her claws free access to his chest. She raked madly at him, tearing scales from his front-side as her chest contracted again and she expelled the rest of her fire bladder at him. The red howled out again and released her, wings churning madly at the air as he tried to fly blind. He would be no trouble for a long time.

Avorina plummeted. Her wings screamed at her as she tried to spread them before she struck the ground. She could see, fuzzily, a blue form and a small pink form fighting on the ground below her, and then off in the distance, a small group of brown and silver things moving towards the two of them.

The fear and aversion that Father had implanted in her regarding humans and their weapons shocked her into action once more, though the action wasn't much. She overrode all orders her body gave and forced her wings out once more. At this angle, that did little but throw her into a crazy midair tumble, but at least it was a slow tumble. She landed on her back, hard, the air driven from her lungs, but she was alive.

Despite a throbbing head and still-blurred vision, she could see Cezurine and the human locked in combat. Though locked wasn't really the correct word. The human had drawn forth a spear with a backwards-hooked tip and was attempting to stab it into the dragon's flesh. Most of Cezurine's actions were little more than dodging the wicked tearing blade, either

unable or unwilling to try to get in close with the human with that spear in play.

Their gazes flickered towards Avorina for a second as she crash-landed. The human gave a grin and turned deliberately away from Cezurine, starting towards her, spear raised. Cezurine's defenses broke and he scrambled to place himself in front of her. The human didn't even try to stop him, only stalking slowly forward, raising the spear. Avorina saw his plans now; if he was guarding her, he couldn't back away or dodge any spear-thrusts, or else they'd be driving into her flesh. Curse their wicked cleverness!

Cezurine seemed to come to the same conclusion as she, trying to shove her backwards with his hindpaws to get her on her feet again. She tried, but her breath wouldn't come, and her muscles refused every order she gave them. She watched helplessly as the human set his spear point towards Cezurine's chest and charged.

The blue dragon made a loud gagging noise as his chest compressed, squeezing his fire bladder. Instinct again, Avorina thought in that timeless moment. But useless since he can't make flame. Indeed, the only thing coming from Cezurine's throat was a surge of thick black liquid. Messy, but utterly harmless. He didn't even aim it correctly; the stuff splattered on the ground in front of the charging human.

However, when the human tread on the fluid, his feet abruptly flew right out from under him, the ground having been made slicker than ice by the greasy stuff. He fell with a wet splort on his front just as Cezurine bounded forward and tore the spear from his grip, then opening his jaws wide in order to tear open his neck.

The human was fast; Avorina had to give him that. And strong. As Cezurine descended upon him, the human twisted about, grabbing the blue dragon by the neck, and twisting again to fling him off. Cezurine landed hard, skidding away in the puddle of his own grease. He struggled to get back to his feet even as the human, black liquid dripping from all over his body, worked his way to the edge of the area and got back to his feet, and drew another weapon, a two-handed sword.

Avorina struggled to rise as the two clashed again. Cezurine had the advantage of mass, but the human apparently had a great deal of experience in fighting dragons, dodging claws and bites with ease. Cezurine managed to gain a slight advantage when he brought the stumps of his wings into play, battering madly at the human, but even that wasn't enough. The human rammed his shoulder into the dragon, knocking the blue off balance, and brought his sword down hard, slicing scales off his chest and going for the vitals underneath.

Avorina desperately wanted to help him, but she was spent, able to only watch helplessly. Her fire was spent, and her muscles still didn't want to respond. Still, she tried. She heaved, causing agony to shoot through her lungs, but all she was able to expel was a tiny ember that splattered against the human's boot.

It was enough. The ember set the boot alight. The boot set his leg alight. The flames from his leg licked hungrily up and engulfed his torso in a bare second. The human didn't realize what was happening until it was too late, and even then, he barely had time to scream before the flames engulfed his head.

She turned him into his own funeral pyre.

Cezurine rolled away from the screaming, writhing flames, limping slightly as he approached her. "Av'ina..." he murmured, bending over in order to help her rise.

"Hurry," she gasped, her breath finally beginning to come back to her. "More... coming." Indeed, the sound of hoof-beats was approaching.

"Go to the water, Av'ina," he growled softly, turning to face the sound and bracing himself.

"I'm not... not leaving you here," she said. "Let's both swim; they can't catch us in the water."

"They have bows and horses," he responded sharply. "They will ride next to the river and shoot us. Please, get away! I will stop them and join you."

"No!" she snapped, her strength returning as she got to her feet.

"Av'ina..." he began, his voice heavy with worry and frustration, but it was too late. The brush rustled, and out came a trio of armored riders, each with sword, lance, and bow. They looked at the burning lump of char on the ground, then at the dragons, and charged as one.

Cezurine braced himself and emptied the rest of his fire bladder once more at the feet of the riders. The leading horse trod directly upon it and slipped, skidding past Cezurine with a whinny and into the water, the rider sinking rapidly to the bottom thanks to his armor. The blue dragon dived in after, and the silent explosion of blood in the water showed that he had struck.

However, Avorina's attention was on the two remaining riders. She knew not to get in the path of those lances; thankfully, she had trained against riders in the human kingdoms she'd recently abandoned. Ducking down and to the left, she evaded the lance strikes and tripped the horse with her tail, breaking its front legs, then shouldering both rider and beast into the other one. Her fire bladder was empty, so she had to forgo the pleasure of burning them both into char as she made for the water and dived in.

Cezurine popped up next to her as she started paddling downstream, taking in the situation at a glance. "Hold me," he said, slipping in front of her and letting her grab his hindquarters, and as soon as she had, he thrashed his tail beneath her, propelling them rapidly downstream.

It was sunset before they stopped. Even after Cezurine's tail gave out, he refused to leave the water until he was far, far away from the lands they had left. Avorina took over for him, now pushing him along whereas before he was pulling her. When they finally left the river, she had barely enough

energy to push him onto the shore before crawling out after him, curling around him for warmth, and sleeping like the dead.



To say that Avorina was sore when she awoke would have been an understatement. Every muscle twitch caused agonizing pain, a reminder from the day before, but she moved anyways, knowing that the best way to soothe sore muscles was to stretch them out and make them work again. Cezurine looked to be in much the same state as she was, groaning slightly as his eyes flickered open, and he imitated her, yawning and stretching out his body as well.

He stopped in mid-yawn as the events of the day before hit him. “Av’inal!” he cried out in joy, bouncing in excitement. “I am free now!”

“You were free before, Cezurine,” she responded, but still pleased at seeing his excitement.

“No, no... that human was the dragon-master human,” Cezurine said, purring in happiness. “He cut off my wings, tried to make me mate. And he is dead!” He dived into the water, and leaped out in joy, all his soreness forgotten. “Swim with me, Av’inal!” he cried out.

She found herself halfway in the water before she realized what she was doing, and completely in the water before it occurred to her that she was still sore. But Cezurine was so joyful that she realized that she didn’t care about how sore she was; she wanted to share his happiness with him.

He nipped at her tail, pawed at her flanks as she sank into the water. He frolicked around her, leaping from the river and over her, rubbing his body along hers, and corkscrewing ahead and behind her. She could barely keep up with him, only managing to simply stay afloat until he paused and bobbed up in front of her. “Av’ina...” he cooed to her. She knew that look in his eyes, having seen something similar in the eyes of the red dragon she had defeated the day before... but she was unafraid of it now.

“Cezurine,” she responded with a purr, leaning her head forward to rub it against his neck. And then, she was off, spreading her wings and flapping forth from the water before diving back in. The blue turned, happily following her under the water, leaping forth to grab at her tail when she was in the air, and sliding under and around her when she joined him in the water again.

She teased him as she half flew, half swam with him following, flicking her tail back and forth, just in and out of his grip, letting herself lag behind, only to bank to one side when he jumped from the water, watching him miss completely. Meanwhile, he teased her when she fell into the water, biting at her tail and flanks, coming up under her to tip her to the side with his own body, only to fall victim to her tricks again when she took to the air once more.

Finally, he leapt from the water, and when he grasped at her, she let him capture her, folded her wings, and fell into the water with him. He caught her, supported her, embraced her as their necks and tails curled about each



other, the river current sweeping them along. Avorina's heart pounded as if it might burst, her lungs heaving when her nose poked above water, but breathing was little more than an afterthought.

She leapt from the water, her energy carrying Cezurine with her, spreading her wings even as he extended what was left of his. She gave a strong flap, carrying them up, and then driving into the water once more, spinning around with him, bouncing off the riverbed, locked together with him even as their heads poked above the water once more and they shared a twin roar of total fulfillment, sending birds scattering.

They at last fetched up against a shallow bank as their energy ebbed. Their heads poked from the water as they heaved breathlessly against each other, tails still curled tightly with each other, scales broken all along their bodies from the tightness of their claws' grips on each other.

Cezurine's body hummed as he sang to her, rubbing his head against her neck. "Av'ina..." he purred. "My mate, Av'ina..."



Their trip over the last day, along with their mating flight, had taken them almost to the sea. Cezurine found a seaside cavern for them to live in, with a ledge far above the tide line. He lined the area with soft sand and made a nest from seaweed. Just in time, for she was already growing heavy with his eggs.

As she lay gravid, he hunted for her, bringing her deer, boars, and so many fish that she feared that if she ate them all, she would never fly again. Just months later, the two lay together, Cezurine holding her close and murmuring comforting words to her as she lay their clutch. "Beautiful," she murmured tiredly as she leaned, exhausted, against him.

"Beautiful. As you are," he murmured, leaning to lick her neck, curling his tail protectively about her body, even as she curled her own about their nest of eggs.

"Listen, my little ones," she cooed adoringly to the group of oblong shells, each of which held a precious little life within. "Listen, and I shall tell you of yourselves. Of dragons."

## Dust by Austen Crowder

Derek's barn wasn't anything special, come to think of it. He didn't keep horses anymore, so the hay was a year old, maybe more, and there was enough dust in the air to fog up the light streaming in from the hayloft's open window. Even as a rabbit I couldn't help sneezing every few minutes - and that's with a stomach full of Benadryl! Derek's good friend Timothy sure had a hell of a time with the dust, though the mask I brought along helped a little bit.

"I'm glad you could squeeze me in, Sawgrass. Figured you'd be scheduled tight, what with the fair around the corner."

"Oh, 'twern't nothing." I laughed. "I've got all the time in the world, now that the church let me go."

Timothy nodded. "Yeah. Heard about that at church last Sunday. Shame, really."

I nodded. "Yeah. A shame. Hand me that spanner, eh?"

Timothy did so, and I went to work on the steam chamber. It was a gorgeous red tractor, Derek's little pride and joy was: vintage, powder-red iron body, 1920s industrialist design, the whole nine. It'd make a great addition to the tractor show at the state fair next week, I knew.

"Hell. It's hard enough to find a Lutheran church in this town, and they threw you out on the street. Real shame." He whistled and shook a small pouch in his pocket - the prayer beads jingled and sounded pretty expensive, all things considered. "All because you wanted to be a rabbit."

"Yeah. Lapists can't't take communion, or some shit like that. Whatever." It was par for the course, really. Not like I really had any alternative line of thinking. Not that they were right by the letter of Church doctrine; however, it's hard to fight back when the entire congregation wants you gone.

Besides, I liked Timothy. Sure, we really only talked at poker nights, but damn it if he wasn't a good man. And gentlemen didn't discuss religion - it just wasn't polite.

He eyed the bolt I was tightening with sudden interest. His tell, of course; you just knew when he was avoiding the issue. "Beautiful machine, y'know."

I nodded. "Should be good to go, too. Go ahead and start up the coals. Derek, you watch the gauges." They were good helpers - certainly better than some of the riffraff that owned these antiques - and when I asked for something to get done it was done, no questions asked. Gotta love that. Maybe it's the would-be priest in me, but something about putting together a well-oiled machine brought a smile to my face, every time.

Derek stayed on glued to the gauges. Not that I blamed him; sometimes, when people started talking faith, it was just best to stay the hell out of the way. As I pulled away from the tractor Timothy came to stand beside me, arms crossed, watching coal smoke trace lazy circles to the ceiling of the

barn. He handed me a grease rag to clean away the black goo between my claws.

"Hell of a machine," he said again.

"Yup."

"You know, my church has a Lapist in attendance. Got special permission from the Elders to let 'im accept blessings. No communion, but at least he's there, right?"

"Right."

He clapped me on the shoulder. "You're welcome any time."

"I'll pass. I have a bit of a past to deal with. Not sure if a rabbit ex-priest would go over well with your congregation."

"Right, right." Timothy nodded. He reached into his pocket and grasped tightly around the beads. For a moment he closed his eyes and looked skyward. "But God still loves you."

I was just about to ask that question of God myself until Derek tried to fire up the tractor. I didn't have time to cover my ears. The tractor's steam chamber whined, whistled, and a sudden concussive force assaulted my chest, face, and ears. The tractor barn turned into a sauna. My eyes misted over. My fur fell flat against my skin, sopping wet. My twitching nose caught hints of charcoal, spring water, and singed skin.

It took a full five seconds before I could hear Timothy screaming. He crunched over in a ball near the tractor, his lungs straining to make any noise at all. On the ground, a slowly growing crimson sea, mixing with the dust and dirt and hayseeds he was grasping ith both hands. "Jesus!" Derek yelled. He jumped off the tractor, ran to the corner of the barn, and picked up a bloody bolt. "It went right through him!"

When I snapped to look at him he stopped talking. Funny, how I still had the leadership look as a rabbit. "Derek! There's a kit inside my truck. Grab it and call 911." I was an EMT, sort of. I took a couple of classes at a community college when I came out seminary. What else was I supposed to do? But I was there, and Timothy was there, and the red pool under his body was growing even faster.

"Roll over," I said to him. As I talked I grabbed a couple of greasy towels from the tool bench and wadded them into a makeshift pillow. "Try to relax."

He screamed and he cussed and he kicked, but he managed to get to his back somehow. I saw the skin on his chest flaking away as he settled into the bloody mud, giving way to muscle, muscle flaking away to bone. When he writhed and scratched at it the blood started to flow, curdled by flaking skin and dead muscle, all falling like so much waste into the hay. "Jesus!" he screamed. When he breathed I could see the lungs pulsing behind his ribcage.

"Hold on," I told him. "Derek's coming with my kit. We'll get you help."

"You blind?" he said. The thought was punctuated with an agonized screech. "There ain't no cream to fix this. Cooked me clean through."

He was right, of course. "Come on, Timmy. Hang on. We'll get you through."

"No." With a sneer on his face he reached to his chest and raked his fingers through his epidermis. It left him screaming, and deep furrows of blood formed where his fingers trailed. "You don't read enough about this shit, boy. I'm done. Screw the doctor; I need a priest."

Derek was long gone. I could have screamed my lungs out and no one could possibly have heard me - to the north there were woods, fields in the south, Derek's house to the East, country road to the west. Hell, Timothy could die here and nobody would need to know.

"You still Lutheran?" he asked me.

"It's... Hell, Timmy. I don't know! It's complicated." Again, simpler than I let on. The elders struck me from the roll to save the rest of the flock. But Timothy didn't need to hear that - not now.

He tried to sit up but soon gave up - he screamed as his body gave way to the greasy towels and muddy red dirt. "It ain't rocket surgery. Are. you. still. Lutheran?"

The mere mention of the word brought terrible thoughts to my head: the laughter of my seminary peers when I started wearing the bunny gear under my collar, the blood splashed over my office floor in protest. "I guess so, yes."

"Fuck, man. I need permission. Be a friend." I mean, sure. We were friends. But it was a sort of poker friend thing - you get together once a week over some beers, chat about sports, wrench on a tractor or two. But this?

His lungs continued to heave. "Come on." There was still nobody to fall back to.

With a curse and a quick invocation I began crossing my moist paw. Not that I had much time to be picky; after a few passes I snapped the wet fur in Timothy's face, then over my own nose. Close was good enough.

Then I smeared my paw in a little grease from a nearby grease gun. (So much for holy oil, eh?) A couple of crosses later the stuff was ready for use - least, as good as it could get. "You sure?" I asked.

He nodded. The screaming had stopped and his face turned whiter than steam.

I put on my best priest voice. "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit." It took me a while to find a piece of exposed skin, what with all the burns on his body. I settled on the back of his neck. It was there that I drew the cross in motor oil. "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."

"Thank you," he whispered. Then, promptly, he died. Timothy would have had it no other way.

Derek came thundering in with my med-kit just about that time, but stopped at the door as I stood from Timothy's body. The kit fell to the

ground, scattering dozens of sterilized gauze pads and betadine packets across the rotten hay. "He's dead?"

"Yeah."

Derek swallowed hard. Leave it to a man not to cry, I say. "Did you... well..." He pointed to the cross now prominently displayed on his friend's neck. "Well, did you do that?"

"Yes." I swept up sealed gauze pads, band-aids, triage manuals, and began to slowly put them back into the bag.

"I thought you weren't Lutheran anymore," he said. "You know. Shoved out, ridiculed, all that shit."

"Yes." I dug into the bag and rooted around a bit until I found a small leather-bound book. "But I am still a human, Derek. Deep down inside."

When I pulled the ribbon my favorite passage came right into my hand. The pages were moist and sticky from being ignored for so long. Yet as I leafed through pages with my blessed paw, I felt myself going right back to the first time I had ash crossed over my head, back in elementary school. You are dust, and to dust you shall return - the words sounded as an echo, long gone but still present in the steam-drenched room.

And as I let the memory fill me I collapsed on the dirty, hay-strewn floor and clasped the Holy Book with all my might. It was hard with the rabbit claws but I made do. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty," I whispered. "Creator of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord."

Even if He wouldn't listen it felt good to say it again.

## Conduct Unbecoming by Tim Susman

*December 13, 1862, Fredericksburg MD*

Richard wasn't shivering because of the cold December night. His fur had kept him warm on nights far colder than this, back home in Maine. He was shivering as he looked up the dark embankment of Marye's Heights from the town of Fredericksburg because of the gunfire, because of the faint wailing of the wounded, but mostly because of William.

He fingered the splint on his ankle, never taking his eyes from the Heights. He felt lonelier now than he had at any point since the day the Army had signed him up and sent him with a bunch of other recruits to the front. On that excruciating, week-long journey, Richard had been the only morph. He'd been scared and hungry as well as alone, and if he hadn't known the fate that awaited deserters, he would've turned around and run all the way home. In the main army, he'd been put into the same regiment as all the other morphs, and there he'd met William.

William Haffre, another raccoon, had taken Richard under his wing and protected him from some of the usual indignities suffered by new recruits. He was the only one who knew Richard's real age (fifteen) and what his family's name had been before their grandfather changed it to Blackman to fit in to human society (they had been the Black Mask Clan). William had played his share of pranks on the younger 'coon, but always with a comradely, big-brother smile, and Richard, who missed his real big brothers terribly, laughed at himself after each one and felt more like one of the group.

With each day, he grew more confident and got to know the others in his all-morph regiment. They were a diverse lot, from raccoons and possums to a couple foxes—most canids were special attachments to other divisions for use as trackers. They bantered and joked when they were traveling or resting, but when they did their daily drills they were serious and intent, and Richard felt more and more proud of himself with each drill as he mastered various skills. He was becoming a useful part of his regiment, and began to look forward to the chance to prove himself in real combat.

Because they had superior night vision, morphs were often called on to undertake dangerous nighttime missions, and so Richard and William's regiment was euphemistically called the "Night Brigade." Morphs weren't suitable command material, though, so Col. J.D. Adams, a human, led them. He made little attempt to hide his distaste for the job. Major Hawkins, a weasel morph, served as his second-in-command and, unofficially, as his guide through the dark.

They had arrived at Fredericksburg with some excitement on December 11, part of the mighty Union army under the command of newly appointed General Burnside himself. The Rebs had put up some resistance in the town, but in the end the Union had prevailed and the Rebs had slunk back to the safety of the stone wall atop the Heights, watching (Richard

imagined) with envious eyes as the Union settled into their town. Richard's regiment had participated in the fighting. It was his first battle, but he hadn't felt very brave shooting around houses and through windows. Fighting was supposed to take place on a battlefield, not in a town. It was a dirty business, William told him, but necessary. Their enthusiasm was dampened somewhat, but not extinguished. It was only a matter of time before the Union took the Heights as well, and then it was on to Richmond.

On the morning of December 13, Major Hawkins had made the rounds of the regiment, informing them that after the human charges during the day, they would be called on for support that night, if needed. "Mop up," he said, shrugging. "They'll have the Heights by sunset."

Only they did not have the Heights by sunset. Wave after wave of blue-clad soldiers advanced up the embankment, and from the security of the terrible stone wall, the Rebs mowed them down like the rats Richard and his brothers used to corner in his family's barn. Richard watched in growing horror as not a single soldier reached the wall. The previous day, he'd imagined himself running proudly up the hill in the service of his country, telling his brothers later about the magnificent battle he'd been in. As the day wore on, that fantasy evaporated like the morning fog. By mid-afternoon, he and William wanted to return to their barracks, but like the others, they felt compelled to stay and watch the carnage.

Richard clung desperately to William. "They won't send us up there. They can't. We have no chance."

"They'll devise some other way." William rested a paw on his shoulder, but his voice didn't reflect the confidence of his words.

"I can't, I can't," Richard whined softly. He was ashamed of himself, sounding like a young kit, but he couldn't help it. When he and his brothers had played games and he couldn't keep up any more, he'd called "pax!" and they always stopped. He wanted to be able to call "pax" now and have the whole thing stop before he had to be part of it. His brothers would tell him to be brave, but he couldn't see any bravery in this senseless slaughter.

"You won't," William said. "I promise you that. You're too young for this."

So when the fifteenth charge of the day, just after sunset, came to no more than the previous fourteen, Richard and William waited anxiously for the order to stand down. When Hawkins came by, his eyes glowed in the dusky light, but he looked tired and worn.

"We go in an hour," he said. "Once it's dark."

William shook his head. "That's crazy."

"That's orders."

Richard started to whimper again, but a squeeze of the older 'coon's paw quieted him. Hawkins moved on, and when he was out of earshot, Richard looked up at William. "What are we going to do?"

William shook his head again, thinking. Then he looked at Richard and said softly, "Follow my lead." He pushed Richard in front of him, then kicked him hard in the ankle without warning.

Richard yelped in pain, then nearly fell as William pushed him in the back of the knee. William caught him and said, loudly, "Richard? Are you okay?"

Other furs and a human came running. William looked up at them. "He must've stepped on a loose brick. He might've sprained his ankle."

Richard understood, then, and his heart filled with warmth. William had taken care of him. He would be okay.

What he hadn't reckoned on, what was making him shiver as his fingers ran over the bandages, was that William still had to go out there and face that terrible wall. Col. Adams had led the regiment out more than two hours ago, and the hail of gunfire that greeted their charge had sounded exactly like all the others. Richard had followed William for a while, then lost him in the haze of gunsmoke and confusion of the battlefield. He was trying very hard not to imagine William out there, but he couldn't help it. He felt smaller than an insect, as cowardly as a Reb. All around him, wounded soldiers who'd made their way back were being tended to and he wanted to help them, but to do so would give away the deception of his ankle. That made him feel doubly a coward, and so part of the reason he kept his eyes locked on the embankment was so he would not have to look around him and see the reminders of his moral failure. What would his brothers think if they could see him now?

His eyes moved to activity by the canal ditch that was the first obstacle on the way up the embankment. A group of humans, not an organized regiment, was making their way stealthily along the ruined bridges. The Rebs let loose a volley of shots (they must have some morphs up there, to see in the darkness), but none of the figures fell. They moved through the wounded past a small cluster of buildings, then up to a brick house that stood alone in the middle of the hill. At that distance, they were no more than small blobs to Richard, but the haze had settled, so he could see them take up positions alongside the house, some fifty feet from the wall. Where they stopped, other figures got up and slowly made their way back, sporadic gunfire following their movements. This had been a relief mission, then—fresh soldiers were moving in to maintain the Union position and relieve those who were suffering from cold.

For the first time in hours, Richard's tail uncurled from around his "good" leg, and he stopped shivering. He scanned each soldier hopefully as they trudged back into town, but nearly all of them were humans. He had just about sunk back into his depression when a human came back across the canal supporting another figure, which had a long muzzle and a tail.

Richard wiggled his toes in frustration, wanting to run out and meet them. As they came closer, though, he could see that the muzzle was a touch too long, the ears too large, and the tail too bushy to be William.



Richard recognized the fox and called out.

"Hoy! Edwin!"

Edwin was cradling his left arm. He turned and looked at Richard, and the young 'coon was shocked at the dull look in his eyes and the droop in his ears. He remembered Edwin sitting with him and William not two days ago, bright and joyful, hoisting a bottle of wine he'd taken from some occupied house. "This is more like it," he'd announced boisterously. "I haven't had a good draught of wine in weeks!"

Now he looked like a different fox. If Richard hadn't known him before, he would never have believed that Edwin was the same fox who'd drunk most of the bottle of wine and kept them up half the night singing army songs. He knelt in front of Richard and suddenly hugged him fiercely with his right arm. "Oh, Richard, it is well that you were not there," he whispered. "Thank Raccoon for turning your ankle, for surely that was your spirit guide's work." He kept his voice low; the humans didn't like to hear about morph 'fairy tales.'

Richard hugged back carefully. His throat was too tight to speak. He felt his heart beat faster. Finally, he managed to choke out one word. "William?"

Edwin leaned back and shook his head, his ears flattening. "I'm sorry. I saw him go down. There isn't anything to be done."

"Go down? Is he dead?"

"Maybe. If he isn't now, he will be by morning."

"The stretchers..." As the streams of wounded had trailed off, some of the humans had talked about organizing stretcher crews to go get some of the wounded from the field. One was moving out there now and another two were mobilizing.

"They won't...they won't get there. See the house?" He pointed to the lone brick house, up on the Heights. "It's beyond that. Too close to the wall. They'd be...mown down." Edwin's voice sounded like it was coming through a long tunnel, as if each word was an effort for him to produce. "And they won't find him. Meade took all the trackers for his attack. Our regiment was all the morphs...and all that's left of our regiment is you and me, and a handful up there...in position, or wounded." He looked up at the stretchers. "Might get to Curtell, if he's still alive...but with all the wounded humans..." His voice trailed off.

Richard's eyes filled with tears. The human behind Edwin pulled gently on his uniform. "Come on, Sergeant Reddle. We have to get that arm taken care of."

"I'm sorry," Edwin whispered, and stood up.

Richard almost didn't hear him. His fingers ran over his splint again while his eyes were fixed on the house. Beyond the house. Beyond the house. Close to the wall. His fingers were unraveling the splint as images and thoughts whirled through his head: William hurt, William protecting him, William sharing his ration when Richard's had been spoiled. Life in the regiment without William.

Shame at his cowardice returned twofold. How could he sit here in safety while his best friend braved horrible danger? What kind of friend was he? The splint was unraveled now. He looked down at his foot and wiggled it. His ankle was fine. He looked up at the embankment again. He couldn't leave William there alone.

He stood up, stretched his legs, and in an instant he was off and running for the canal bridges. A few humans turned and looked at him in surprise, and one tried to stop him, but he ran by the outstretched arms. At the bridges, gunfire rattled and he heard the shots fall around him, but he did not stop running until he came to the small cluster of buildings, some fifty feet beyond the bridges. The stone wall was still a long ways away, 150 yards or so.

The moaning of the wounded was much louder here. He stepped into one of the buildings and staggered back, overwhelmed by the scent of blood in the small space. Humans sat scattered on the ground, with a few morphs, and the wounded and dead shared space. One human had pulled himself against the body of a dead possum for warmth. The stretcher crews had not made it up here yet, but even if they did, they would work for hours just to clear this one building.

He left the building quickly and headed up the hill towards the brick house, but he had barely gone three steps when he heard shots again. He dropped to the ground, pulling himself along the frozen mud with agonizing slowness. Every five feet he found another corpse, while the moans of the wounded soldiers who were slowly freezing to death formed a gruesome background to the crack of gunshots. He began to be able to make out some of the moans. Many were moaning for water, some were praying, and a few were cursing. Richard had never believed in the human conception of Hell, but as he wormed his way through the maze of frozen death, listening to the heart-rending wails, immersed in the smell of blood, he began to wonder if he hadn't died and been sent there. He tried to block out everything except reaching the house, and so terrified was he that he barely noticed when a bullet grazed his tail. Only a few minutes later did he realize what the ruffling sensation had been, the quick brush running against the cold north wind.

As he got closer to the house, he could see a small barricade behind which five or six soldiers had bivouacked. They returned fire occasionally, not sure what the Rebs were shooting at. Only one was a morph, and Richard perked his ears hopefully when he saw the long ringed tail. The raccoon turned, probably catching his scent on the wind, and Richard recognized him as Charles Ringer. He turned away and crawled on toward the house.

If the small cluster of buildings had been bad, the brick house was a nightmare. Piles of soldiers lay behind it, and he could not tell which were alive and which were dead. Only one morph was visible: a possum propped up against the wall, holding his stomach. A human lay on the ground, sprawled out, reaching toward the town as if for salvation. The cries seemed

to come not from any particular soldier or soldiers, but from the mass of them. Richard didn't see William anywhere. He crawled behind the house, out of the line of fire, and crept to a window. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was surprised at the equanimity with which he crawled over the dead to look into the house.

The inside of the house was packed full of blue uniforms, most not moving. Some were sleeping, and some would never wake up. He counted three morpys in the house, but none was William. He didn't know whether any of them was alive.

Beyond the house. Close to the wall.

The bodies were thicker still as he crawled around the house, scanning the ground in front of him. "I'm so thirsty," someone groaned to his right. Not William. He saw another ringed tail amidst a pile of corpses up ahead, not quite at the gully. He crawled toward it, ignoring the other moans as the wind carried them away.

"William?" He was answered only by a couple shots from the wall as the treacherous wind carried his voice to the Rebs. He took shelter behind the bodies and pushed one of them aside—and the black-masked muzzle lying behind it was the one he longed to see, the one he had seen again and again in his mind for the last four hours.

Overjoyed, Richard shook his shoulder gently, not wanting to risk another word. William's uniform was damp and cold, and he didn't respond to the shaking. Richard began to panic, and then he noticed the soft plume of white at his friend's nostrils. So he was breathing; he wasn't dead. Richard held on to that. He's not dead. His ankle was in terrible shape, though. His foot was bent awkwardly out at an angle it was never meant to, and the pants leg was torn and stuck to matted black fur.

Richard found himself at a loss. He couldn't just wait here until William woke up. They had fur, but the harsh north wind had picked up and was driving through even that—and because of their fur, they were not issued the thick coats that other soldiers were. With the wound as severe as it was, William might not survive the night. And even if he did, the Rebs would be able to pick him off in the morning as easy as pie.

Richard got his arms under William's shoulders and tried to drag him. He got about two feet before he had to give up. He couldn't get the leverage without exposing himself to the Rebs, and the noise he would have to make would certainly draw fire. He sat down behind the grisly shelter and pawed the ground, getting more and more frantic and whimpering despite himself. To have come all this way for nothing? So he could hold his friend's hand and watch him die? Or die with him?

He heard shots again, suddenly, but from somewhere else. They were coming from close behind him, and he thought, "They found out about my ankle. They've been ordered to shoot me." But the initial volley only lasted a few seconds, and then the Union guns were silent again.

Under the howling of the wind, Richard thought he heard movement off to his left and ahead. He fumbled for his musket before realizing it was

still lying on the ground back in the town. William's lay beside him, ice-cold to his paws. He shivered as he grabbed it, trembling so much that he had to brace his paws against his knees. He didn't dare speak for fear of attracting more shots.

Through the darkness of the night, he saw a Reb moving to his left. The soldier bent over another shape, held something to it, then moved on. Richard had heard of Confederate assassins and looters, who went through the battlefield taking coats from dead soldiers and killing wounded soldiers. This, then, was what his comrades had been shooting at. He let go of the musket to rub his paws together, and the impulse to run seized him.

He looked at William's muzzle again. In his friend's quiet expression, he seemed to see the faces of his brothers, Randolph and David. They wouldn't blame him for running away, but would they respect him for it? Neither of them would desert a friend. The warm glow of friendship fought the north wind, and hardened his resolve. He picked up the musket. Once this Reb was past him, he would worry again about moving William, but until then he would not let his friend down. His paws could barely grip the musket, but he gritted his teeth and crouched there, waiting.

It seemed to be a hundred cold hours before the figure approached him. As the Reb walked closer, Richard saw that he was a young human with a rather narrow face and a thin moustache. He wore a thick coat and a Confederate hat, and he didn't appear to be carrying weapons. Instead, he was carrying several canteens.

He stopped when he saw Richard, and then stepped forward, holding out a canteen. "I am only bringing water," he said. His voice was soft and genteel, the broad 'T' unmistakably Southern, and he spoke in a low whisper. "Are you wounded?"

Richard blinked, feeling slow and stupid. His heart was still racing, expecting this enemy to lift a gun and shoot at him any minute. He shook his head.

"Then what are you doing out here? I heard some moaning from here."

Richard's paws slowly let the musket's tip drop. His teeth chattered from fear and chill the first time he tried to talk, so he closed his muzzle and tried again. "H-he is." He gestured to William with the musket. "I came out to g-get him."

The soldier's eyes widened slightly. "By yourself? That's very brave," he said. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen." That was what he'd told the Army when he enlisted.

"What's your name?" The Reb crouched down as he asked this, looking from William down the battlefield to the brick house.

"Richard."

That got a smile. "Me too. Well, Richard, is this your brother?" Richard nodded, without even thinking. "Grab his shoulders. I'll take his legs. Keep me between you and the wall there, so my comrades don't shoot at you, and walk carefully."

Although the Reb picked up William's legs immediately, it took Richard a moment to realize what was happening. The Reb was helping him? Helping William? He looked at the human's face, pale and bright with the starlight and the thin moon, and he wondered if this might be one of those human spirit guides he had heard about, the ones they called 'angels.' His numbed paws wouldn't uncurl right away, but after a moment he managed to drop the musket and wedge his arms under William's shoulders.

William was cold and heavy, but no longer unmanageable. His weight tended to drive Richard backwards, so that he stumbled on the rough terrain. He fell once, but the activity was warming him from the inside, and the quiet courage on the other Richard's face inspired him to scramble up right away.

The moans of the wounded rose up behind him. He felt rather than saw the bulk of the brick house as they approached it, and when they were level with its front, the soldier stopped. "This is as far as I can go," he said. "Can you manage?"

Richard looked over his shoulder. There was shelter here, and he saw the white flash of a stretcher moving, some hundred yards away. "Yes."

"God be with you, then." The soldier stood up.

"Wait! Why...why did you help me?"

The Southern Richard looked over the battlefield, then back to the Northern Richard. His face was shadowed and hidden, but when at last he spoke, his grief was clear in his voice. "This does not become us, this war. Look at what it has made of us. No gentleman should have to listen to these cries, and no morph either. I could stay all night on this battlefield and not repair a hundredth of the damage to my soul. None think to bring water to those poor souls who cry out for it not fifty feet from them. Such a simple thing!" He bowed his head. "And tomorrow, it will all begin again. But for tonight—for tonight, at least, I will be a gentleman."

Richard felt tears in his eyes. "Thank you," he said softly. "G-god go with you."

When the other was gone, Richard pulled William to shelter behind the house. He sat down, out of sight of the stone wall, and examined William's leg. The wound, located between the ankle and knee, looked messy and had been fouled by dirt. The blue uniform around it was stiff and caked with blood. He took a white cloth from his own pack and wrapped the wound as best he could. William moaned as he did it, but didn't wake up.

Richard rubbed his paws together to warm them, and surveyed the route back. He hoped that nobody would fire on a retreating soldier, but if they were firing on noises, then he would be in danger now that the human was no longer with him. Or, he thought, perhaps the human would serve as cover. When he listened closely, he could hear murmured prayers and soldiers drinking from canteens—not a lot of noise, but probably enough to mask the sounds of dragging. Richard looked down at the stretchers and figured he would have to get to the first group of buildings before he had any chance of getting them to come get William.

"Come on, William," he muttered softly as he hefted his friend's shoulders again. He knew it would be dangerous to talk, but it made him feel immeasurably better. Somehow, talking to William made his survival seem more assured. He was alive, this was just a rough patch, and once Richard had gotten him through it, they would be okay again.

Slowly he dragged his friend down the embankment. William's legs scraped along the ground, but he couldn't help that. A couple shots came his way, but far wide, and now they could not scare him nor deter him from his purpose. Oh, Raccoon, he thought when he looked over his shoulder and saw the buildings no more than twenty feet away, I'm going to make it.

"Hey, take me," a wounded soldier called as he passed him. "Leave that animal!" Richard grimaced and kept going until he felt the rough stone of the building against his back. He almost sobbed in relief. His arms felt light and nearly numb as he rested William against the wall.

"Stay there. I'll be right back, I promise."

The nearest stretcher already had a soldier on it and was headed for the town. Another one was coming across the bridges. Richard ran for them as quickly as he dared. Even though he was careful, he caught his foot on a rock and went tumbling down the embankment, coming up against a dead soldier.

He got up, shuddering, and continued toward the stretcher. The humans were walking around blindly, trying to locate the wounded by sound, but stopped as he hailed them.

"Hsst! This way! There's a wounded up here."

"They're all over," the human replied, looking in Richard's direction but not at him, searching the darkness.

"But I know where this one is."

"Can you see?"

"Yes!" Richard was within thirty feet, and now the human saw him. "This way!"

"Lead on, then." They followed him up the hill to the buildings. Twice they heard other soldiers and wanted to stop, but Richard kept going, and they followed. Richard found that the walk was not nearly as nightmarish now that he knew where he was going, knew William was alive, and was not alone. His heart went out to all the soldiers they passed, but he kept on his way, keeping his friend foremost in his mind.

"There he is!" He ran to William and knelt beside him. The stretcher crew stopped a few feet away.

"This is what you brought us up here for? Is he an officer?" The two men stayed by the stretcher and didn't approach.

"No, but his foot is hurt. He's fine otherwise, but he'll die if he doesn't get back." Why weren't they coming to pick him up? Richard stood up.

"There are people out here! We don't have time to take an animal back." The man's eyes glittered in the moonlight.

"You have to!" Richard felt his triumph melt away into desperation.

"Sorry, son, but you know how it is."

“Look,” Richard cast about for some bargaining chip. “You can’t just leave him here!”

The soldier shook his head and directed his companion to one of the wounded humans nearby. “Sorry,” he repeated. “But thanks for the help in getting up here. We’ll need you on the way back, too.”

“I’m not going.”

Now the human turned to look at him, and it was not a friendly look. “Where’s your loyalty to your country, son?”

Shot to pieces anyway, the moment I put that splint on. Richard shivered, but this was nothing compared to the fear he’d felt sitting by William with the Reb approaching. He didn’t even hesitate. “Bring him back, and...I’ll help you all night. Otherwise I’m sitting here with him.”

The humans exchanged glances and whispered words. Richard didn’t hear what passed between them, but a moment later, they walked over to William and loaded him on the stretcher.

All night he walked with those two, sometimes helping them with the stretcher when one got tired. They brought in ten more soldiers by the time it began to get light, while none of the other crews managed to bring in more than five. The Rebs shot at them occasionally, but without any success until the sky brightened. Soon after Richard got a nick in his tail from a Reb gun, the stretcher crews were ordered to remain in the field hospital and tend to the wounded.

Exhausted, Richard crept into the hospital building and checked on William. He was still unconscious, but his leg was heavily bandaged and he didn’t have any doctors fussing over him. Richard took that to mean he would be okay. He wanted to go back to his bunk in the barracks, but somehow the hospital floor pulled him down and wouldn’t let him up again.

When he woke up, he had a blanket over him, and William wasn’t in his bed. Richard felt a moment of panic. All for nothing? He accosted a passing doctor.

“What happened to the raccoon here?”

The doctor looked at him for a moment without replying, and Richard noticed for the first time that the human looked almost raccoon-like himself, with dark eyebrows over his eyes and dark circles under it. He probably hadn’t slept all night. Finally, the doctor checked the chart and nodded. “Haffre? They’re operating now.”

“Operating?”

The doctor nodded. “They couldn’t save the leg.” He didn’t wait for an answer, but wandered down the row, checking on other patients.

At least he’s alive. Richard walked slowly back to his barracks, still tired. He thought he might lie down again there, but as he walked in, he met Major Hawkins. The weasel looked sympathetic, and patted the bunk beside him. Richard sat down, his ears folded back.

“That was some night you had, young Blackman. I’ve been told about William and all you did to help the humans. I suppose it was a good thing

that your ankle prevented you from going out with the others. You're something of a hero now, you know."

"I don't deserve to be a hero," Richard said slowly. He certainly didn't feel like one. "I just did what I had to."

"Sometimes those are the most heroic acts of all. Don't sell yourself short. Even some of the humans noticed."

Richard couldn't shake the shame of faking his sprained ankle, no matter what good had come of it. He asked himself again what David or Randolph would have done. Coming up with the answer was easy; carrying it out was much harder. "Major," he said, "my ankle...I didn't really hurt it." He'd thought that the confession would make him feel better, but it didn't. He hung his head.

"I know."

"What?"

Hawkins patted his knee. "You're not the first to fake an injury, young Blackman, nor the first underage soldier we've had."

Richard fidgeted. "I'll be eighteen soon."

"Not for another couple of years, I think. I've seen a lot of young soldiers, private." Richard stayed silent. "Listen, Col. Adams wants you dishonorably discharged because of the malingering. He's in a foul mood because of yesterday, and he doesn't care what else you did last night. I convinced him to give you a chance to own up to it, and you did. In a way, that took more courage than what you did last night. We still think it would be best if you leave the army, because you'll have no other regiment to go to and Col. Adams doesn't want you in his, but officially it will be because of your age. How old are you, really?"

"Fifteen," Richard said in a whisper.

"Normally, we overlook that. We need the soldiers. But in some cases, it's better to let the soldier grow up a little more before we let them fight." He patted Richard's knee again. "Cheer up, civilian. I think you'll make the Union a fine soldier in a few years, though Weasel knows I hope this is over by then."

"I hope so too." Richard fingered the scar on his tail. "I hope I'll be a good soldier."

"You were brave enough today to inspire someone twice your age."

"Brave? I was scared, like a little kit." He thought about that. "I guess I was more scared for William than for me."

Hawkins smiled. "However you did it, it was a brave thing to do." He sighed. "They're rebuilding this whole regiment, I think, since we lost so many. I hear we're retreating tonight. Then we'll get to count our losses." He pressed his fingers to his eyes, and his ears folded down.

"What happened? Why did they keep sending us?" Richard felt somewhat emboldened by his new status as a citizen.

Hawkins looked around to make sure there was nobody within earshot. "Burnside," he said. "The general was going to keep attacking. Apparently they talked him out of it. We were supposed to be coordinating with



Meade, but he failed in his assault too, and they're trying to figure out who to blame for that. It looks like a bad deal all the way around. Maybe ten thousand dead for the Union."

Richard winced. "That many?"

"Here and elsewhere, yes."

Richard gave Hawkins a comradely hug. "Best of luck to you. Weasel be with you," he said softly.

"Raccoon be with you too, Richard." The weasel smiled at him, then walked away.

Two days later, Richard and William walked north from Fredericksburg toward William's home in Pennsylvania, William on his one remaining foot with the crutch he called "my medal." He'd earned an honorable discharge, though he wouldn't get any other recognition of his bravery on the field. Richard thought that wasn't fair.

"Bravery," William snorted in response as he and Richard walked through northern Virginia. Technically, this was Union-controlled land, but without the army at their backs, they were easy targets, so they kept their voices low. "There was nothing brave about it. I charged up a hill in a group of soldiers, and kept going until my foot hit a bullet." He tried to smile about it, but the smile turned into a grimace at a twinge from his leg, bandaged off below the knee.

"I still think you were brave." Richard's tail swung back and forth, no worse for the bullet wound. He hadn't even gotten a bandage for it, but it was nearly healed. "I couldn't have gone up there with you."

"You went up on your own. Besides, you stood up to that Reb and to those guys with the stretcher. Now that's brave. I think you deserve a medal more than I do, squirt."

Richard kicked a pebble on the ground and watched it skitter away. "That wasn't brave. I wasn't even thinking when I did that. I don't think I could do it again. Doesn't bravery mean something you do even though you know what might happen?" He considered. "That soldier, he was really brave. He could've been shot by his own army, or by ours, before they realized what was happening."

"He's human," William said. "At least he might get a medal for that. Don't discount what you did, though, Richard. Bravery takes many forms, and while I think it was stupid of you to run into battle all by yourself, I also think it took a lot of courage, and I owe my life to it. You may not have known what you were doing at first, but you had plenty of chances to turn back." He chuckled. "Now, just wait until my sister tries to make her rhubarb pie. You really have to be brave to take a slice of that."

Richard laughed. "Will you be well enough to travel to Maine? Maybe my brothers will be home. I hope they're okay."

William's tail brushed his. "If they're anything like you, they're not only okay, they've already been promoted."

Richard felt a swelling of pride in his chest. He smiled at William and kicked another pebble along the dusty road, northwards towards home.

## Fox Hunt by Alan Loewen

Brendan Phillips sighed with boredom and rubbed the handle of his wheelchair as if the nervous habit could make the submersible bus move faster. For him, the novelty of cruising above the drowned streets of San Francisco had lost its enchantment four years ago, but a job was still a job.

The earthquake of 2015 may have sunk the city below the ocean, but humanity's creative greed remained unchanged. New builders realized the security benefits of having underwater office complexes and when they built them, savvy businesses responded. Yet, the increased security measure of being a few hundred feet under the Pacific also brought well-equipped and cunning corporate spies to face the challenge. And new forms of crime required people like Phillips and—his handicap notwithstanding—Phillips was the best.

For the past four years he worked for Triton Dome, a business complex that housed over fifty corporate offices with a combined value that exceeded trillions of dollars. From the early evening until the following morning, Phillips would be the dome's sole occupant and its sole defense against corporate spies, hackers and other unwelcome guests. However, with his technological toys, Phillips knew the odds were mostly in his favor.

There was a gentle bump as the submersible bus docked with the Dome. As Phillips released his wheelchair from the floor restraints, the air lock opened with a hiss of pneumatics.

The people on the other side of the airlock waited politely as Phillips wheeled his way past them. They were the last remaining people in the complex: workaholics, presidents and CEO's with escorts and bodyguards, executive secretaries, and the various daytime security officers that were hired by the individual companies. After polite nods to Phillips they boarded the submersible that would take them home.

Phillips wheeled his way through the deserted halls to his private office complex where retinal scans and voice prints let him through the four security doors. The main office looked cramped, but Phillips didn't mind need a lot of room. Computers, monitors, and other electronic paraphernalia took up most of the space. For the next twelve hours, Phillips would prowl the halls of Triton Dome with electronic senses combined with his years of experience and a finely honed intuition. He clicked the wheels of his chair into the specially developed floor slots.

"Veni, vidi, vici."

"Voice print analyzed and confirmed," a female electronic voice chimed. "Good evening, Mr. Phillips." The monitors and sensors flickered into life.

"Good evening, Molly," Phillips replied as he scanned the monitors. "Status report?"

"External sensors detect only the submersible bus now halfway to port."

Phillips shook his head. "I suppose it's too much to hope that the bad guys would use traditional submersibles tonight. Well, keep an eye out for

water displacement and wake up the troops. Also, call up the chess program. Master level. I feel lucky tonight.”



Duke bit back his claustrophobia as his submersible cut through the Pacific waters. Hired for his small stature, Duke fit into the bull seal-shaped submersible with no room to spare.

If it wasn't for the money, Duke would surely have refused the job, but who could resist an offer of five million euros for the sole purpose of planting a bug in Triton Dome? If it went without a hitch he would make more money in one night than he had in the past eleven years of petty burglary.

That is if he didn't go off the screaming deep end with claustrophobia or lose his lunch from sea sickness.

With a groan, he closed his eyes and willed himself not to be ill.



Phillips contemplated his next move. For a AI-construct Molly was good, but not invincible. He saw that he'd be checkmated in three moves unless he found an escape.

“Mr. Phillips, sensors have picked up a bull seal swimming toward the northern end of the complex.”

Phillips didn't even bother looking up from his computer screen. So?” he asked. “It's that time of year for them to migrate south. Is he doing anything unusual?”

“Sensors indicate that there is a pod of killer whales approaching one kilometer to the west. The seal is not changing his course to avoid them.”

Phillips cocked an eyebrow. “Interesting.” He chewed on his lower lip for a moment. “Let's see what our bull seal really is.”



Duke felt a wave of relief as he left the submersible. Swimming fifty feet under the surface of the Pacific ocean with an aqualung the size of a large pen sticking out of his mouth didn't make him any that much more comfortable and the special contacts for underwater vision made his eyes itch, but at least he could now see more than two inches around him.

Cautiously, keeping alert for security monitors and sensors, he made his way to the emergency lock and hooked up the brain eater, flipped open the small console and tapped in the priming codes. A small technological device worth a few million, it could scramble and confuse most AI constructs it came across. Within moments it reached through the titanium skin of Triton Dome and latched onto the AI unit that operated the lock. Suddenly, suffering from a bad case of dementia, the AI opened the airlock neglecting to inform Molly of the sudden breach of security.

Duke sighed with relief. *This*, he thought to himself, *is going to be a piece of cake*. He cycled through the airlock where fans blew excess water off his wet

suit, and stepped out into a dry corridor. Now inside the Dome, all he had to do was find the target corporation, plant the bug, and go home to enjoy his millions. He put the aqualung in the pocket of his utility belt.

He walked quickly, following the mental map of the Dome's layout his employers had made him memorize. In ten minutes Duke would be a millionaire.

He turned the corridor and came face-to-face with a sentry. Standing seven feet tall and five feet wide, it transported itself on treads and was armed with an incredible array of innovative weaponry.

"Whoops!" Duke said.

"You are under arrest for unlawful entry," the sentry intoned in a soulless tinny voice. "Lay face down on the floor keeping your hands visible at all times."

"Sure," Duke said. "Anything you say." Duke whipped out a small rod from his belt and, shutting his eyes tightly, pushed the button. Even through his tightly closed eyelids Duke could see the light that shot out from the rod which, for one brief millisecond, became the brightest object in the local universe. Spinning on his heels, he ran back to the submersible leaving the sentry with its visual electronics quite fried.



"Impressive," Phillips said tapping eagerly on the console keyboard. "So far, this seems to be a first class thief." He turned to another console. "Molly, let's see if we can checkmate this misguided young man."



Duke ran back the hallway only to find another sentry guarding the airlock that led to the submersible. With a curse, he ran down another hallway desperately seeking an alternative escape route.

Running wildly, he spotted sentries standing in various hallways and, unaware he was being herded, ran blindly.

With a cry of relief, Duke finally found an airlock at the end of a deserted hallway. He pushed the open button and the door slid open with a slight hiss.

A sentry stood on the other side of the lock. With a puff of air, it shot out two small, thin darts that easily pierced Duke's wet suit. With over one hundred thousand volts coursing through his body, Duke had no choice but to fall senseless to the floor.



Thirty minutes later with the intruder beginning the hour-long cryogenic process, Phillips studied the bug the burglar tried to plant in one of the Triton offices. Surely, any information it could have picked up would have translated into millions of dollars for those who listened to its secrets, but considering the amount of investment needed to stage the raid, Phillips just

couldn't see any decent profit margin for those that had hired the would-be burglar.

Phillips shrugged and put the bug aside. Tomorrow, the intruder would be in the gentle and pervasive hands of the Department of Psychological Correction. Harsh, but this was, after all, the twenty-first century.

With a sigh of contentment, Phillips went back to his chess game.

However, the game went bad. Phillips's attention kept straying because his paranoid intuition wouldn't stop screaming at him. With an impatient sigh, he turned off the computer program and in his mind replayed his encounter with the Dome's uninvited guest.

"Molly, do sensors pick up anything unusual?"

"No," the answer came back immediately. "Sensors detect no unusual activity."

Phillips turned back to the bug still lying on the workbench. Taking a jeweler's glass out of his work drawer he studied the tiny microphone closely. Seeing nothing of any consequence, Phillips then grabbed a kit of tiny tools from the desk. Even though opening the bug was sure to destroy it and its use as evidence, Phillips had learned to trust his instincts. In a few minutes, he had the listening device open and stared in surprise at the contents. There was no power supply. The bug was a dummy.

Phillips threw the bug and his tools on the desktop in disgust. "Molly! The first guy was just a decoy. Wake up the troops, we have another intruder. And send a water sentry out to that submersible."

Quickly, Phillips pulled up a schematic of Triton Dome and put the sensors on full sensitivity. The computer screen showed nothing except for the presence of the sentries.

"I know you're here," Phillips muttered under his breath. "Where are you?"

"Mr. Phillips, there's a signal coming in from the water sentry."

Phillips turned to another screen. The bull seal dummy submersible still floated where the original burglar had left it. Nearby was a stealth submersible. Phillips's jaw dropped in mute surprise. A stealth submersible started out as a cool one billion euro item. What profit could a corporation make spending one billion euros for information that was probably not going to net them much more than their original investment?

"Molly, have the water sentry incapacitate both submersibles."

Once again, Phillips turned to his screens and his sensors. They still showed nothing except the sentries.

The sentries?

The complex was guarded by three hundred and twelve mechanical sentries. "Molly," Phillips barked. "How many sentries show up the sensors?"

"Three hundred and twelve," the AI responded.

Phillips chewed his lower lip in frustration. "Pull up a visual of all the sentries, one by one, keeping their image on the screen for exactly 2 seconds."

Seven minutes later Phillips stared open-mouthed at the screen.

The intruder had hitched a ride on the back of one of the robot sentries, the one place, Phillips suddenly realized, they had never been programmed to look for an intruder. And this was a very unique intruder. Wearing only a bikini and a thick utility belt, the diminutive figure would have stood barely five feet tall, but from the tip of her muzzle to the tip of her bushy red tail she was as illegal a creation as the law could stress. A morph. An animal in humanoid form. And the creation of anthropomorphic animals was considered so illegal that violators had their IQ's wiped and spent the rest of their lives asking patrons if they wanted fries with their order. And here, in Triton Dome, Phillips had a fox-morph, still dripping water from her fur and hitching an easy ride on the back of one his sentries.

Whatever her mission was, Phillips realized that somebody was willing to risk everything to get something from one of the office complexes of Triton Dome.

"Molly, have Sentry 188 make his way toward the common room."

"The sentry does not respond."

Phillips viewed the sentry closely before it got out of the range of the concealed security camera and swore when he saw the brain eater stuck to the sentry's torso. It was now in the command of the fox-morph.

"Molly, have all sentries within three hundred yards converge on the intruder. Switch monitor three to Sentry 28."

The monitor flickered and Phillips found himself looking through the eyes of a lumbering sentry. Grabbing the joystick and putting the sentry into manual control, Phillips ordered it to approach the fox and her impromptu vehicle.

With a pang of guilt, Phillips realized he was enjoying this way too much. Since his hiring he had thwarted well over two hundred attempts at infiltration and actually captured over fifty percent of the intruders. To catch a fox-morph, and one so evidently well-trained, would be a real feather in his cap.

He jacked his sentry up to full speed to get to the intruder before she achieved her goal, whatever that may be. There was a possibility that her assignment had already been achieved, but Phillips doubted it. Unless this was a suicide mission, she was steering the sentry away from her only sure avenue of escape.

He checked his sentry's armaments. The taser was charged and ready; likewise the super-glue gun, and the bolos. On one monitor Phillips watched the progress of the fox and on the other he watched through the eyes of his manually-guided sentry. The whole affair reminded him of the computer virtual reality games of his youth, but this one had real consequences if he lost. No rebooting for him if the fox-morph got away.

He brought his sentry to a halt and backed into a recessed doorway. The fox and the sentry she had possessed would be walking by in a few moments and a burst of super-glue would end this little drama quite quickly. Taking his eyes off the monitor that tracked the piggy-back riding

fox-morph, he focused his attention on the monitor that looked through the eyes of his own sentry.

The possessed sentry lumbered into view and came parallel with Phillips's. Aside from the brain eater, there was nothing on the sentry's back.

Phillips quickly turned to the monitor tracking the fox-morph, but at that moment the creature's face appeared upside-down in close-up in his sentry's monitor. Before Phillips could respond the fox brought her arm back and down on the sentry's visual eye. Ironically, she was armed with only a screwdriver, but it was enough to make his monitor go black.

Blinded, Phillips's sentry was useless.

He wasted no time in mourning a temporary loss. "Molly, bring all sentries to Section 4-B and have them tag anything that so much as moves."

"Yes, Mr. Phillips. Command executed."

In the monitor tracking the fox-morph through security cameras, Phillips watched her take the brain eater off the sentry and send it lumbering through the corridor.

"Molly, regain control of Sentry 188."

"Unable to comply, Mr. Phillips. The sentry does not respond."

"Wonderful," Phillips said sarcastically. "Now she has an additional piece on her side."

He watched the fox as she typed commands on the brain eater's tiny console. Placing it against the wall, she ran it over the paneling. Suddenly the monitor flickered.

Phillips gasped with sudden understanding. "Molly! Cut off the security cameras in Section 4!"

The screen went black. "Complied, Mr. Phillips."

"Perform a diagnostic and make sure that brain eater didn't have any access to the rest of the security monitor system before we shut the node off."

"Complied, Mr. Phillips."

Phillips groaned and rubbed his temples in exasperation. This fox was a worthy opponent and now she controlled a small part of the playing field. In chess, that could mean the game.

"Molly, keep the sensors on full alert and tell me if that fox-morph leaves section 4. Also, pull up the office list for that section. Let's see what she's after."



Cerise punched buttons on the brain eater to make the damage to the electronics buried in the wall paneling permanent. Her masters had spent months training her for this exercise and she had no choice but to comply. Capture would mean termination and, though she longed for her personal freedom, she was intelligent enough to realize she had to play with the cards she had been dealt.

By now, every sentry in the complex would be after her and she had to deal with them first even though her real target was just a few hallways away. The sentry she had possessed would buy her some time, but those few precious moments would barely be enough. Not only did she have to reach her target, she also had to get away.

Admittedly, for the first time in her memory, facing this challenge made her feel truly alive. She reached into her utility belt and pulled out the next weapon in her arsenal.



Phillips had taken control of another sentry that was leading the push into Sector 4. Turning a hallway, he came upon the sentry that had been driven insane by the fox-morph's brain eater. It stood silently in the middle of the hallway and appeared to have deactivated itself.

But it was playing possum. Before Phillips could react, it surged toward him.

Striking Phillips's sentry at an oblique angle, it jammed both itself and the other robot guard tightly between the walls of the hallway effectively blocking it. With an oath, Phillips tried to free his own machine, but not before the possessed sentry began to discharge its super-glue guns. In seconds both guards became a permanent part of the decor until somebody could get solvent down there to free them.

Phillips slapped the top of his desk in anger and switched manual control over to another sentry. There was one other hallway to Sector 4 and before he could get his sentries there, the fox would have a good ten minutes to prepare for her next move.

Typing furiously and shouting orders at Molly, Phillips managed to turn the sentries around and had them roll down the hallway two-by-two toward Sector 4. As the sentries turned a corner and increased their speed, Phillips jumped when he saw through his monitor a sudden shower of sparks before it went completely black.

Mouth agape, Phillips switched manual control to the sentry that had been behind the first. It did not respond.

"Molly! Get me a working sentry on my monitor!"

"Complied." The screen flickered and Phillips groaned in dismay. Dimly illuminated by the emergency lights, the hallway was effectively blocked by two rows of sentries that had fallen over one another. Zooming in, Phillips saw the burnt wire that had been connected to a fluorescent light fixture, attached to the wall, strung across the floor at knee height and run up the far wall where it was connected to yet another light. The two lead sentries had stumbled into the trap, electrocuted themselves and made an effective road block when the two sentries directly behind tripped over them like clowns in a bad Keystone Cops film. Not only had Phillips lost four sentries, but the circuits for the hall lights had blown to add insult to injury.

"I've been checked," Phillips muttered, "but it isn't mate yet." He unlatched his wheelchair from the slots in the floor.





Cerise only needed a small amount of plastique to blow the door open. Any more and the walls might buckle and let in the Pacific Ocean. With a loud pop, the door to Eden Evolution, Incorporated flew open.

Her brain eater made short work of the security panels inside and she was able to gain access to the inner laboratory where lay the information her masters so strongly desired and had spent billions of dollars and risked everything to obtain.

Cerise didn't have time to hack the system. She simply cracked the computer casings open and took their hard drives. Her masters would have all the time they desired to hack them later.

Finding somebody's attaché case, Cerise stuffed the five miniature drives inside it and contemplated her next move. She had to get out to the second hidden stealth sub as, by now, the first had surely been discovered and incapacitated.

Outside the EEI offices, the hallway was dark and filled with the faint smell of burning insulation. Fortunately, the dim illumination from the emergency lights was sufficient for Cerise to see her way to the second emergency airlock. One of the benefits of not being fully human.

Looking around the corner, the fox could not help but laugh at the effectiveness of her simple trap. Five sentries lay collapsed in the otherwise empty hallway. The other sentries waited for her somewhere, but she had reduced at least five of them to electronic rubble. With a feeling of satisfaction, she hurdled the pile of sentries ignoring their hot electrical smell.

She heard a popping sound and with an agility born of her nature, dove to the side as the taser needles missed her flank by only a fraction of an inch. The fifth sentry had only been faking damage. With incredible speed, it righted itself and headed for the fox.

Cerise sprinted down the hallway, running from side to side when she heard another pop. Desperately, she leaped for the far wall, but not before the bolos twisted around her right leg sending her sprawling. Desperately, she opened her utility belt, grabbed a sonic grenade and sent it rolling under the sentry's tracks.

The sentry's tough interior was no protection for the sonics that shattered the fragile electronics buried deep within, but Cerise herself was too close. Whimpering in pain, she tried to crawl farther away as the sonics vibrated her bones and teeth.

The grenade only lasted a few moments. With a crash, the sentry fell to the floor, no longer a threat. Cerise groaned trying to get up off the floor, hoping no other sentries would come until she had recovered her senses. Though she ached all over, fortunately she wasn't bleeding from her nose or ears and she could still see. Shaking her head so she would stop seeing double, Cerise released her leg from the bolo, picked up the attaché case, and made her way to the emergency airlock where her stealth sub waited.

Limping down the hallway, Cerise felt the floor vibrate through her bare feet. That meant sentries and lots of them. Quickly, she took her final sonic grenade out of her utility belt and set it as a proximity mine. Placing it on the floor of the hallway, the fox-morph found enough energy to sprint down the hallway and around the corner. Moments later, the sonic grenade triggered, but Cerise was far enough away to avoid any effects.

With a sigh of relief, Cerise stumbled upon the emergency airlock. With the batteries of her brain eater exhausted, she quickly opened the lock manually, not caring that she would trigger all sorts of alarms. She had won and she wanted to go home even if home was a prison.

She tapped the opening commands and the pneumatic door slid open. She had just enough time to register that there was a man in the airlock sitting in a wheelchair and holding a small taser. There was a popping sound, a sharp stinging pain in her chest and one hundred thousand volts of electricity stripped her of consciousness.



When Cerise opened her eyes, she found herself restrained in a medical unit. The monitor above her head reported that it had stopped some minor internal bleeding and was now in the process of mending some inconsequential damage to her skeletal system.

The man in the wheelchair sat next to the unit studying her casually through the glass.

He pushed the TALK button on the intercom. "Check and mate," he said. "Can you speak?"

Cerise turned her eyes to the ceiling of the medical unit. "I wouldn't be of much value if I couldn't."

The man's voice came again through the intercom. "The med unit had some trouble with your genetics and blood type, but I've restrained it to work on only the damage you took from your own sonic grenade. You should be fine in just a few minutes."

Cerise turned her head and saw Duke, the unwitting decoy who preceded her into the Dome, across the room in cryogenic suspension. "That's nice of you to fix me up before you freeze me and turn me over for eradication," she said sarcastically.

The man laughed. "I think they'll have some questions about your creators before that."

Cerise snorted in derision. "Impossible. I don't know who they are. They keep me in a safe house and I have no contact with them. And since I won't be reporting back, all trace of their existence will be eliminated well before you can drag any information out of me."

The man studied her carefully through the med bay window. "I can give you another alternative," he said after a few minutes of silence.

Cerise looked at her captor and cocked an eyebrow. "I'm listening."  
"You could work for me."

Cerise barked a short laugh. "And what fantasy is this? Work for you? An illegal morph? If I take the job do I get an annual vacation in Hawaii?" She snorted her contempt. "All you offer me is a change in owners."

The man's voice came through the intercom short and terse. "No. Not an owner; a supervisor. I'm not saying there won't be difficulties, but it can work. I can get you a private, hidden room here where you can stay during the day. At night, you supplement the sentries. You yourself have proven they have their flaws. You can be my legs, my eyes, my other brain out there in the complex."

The fox-morph stared at him intently with dark vulpine eyes. "Why?"

The man shrugged his shoulders as if stating the obvious. "It won't be long before other intruders arrive who will match or exceed your skills. I need your specific talents."

The fox-morph studied him intently through the glass. "And if you were to be fired or died from an accident? Will your successor be just as understanding?"

The man shook his head. "As I said, I'm not saying there won't be difficulties, but with your intelligence, I think you can deal with unexpected surprises. It's either work for me or face eradication. You don't have a choice."

Cerise stared at him in undisguised contempt. "You're wrong," she said curtly. "There may be only two choices, but they are still my choices to make."

The man stared at her for a moment without expression. Quietly, he looked down and absent-mindedly rubbed the handle of his wheelchair. With a sigh, he turned and wheeled himself to the desk and stared quietly at Cerise's dismantled utility belt.

Cerise had no idea what was going through the man's head. Her masters had told her that she would be hated and treated with loathing by anybody she met outside the safe house. She never expected that if captured she would be offered a job. Watching him as the med unit continued its subtle work, Cerise saw the man turn on the desk monitor and speak to it, but her intercom couldn't pick up the words.

After a few more minutes, the man spun his chair about and wheeled it back to the med unit window. "I owe you an apology," he said into the intercom. "You're right. The choice is yours to make and I've decided to give you another."

He tapped some keys on the med unit console. With a click, the restraints popped off Cerise's wrists and ankles and the glass door slid open.

"You are free to go. I have had your second stealth sub put in airlock 5. You can either return to your creators, or you can come work for me, or wait here for arrest and eradication.

"There is a sentry outside the door who will escort you to either the airlock or my office. Of course, you leave without your booty and I warn

you; if you leave and ever return here and I capture you again, I will show no mercy. It will be a final checkmate.

“There’s one more thing you need to know. The med unit found a miniature cyanide pump in your abdomen which I have permanently turned off. It seems your owners were going to make sure you wouldn’t talk to anybody if you didn’t return home by this morning. Regardless of your decision, I can have the med unit remove it in just under an hour. Consider it my salute for tonight’s game well played.” With that, the man turned and wheeled his chair out the door.



Phillips sat quietly in his office trying to repair what damage had been done. In four hours, the first workers would be arriving and he wanted no trace of the night’s activities. The first draft of his report to EEI was that the hard drives had been recovered, but the intruder had escaped. Depending on the fox-morph’s decision, Phillips stood either ready to wipe the security tapes or store them for evidence.

He had left the fox-morph to her decision thirty minutes ago, but as there had been no console light showing activity in airlock 5 he had to assume she was still mulling over her decision in the med unit.

A few minutes later Phillips smiled when he heard a discreet tap on the door. *I wonder*, he thought, *how good she is at chess?*

## It Always Rains Here by Seth Drake

Tuesday night 2 a.m., I can't sleep and it's raining again. The street lights reflect ochre from the low clouds and as I walk down to the all-night coffee house I get a claustrophobic feeling, as though there is no sky beyond, no moon, no stars, no absolute zero of space. Worse than that, even: that there is nothing beyond the place where the ruddy-grey bowl of nothingness comes down to meet the landscape, that all I can see is all there is. Deresby, this scabbed, itchy anus of a town, God's one and only.

I've been reading too much *noir* lately, I can tell.

The doorbell jingles merrily over my head as I walk in. As usual I'm the only one here, and also as usual Joseph the owner is on duty. I asked him once why he always does nights. "It's cheaper than paying someone overtime," he replied in his usual quiet drawl. "And besides, I got used to nights, back in the day." *Back in the day*, he says, but never which day it was. And tonight, like every night after the first couple, he sets up my coffee the way I like it. While it brews we make a little conversation: politics, weather, what you'd expect. He adds another notch to the tally on my slate, which I make sure gets cleaned regular as clockwork on a Friday. It's the only slate he keeps. I take it as an honour.

The coffee is rich and hot, bitter but not astringent. The first cup I always drink black, for that full-on taste and the caffeine jazz that starts off in my basal stem and jitterbugs its way down my spine until my fingers shiver. Joseph makes good coffee. After the first the taste is just too much, so I mellow it down with a little cream and sip slowly, listening to late-night classical music and reading.

I drink the entire pot in silence, as I do every time I come in at this hour. It's the main reason I come here, apart from the fact that it's the only place open through the night. Joseph doesn't ask questions, isn't one for idle conversation: he just reads his books and drinks his own coffee until about four when he starts making the bread and pastries for the next day. I like it that way. I don't come here to talk. I come in here at night because I can't sleep. At least that's the reason I always give.



There was something of a sensation when Joseph opened his coffee house. Not because it was a 24-hour place, although that was a complete novelty around here. Even the fact that he's openly gay didn't matter to anyone beyond the usual coterie of foul-mouthed, ill-bred piss-head morons who insisted on using the shop's front window as a urinal each night for the first month it was open. No, what made the place stand out in every way was, and is, the owner himself. His attention to detail. His perfectionism. The way he regularly goes to markets and trade fairs to find the very best tea and coffee for his shop.

None of that. What mattered most was that he has fur.

Joseph is a therianthrope.

Really, of course, it doesn't matter. In most major civilised cities therians have no problems – at least as long as they stay away from the parts that most sensible people stay away from as a matter of course. It's become commonly accepted that therians are people, too, and by and large they're accepted as such. They study at university, they hold jobs of all shades of collar colour, they serve with pride in the military, they work in hospitals and on the police force. I won't be at all surprised to see one elected to parliament one day soon, and I know for a fact a private school in a city not far from here appointed a therian to its teaching staff.

The thing is, though, that that's *there* and not *here*. In Deresby, a one-horse town as long as someone had a horse it could borrow, Joseph's arrival caused a sensation and pretty much split the population in half down strictly partisan lines. Some argued that he was a perversion against nature, that he was a threat to the children, that he should be told to leave and never come back. Others pointed out that for whatever reason he wanted to open a coffee shop in Deresby and that we should be grateful and buy his coffee. A few voices, those of the few people who'd seen a bit of the world and, oddly enough, a large number of the older generation, said that he was just someone trying to make a living and who just happened to look like a cheetah that walked upright, and why couldn't everybody stop working themselves up over what amounted to very little at all?

Me, I didn't join any camp. While they were all arguing back and forth between themselves, I was looking forward to the first decent cup of coffee I'd had in far too long that I hadn't had to make myself. And they day he opened up shop I was first through the door, even though I had to push past a line of xenophobes to get in. Just as I'd hoped, the coffee was incredible. I put out my hand in gratitude and when Joseph took it and squeezed, soft pawpads pressing against my palm, strong fingers wrapping around my hand ending in sharp black talons that grazed lightly over my skin, electricity tingled up my arm and down my back. His emerald green eyes met and held mine for almost slightly too long. I wondered what the fur on his head felt like; if, like domestic felines, he had a purr point on his cheek *just there*; whether he got that 'happy cat' face when somebody stroked it. If anybody ever had.

"You should drink it before it gets cold," he said.



I suppose that I shouldn't be too hard on the place. It's seen its share of hard times, and the local executive doesn't lift a finger to help. As far as it's concerned the whole place barely exists: as long as the taxes get paid the town gets its services but apart from that there's a curious lacuna on the map the size of a couple of square miles. It was a mining and cotton town once, like so many around here. There were at least three mines and, I think, five mills, all turning and churning. It had two railway stations. High Manor was its own community even though it was really a section of Deresby, with a mine and a mill and even its own stores. Back in the day,

the half-mile or so length of High Manor Road boasted nine pubs and five fish-and-chip shops.

Now all but one of the chippies has gone, and all but one of the pubs. The mines and mills are long since closed, and Deresby is a sort of post-ex-industrial ghoul town that somehow manages to live on but can't really remember why.

I didn't grow up here. I heard all those tales of long-ago from a trio of elderly acquaintances with whom I play bridge on a Monday night. The old like to talk, just as the lonely do, so the four of us get on well. I'm the youngest by a few decades, but I like to listen, which is unusual for someone my age. No, a job brought me here, a job at the university in the city nearby, and love helped to keep me here. For a while.

Now it's just the job. And the mortgage.



Friday night spools around. Even from up on High Manor Road I can hear the whoops and roars and cries of the locals as they enjoy their traditional Friday night entertainment of going to the local pub and drinking until bladdered. I haven't been down to the coffee shop since Tuesday, and I can feel the trembling tingle of a sleepless night in the back of my eyes.

I'm washing up my dinner dishes when the bombshell hits.

"... and England have *won* their football match against Holland..." says the radio. And I freeze. I know I'm going to end up going down to Joseph's, but for it to have to be on a night when the rowdies will be celebrating a soccer win just seems unfair. I'm not the most confident of people; I'm not streetwise. The prospect of walking those few hundred yards down the road into Deresby fills me with dread. I start to think of all the ways that I could get to the coffee shop without encountering a bunch of tanked-up football fans, but my mind comes up blank. I could just go to bed, of course, but I know from bitter experience that lying there for six hours tossing and turning is even more enervating than the coffee I'd be drinking otherwise. Plus I'll only end up brooding and feeling increasingly sorry for myself.

I figure I might as well head out early, before it gets too close to closing time and the streets are full. So the doorbell chimes well before midnight and Joseph looks at me in surprise. "You're early."

"England won against Holland. It's going to be Bedlam out there come closing time. I thought I might as well come down before the inmates take over."

He nods and begins to make the coffee. By the time I take it over to my table and start to drink, the noise outside is already starting to build, drunken chanting and laughter roaring up and down the street. Joseph has looked up from his book and obviously caught my worried look in the corner of his eye. "Bunch of tossers. Don't worry about them," he says. Just that, somehow reassuring and dismissive at the same time. So I don't.

I'm engrossed in my book and I don't notice the time passing. So when the doorbell rings again I'm jolted back to reality with a start. Automatically, before even looking at the door, I glance at my watch and see it's after two; it's now I hear it's almost silent outside. So when finally I look up I don't expect to see a group of twenty-somethings half-stagger, half-swagger through the door that they leave open behind them. Although I'm tucked into my usual corner in the table at the far side of the shop, the stench of cheap beer hits me within seconds and I find it hard not to gag.

As he goes up to the counter, Joseph shoots me a glance as though warning me to stay put. "Hello, gentlemen. How may I help you?" Polite as ever.

The one at the front sniggers, a nasty, glottal sound. "Hhhhello *gentlemen*, hhhhow may I hhhhelp you," he mocks, exaggerating Joseph's RP diction. The others laugh as they mill around him, looking around the shop. One of them looks worse for wear than the others and distinctly green about the gills. Joseph just stands there, waiting.

"Ah'll 'ave one uh them and one uh them, an' two uh those," the boy says finally, jabbing at the perspex front of the counter where the pastries are stored. "An' uh kebab."

There are more sniggers and a guffaw. The kid with the green face is increasingly so.

"Sorry, gentlemen, I don't serve kebabs."

"What, naw kebabs?" The boy's flat, grating tones, an unholy admixture of the local accent muddled by years of exposure to the estuarine snivel propagated by some of the more popular soap operas, is made worse by his conspicuous alcohol consumption. "What fuckin' kind uh fuckin' shop is this if yuh 'aven't fuckin' got any fuckin' kebabs?"

Joseph remains placid through the torrent of abuse. "It is a coffee shop. I sell coffee. And tea."

"Well, yuh fucking furbelow, ah want uh fuckin' kebab, not uh fuckin' coffee. So get me – uh – fuckin' – kebab."

I can sense a change in Joseph's posture as the mood begins to turn ugly. Before he can reply the kid with the green face finally loses his battle with his cardiac sphincter. He claps his hands to his mouth in a valiant attempt to stem the flow but his guts are stronger and the chunder still escapes, drooling down the sides of his hands and down his sleeves. A moment later and he's doubled over, vomiting the contents of his stomach all over the wooden floor of the shop. His mates cheer. "Way tuh go, lad!" "Nice one, mate! All over the floor. Nice one."

Joseph's eyes are cold as he surveys the developing morass on the floor. It stinks, really stinks. I've smelt specimens that had been left out of the formaldehyde for a day or two, and that's bad; this, impossibly, is worse. If it weren't for the two empty pots of coffee between me and it, I would probably have been tempted to join in. Fortunately, as he'd started to vomit in earnest the kid had made a belated attempt to reach the door and so I



was spared the sight. I thank the God I never believed in for that small mercy.

"I think I would like you gentlemen to leave. Now," says Joseph. Barely moving a muscle in his body. But I can see through the glass counter in front of him that his tail has a life of its own, spiking viciously from side to side. His whiskers are back, too, and I can imagine his nose revolting against the reek of that pool of vomit. Those rounded ears are starting to swivel, too.

"But ah 'aven't got me kebab," comes the reply. Sneered.

"I told you, I don't sell kebabs. Now get out of my shop, you in-bred, imbecilic excuses for humans, before I come round this counter and rip each of you a new asshole."

"Fuck you!"

I don't think I've ever seen anyone move so quickly or with such agility. Joseph is a single blur of colour as he springs over the counter to land, fangs bared, next to the gang, his back to me. He opens his mouth and lets out a vicious hiss: the kids, already in shock from his stunning leap, like all bullies are less aggressive now that their dominance has been challenged. It's a wild, feral sound and reaches some primal part of me, long since buried when my ancestors came down from the trees: *Danger! Hide! Hide now!* And I do: I can't help it, I scrunch myself down into my seat and freeze, hoping to be unnoticed.

Joseph takes a step towards them and they flee.

He stands, trembling with anger, listening to them clatter away into the night. A few moments later he relaxes slightly but is still on edge as he turns to me, takes a step forward and is about to speak when a brick smashes through the plate-glass window. As though in slow motion I watch it fly through the air, trailing shards of broken glass behind it, before it bounces off the rim of the table in front of mine, skitters sideways across the room and lands in an open sack of roasted beans.

Before I can shout a warning, Joseph is out of the door at full speed. By the time I've got to my feet he's taken down one of the five guys who came through the door with a clean rabbit-punch to the solar plexus. With a breathy groan that kid goes white, folds up on himself like a concertina and drops. But that leaves four more, and, fast and strong as Joseph is, he can't take them all. One of them gets around behind him with a piece of plank, and one swift strike to the back of the head later Joseph is down on all fours.

"Not so fuckin' fly now are yuh, yuh furry faggot," says the kid as he kneels behind Joseph, grabbing at the back of his pants, starting to pull them down. "I'll fuckin' teach yuh not tuh fuckin' sell kebabs, yuh fuckin' furry freak." Joseph is shaking his head trying to clear it when the other remaining kid lands a kick to his stomach and he sprawls flat on his front on the pavement.

*He saw red.* It's an old expression, not one I've ever given any thought to. And I don't give any thought to it right now. Before I know what I'm

doing, before I can pause for breath, before I can remind myself that I'm a coward, that it's not my fight, that Joseph doesn't mean enough to me to get hurt for, that he's just the guy who makes my coffee, I'm heading for the door. On the way my hand mysteriously fills with the heavy steel tray that Joseph uses to serve with. It's cold in my grasp, satisfyingly weighty, and a moment or two later when a loud *bongggg* echoes down the street it seems to come from a place far away and not from the tray in my hand that resonates as it impacts the back of the would-be rapist's head.

Time snaps back to normal in a sucking gulp as the tray clatters to the floor, the recoil of the impact having shaken it from my weak grasp. The kebab-hungry kid is collapsing sideways into the gutter, his eyes crossed in an expression that would be comic in any other situation. And his pal is charging forwards, furious, hatred in his eyes. I don't see the punch coming, but I feel it land, knocking me back towards the wall between the broken front window and the shop door. I feel my lip burst and taste warm copper as I impact the brickwork and he raises his fist for another blow.

*All men have a weak spot*, Jim used to say when he and I were still a couple and he was trying to teach this eternal tenderfoot the ability to protect himself at least a little. *It's almost impossible to miss. It's just a matter of timing.*

Through a blurry haze I see the yob step forward, arm going back. I lean back against the wall and give it my best shot, kicking out hard with the toe of my pointed shoe. And for the second time in one night somebody is looking out for me: I see it connect with his body right at the top of his legs, feel something very squishy get mashed by the leather and hear the squeal of agony as his balls meet their Waterloo. Joseph is clambering to his feet just as the boy tumbles to his knees clutching his nethers, and he puts him mercifully to sleep with a light tap from the faithful old tray.

"Thank you," he says. Looking straight at me. I can't be a pretty sight. My face is swelling beautifully and my split lip is still bleeding, blood drooling thickly down to splatter on my shirt. He steps slowly towards me. So graceful. His tail now almost still again. "I'm sorry about that... I must be out of practice. Back in the day, I could have eaten five little shits like that for breakfast. Metaphorically speaking, of course," he adds after a pause. A faint hint of amusement gleams in his emerald eyes. In a heartbeat it's as though the pain wracking my face never was.

"You keep saying, 'back in the day,'" I say bluntly. "Back in *which* day, exactly?"

He smiles, black lips curling up. "Back in my Army days. 1 Para."

I feel my eyes go wide; it's automatic, I genuinely can't help it. And then as the shock of that revelation fades it takes with it the adrenaline and endorphins that had been keeping me upright. My legs give way and with a groan I feel the wall behind me starting to turn to rubber. A strange grey haze materializes out of nowhere and the ground just sort of comes up to meet me as I slide down the wall.

When I come to a moment later I'm seated by the wall with Joseph looking worriedly into my eyes. "I'm all right," I mutter. "Not used to all this Special Forces stuff."

He undoes the second button on my shirt. Soft handpaws brush my skin as he reaches in to feel my pulse; I know it's racing, my heart pounding fit to burst, but it's not because of the fight. His paw slides up my neck, over my cheek. Cups it. Those emerald eyes inspect me thoroughly. "Is your lip sore?"

"A bit." *A bit about the size of the Titanic.*

Warmth, soft and delicate, meets my damaged lip. The gentle whuffle of his breathing whispers over my cheek as he kisses my wound. Wildfire rushes through my body, slow lightning.

"Now?"

"A... a bit better... I think."

He smiles into my eyes and right then I feel the past I've clung to for so long slip away like a shed snakeskin. I barely even notice it go. His lips meet mine, properly this time, and right there in the privacy of the empty street we kiss softly and gently as a warm summer rain begins to fall.

It always rains here. But I find I can live with that.

## Hiding from the Moonlight by Will A. Sanborn

I got home early, as I do this time every month, getting in just at night fall, before the moon has come up. I've done it for so long now that the routine has become engrained in me, I hardly even need to look at the calendar to count out the phases of the moon anymore. Once again, it's passed through all its cycles, and its coming fullness leaves me hidden away in the house.

Getting home, I quickly drew all the blinds, shutting myself away from the wandering eyes of any chance passerby. I've done my best to get away from people as much as possible, but I still have a couple of neighbors. They've never said anything to me about my monthly seclusion, but they must know there's something strange about me. For now, their diplomatic silence on the subject is a small blessing for me, at least giving the illusion of my affliction going undetected.

They must find it strange that I'm never outside on the nights of the full moon though, for even the most reclusive soul ventures outside occasionally. Not me though, I keep to the safe seclusion of my house, never leaving, lest someone should see the shape I'm in during the times of the changing. If they did see me, I'm never sure what exactly would happen, but I imagine there'd be plenty of mistrust and disbelief as they all looked at me, and likely even some fear and the possibility for violence. People aren't used to anything that's different, and on nights like this, I certainly fall into that category, falling quite sharply into it in fact.

No, I figured out long ago that during the times of the change, it was best for me to keep myself hidden. I don't trust people enough to be able to deal with what I am. It's not that I blame them really; it's taken me so long to try and come to terms with it myself. It's still not something I'm totally comfortable with, even now, and if the situation were reversed and I was one of the normal ones finding about myself, I know I'd be shocked. I still have nightmares about possible confrontations, even after all these years.

It's a lonely life, but it feels necessary to me. I don't want to trust people to see me like that, especially given the vulnerability it brings upon me. Sighing to myself as I steal furtive glances at the moon through the windows; I wish again that it didn't have to be this way. I wish I didn't have to be like this. How nice it would be not to have to fear the coming of the full moon, to have my life ruled so harshly by its monthly cycle. Not being different, I'd be allowed to find someone to share my life with too, instead of having to shy away from most personal contact, fearful of getting too close to someone and accidentally revealing my dark secret to them.

It would be so nice to be able to run outside unhindered on nights like this. Feeling that animal power rushing through my veins as the change overtook me, reveling in the power of the moon bestowed upon me, instead of having to be its prisoner, locked away fearful in my house. I dream of that some nights too, of running free in the fields lit up in the silvery glow, the bright moon overhead shining down happily upon me. I

dream of finding kindred spirits who were lost to me from all these years of isolation. I would finally join them, all of us shifting into our animal forms, sharing the glory of the nocturnal pack as we ran along, howling a happy chorus into the night.

I felt my eyes heating up as those thoughts stole over me yet again, the familiar feelings assaulting me. I've repeated the scene countless times, and as the moon climbed higher in the night sky, I was doomed to live through it once again. Checking my watch, even though it's unnecessary, I confirmed my now-infallible feelings, that it was about to begin. The changing time was almost upon us again.

Sighing, I closed my eyes, tearing my view away from the moon peaking in between the crack in the curtains. Standing there for a few moments in silence, I wished with all my heart that this curse would be lifted from me, that my life could be normal. It's so unfair that I have to suffer alone like this. The time was almost here, please let it be different, don't let me suffer with this imperfect body any longer. Please, oh please, let it be different this time.

I stood there for several minutes, trying to force my breathing to be slow and regular, meditating on my wild hopes. But I knew it was all in vain, I'd been through this so many times before, there was no secret mantra, no force of will that could save me from my fate. There was no magic spell that could make my body right. Still, for a second or two there, I almost thought I felt a shiver ripple through me. Wishful thinking was all it was, and it passed quickly, with no tangible results, leaving me as I'd been before.

Finally, choking back a sob as the futility of the situation crashed over me once again, I opened my eyes. Another month had come, and once again nothing could be done for me and my situation. Opening the blinds of the window slightly, to stare out into the night, I was greeted with the unwanted sight of my reflection in the dark glass. There staring back at me was my plain, everyday face, my flat visage, pale skin bereft of fur, my body unchanged. Warm tears trailed down my naked cheek as I caught sight of one of my neighbors just emerging from his house, his body shifted into its lupine form, silver fur shining in the moonlight. Once again I was left alone in the night, never to know the joy of the change, never to feel the power of the animal shifting, never to know the comradely of the moonlit pack. Why did I have to be like this, why am I the only one that's different?

## Magnum Opus by J. Scott Rogers

*"It's an experience like no other experience I can describe, the best thing that can happen to a scientist, realizing that something that's happened in his or her mind exactly corresponds to something that happens in nature."*

*-Leo Kadanoff*

Victor leaned quietly back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap, watching the computer terminal proceed through its shutdown. He regarded the screen with tired eyes as it routinely closed files and logged him off the company's mainframe. It was the same shutdown procedure it had done countless times before, day after day, for more years than he could justly remember. He'd never paid much attention to it before, as it was hardly something that should warrant the interest or valuable time of a geneticist in his position.

The most insignificant events were attracting his notice today. The sound his laboratory's coffee machine made when it perked the morning's pot caused him to stand in place, watching it with an amused grin until the last drop fell into the decanter. Afterwards, he walked through one wing of his lab, pausing on the way to his office to watch one of the technicians scribbling in her laboratory notebook. Only when the unfortunate young woman started to fidget and glance nervously over her shoulder did he hasten back to his office. The various sounds of the laboratory, the hum of refrigerators, the whine of the centrifuges, all the sounds that had occupied his daily life for decades took on a refreshing melody, unique only to his ears.

Despite their insignificance, Dr. Livingston could easily justify these minor distractions today. It would be the last time he'd have the chance to witness these casual familiarities. They granted an enduring sense of identity to the place that had long ago come to be not just his home, but his entire life and his very existence.

Early in his career, Victor's science had forced him to make a difficult decision. She had made this decision necessary, but she also offered him a promise. If he would take her as his mate, his one true love, freely giving her all his motivation and passion, she would gift him with the success and renown in genetics and bioengineering that he deeply desired. He would rise to the pinnacle of his field and become a foundation in the research. He wouldn't be another lab-bench bound test tube jockey, rather, he'd rise to become a creator of life...

Victor had remained a faithful mate to his career, despite the sacrifices it cost him. He hardly acknowledged, much less cared how it affected the other realities in his life. The doctor's friends became expendable, filtering out of his life one by one with barely more than an indifferent shrug with each passing. Even his wife had surrendered to the complacency forced upon her, having washed down a handful of valium with a half a bottle of vodka.

The old doctor sighed and slid the keyboard back under the table. The office was silent amidst the stacks of moving boxes against the walls. The half empty shelves still showed dust free silhouettes where books, journals and other trappings of his office had rested – now just spectres haunting him with the inevitability of the day.

Most people would welcome the eve of their retirement, but to Dr. Livingston, retirement was a death. He had sacrificed everything substantial and meaningful in his life for the benefit of his career. Once that was taken away, there would be nothing left. He'd never considered this finality when he made his decision so long ago. Retirement would leave him a widower in an empty house.

The scientist leaned forward in his chair and removed his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes against the headache that threatened to blossom into another agonizing migraine. They had been more frequent over the last year. His physicians had recommended that he cut back on his workload, to ease back a bit from his responsibilities. He ignored them, of course, as there was no evidence of illness. Why should he slow down? Despite the headaches, he felt fine most of the time and was still doing productive work. Migraines he could deal with, but not being able to do his research was unfathomable! They might've as well asked him to retire!

Apparently his physicians weren't alone in sharing that notion. Over the last few months, he had gotten more than his share of friendly inquiries from senior management about how he was feeling. There were chance meetings in hallways and in the cafeteria where the topic of being promoted to some sort of cushy management position was mentioned. They offered him a vice presidency with a nebulous job description that took him out of the lab and gave him regular hours. These offers were dangled in front of his face like carrots to a carriage horse.

He had resisted such promotions many times in the past. He was doing what he wanted to do, working on projects that he enjoyed. Anything higher up the corporate ladder would be a one way ticket out of the laboratory. He knew that upper management wasn't exactly thrilled with his progress on the Mythics project and was looking for a comfortable way to take him away from it.

It was insulting how simple it had been for the Board of Directors to vote approval for his forced retirement. He had been with Imagenomics since being recruited fresh out of graduate school and into their Biorg Research Project. He climbed quickly in the Research division, and with time, finally became its Director. It was all he could ask for. He didn't want anything more.

Of course, that wasn't entirely true, he did want something more... much more. He wanted it so badly that it became the sole motivation behind his drive as a scientist. That's why he started the Mythics Research Project in the first place. Victor opened his eyes and glanced down at the statuette that still remained on his desk, in the same spot it had occupied for years. A wan

smile creased his wrinkled face. The small carving was a gift from a past associate that illuminated a hidden piece of the scientist's soul. It was a fascination that resided deep in Victor's heart all his life.

He reached out to the fine porcelain carving and traced his index finger over the sharp black beak, down its neck and over the mantled, blue-grey wings of the Kestrel gryphon. It was exquisitely painted in professional detail. An impressive and harmonious blend of a fast, agile raptor with powerful, leonine hindquarters, the creature was poised on a cliff's edge near its nest, its wings mantled in preparation for flight. It looked out from its vantage with its beak agape in an shrill cry and an expression that Victor always interpreted as being excited and eager. He was in love with this creature.

The purpose of the Mythics Project was simply to bring this magnificent creature from mythology into reality. Humanity had already created the Biorgs. The seed for their creation was derived from ordinary Terran fauna— their genomes engineered so developing embryonic cells would receive the proper molecular switches to develop in novel ways, creating sentient animal-human hybrids. What was stopping them from creating creatures of their own imaginations? The genetic baselines existed, the technology would improve with research, and it was a plausible endeavor!

Twenty years ago it had been easy to sell his proposal to the Research Advisory Committee and the Board of Directors, they snapped at it like a trout towards a fly. Victor's exuberance and dedication, backed by his formidable knowledge, track record and oration skills cleared most of the initial hurdles and green-lighted the project quickly. The funding for this project had been staggering... twenty years ago.

Victor's fingertip had gone to the gryphon's sickle-shaped wings. She was so beautiful. For a countless time, his imagination went to the skies, and the vision of his gryphon soaring through it. Her wings cut swiftly through the air as the lithe body folded and twisted acrobatically with its graceful aerial dance. She released an echoing, piercing cry that sang to his ears. Victor could see himself from a distance, earthbound, reaching into the sky towards his magnificent creation, beckoning her to come. She pirouetted mid-air towards her master, landing with a gentle rush of wings that fold quickly against her back. She padded directly towards his outstretched hand, resting her head against it. The gryphon closed her eyes and the corners of her beak curled into a pleased smile as he stroked her face...

"Dr. Livingston?" The voice intruded sharply on his thoughts, banishing the pleasant fantasies back to the limits of his consciousness. He looked up quickly and scowled at the doorway to his office and saw a whiskery snout protruding past the crack of the door. He realized quickly it was Jordan, his lab's senior technician. The rat blinked at the scientist's glare and recoiled slightly. "Are you busy?" he said softly, retreating into the lab.

Victor realized he was scowling and immediately softened it. Jordan was one of the few members of the lab that he could talk to. More accurately,



the Biorg was one of the few members of his lab that had a genuine ability to listen. He was intuitive and intelligent, and Victor had warmed to him quickly over the years, casually taking the young scientist under his wing. Jordan was observant, and understood his supervisor well enough to know when it was a good time to talk, and when it was more prudent to hold his tongue.

"No, no, Jordan, please, come on in." He noticed that his right arm was stretched high over his desk, still caressing the fantasy gryphon. He pulled his arm back and waved the Biorg in. His migraine was starting to pound, a searing spot of light in his right vision. "I was just getting my personal belongings into order before going home."

The rat glanced at the scientist's hand and hesitated a moment before entering the office, as if he were stepping onto holy ground. He quietly shut the door behind him and folded his hands in front of him, his tail hanging limply by his feet. He glanced down at the floor for a moment, his whiskers motionless before glancing back up to meet Victor's eyes.

"Why were you crying?" he asked gently.

Victor stared at the rat a moment, then brought his hand to his cheek. His fingers came back moist, catching the stream of tears that were falling into his beard. His face reddened and he found himself unable to keep the rat's gaze. "I... I don't know." he finally stammered and glanced back at the gryphon statuette. "Did anyone else hear me?"

The rat licked his lips and walked slowly towards the double chairs in front of Livingston's desk. He leaned against the edge of Victor's desk and looked down at the gryphon statuette. He smiled, his whiskers starting to quiver. "No, I don't think so. I only heard you because I was walking by to head out for dinner. Most everyone else is out for dinner as well. It's almost six o'clock." Jordan said. "Though, I was going to stop by and say goodbye, and see how you were doing."

Victor removed his glasses and wiped his face with the palm of his hand, removing the remaining tears. He looked up at Jordan with a smirk. "I just got a bit emotional, is all. It's not easy for me to just walk away from everything like this, and not under my terms. Not with so much left to do." He smiled sardonically and waved his arm. "Not with so much I want to do..."

The rat nodded and his smile broadened, feeling more comfortable. "I'm sure, doc. Can't say I blame you for feeling that way." He glanced at the gryphon again. "Too bad she never flew." He reached over and lightly tapped the statuette with a claw tip. "You put a lot of love into this project. It was an inspiration to see you so passionate about it. There's not many in this profession that can still profess that much love for their work." He withdrew his hand and looked back at the human. "I'm sorry the boys upstairs didn't share that with you."

Victor inhaled, leaned back in his chair, and exhaled softly. "It was a financial decision on their part, Jordan, not a personal one. In retrospect, I guess it was the correct one as well. They gave me my shot, much more of

one that I rightfully deserved.” He swallowed and massaged his forehead with his fingertips, his migraine was getting worse. “The Mythic Project was nothing more than a billion dollar, twenty year failure waiting to happen.” He dropped his arm back to his desk. “Even with our most sincere efforts, Nature just isn’t always eager to give us her secrets, no matter how much we coax her into doing such. The Mythics were just doomed to remain one of those secrets.”

The scientist looked back at Jordan. It was a conversation they had shared many times in the past. The expectant expression on the rat’s face compelled him to leave his student – his friend – with something more. Jordan deserved at least a taste of the wisdom he had gained over the years.

“Love and passion aren’t enough.” Victor frowned and tapped his finger on his desk to emphasize his point. “Nature is always the Master, we are always the student. I forgot that, and over the last twenty years, she has painfully reminded me of this. We cannot wrest what we want from her, rather, we have to patiently pursue it through our discipline, and learn when to accept our failures with dignity and grace.”

The scientist paused for a brief moment, looking past Jordan’s face. “Even when it is thrown upon us by a significantly lesser force than Nature...”

Victor pushed away from his desk, took his cane and slowly stood with a wince. He was getting dizzy from the headache and needed some fresh air. A walk through the orange grove would be perfect right now. The blossoms were out and the air was sweet with their scent. His words had felt hollow, cold and meaningless. He didn’t believe them, but it was the appropriate thing to say. He restrained himself from voicing his true feelings. Venting bitterness about the company and whining about his personal disappointment would’ve sounded selfish, if not completely childish. At least he could leave Jordan with a measure of dignity, rather than a lasting impression of a defeated old man with his dreams dashed to splinters on the rocks.

“I’m going to take a short walk before taking the rest of my belongings, Jordan. I’ll be back in an hour,” he said stiffly, then walked towards his office door with the briefest glance towards the statuette.

Jordan watched him quietly. “What’s her name?” he asked suddenly.

The old scientist paused with his hand on the doorknob. He was stunned by the question. Jordan had seen right past the doctor’s words and exposed their mendacity with the precision of a surgeon’s knife. Victor looked back. “She doesn’t have one.” he said with a whisper. “I was going to name her the day I saw her real eyes looking back at me.” He surprised himself by forcing back a light sob, catching a fresh tear from the corner of his eye with his thumb. This was hardly the swan song he’d intended.

“She was to be my magnum opus, Jordan, my life’s greatest accomplishment. That’s something which is impossible to name until you witness it come to fruition. It must pass beyond the boundaries of your dreams and imagination until it comes into being.” He cleared the emotion

back in his throat and straightened up, smiling with a forced change in attitude.

"I don't expect you to understand. It's difficult for one as young as you to seize the importance of what I'm saying. Let's just say, she was my greatest dream, and my greatest failure..."

Jordan nodded, feeling for the doctor's discomfiture. He walked over to the old man with a compassionate smile and stood in front of him. "I'm sorry, Victor," he said evenly. "I can't honestly say I fully understand, not as much as you do, but I can understand why you feel that way." He extended his hand to the scientist. "It has been an honor, and a pleasure working for you."

Victor took the Biorg's hand and returned the gesture. "Thank you, and I feel likewise to know your company, Jordan." He turned to leave.

Jordan followed Victor out of his office and towards the laboratory's door. The intense disappointment radiating from the old scientist made him want to say something to comfort his mentor.

"Doc, she's not a failure. You did bring her to life, in a way. Your passion for this project made her real in the imaginations of everyone that worked on it."

Victor walked down the hallway without responding.



The late afternoon was pleasantly warm and the walk through the aromatic orange grove uplifted Victor's spirits. The sun was starting to set low on the western horizon, casting shadows from the trees across the cement pathway. The orange grove had always been the scientist's favorite retreat. It was a peaceful place that allowed him to think, undisturbed by the lab, telephones or questions. Except for the infrequent jogger that trotted by, or a wayward crow that cawed noisily from the top of a tree, the scientist was usually alone.

He approached the old, wrought iron bench that rested in the center of the grove and slowly sat down, folding his hands on top of the cane. He took a deep breath, inhaling the refreshing scent of orange blossoms that came every spring from the old trees. The air was filled with the soft buzz of honeybees and the rustle of leaves in the gentle afternoon breeze.

He had taken afternoon walks here for many years, watching the trees grow and age with him. They, at least, seemed to retain a significant purpose in their life. They also appeared to weather the years better than he did, and they would certainly do so for many more after he was gone. A final afternoon of rest in the grove seemed an appropriate epitaph to his career. He closed his eyes and let the pleasant sensations bid him goodbye.

There was a sudden rustling of tree branches somewhere down the path. Victor frowned at the disturbance to his tranquility, but kept his eyes closed. Probably a jogger taking a short cut through the grove. He waited for the sound of running shoes and breathless panting to come up the pathway, pass right by, and leave him in peace.

Instead of the soft pad of sneakers, a clacking sound like cleats on the cement path approached the bench. Victor exhaled through his nose and set his jaw, his impatience rising. The clacking noise stopped directly in front of him. Victor could feel a presence waiting before him. Obviously someone felt the need to talk to him.

The scientist opened his eyes and immediately felt his stomach turn to ice, catching the breath in his throat. Every muscle in his body froze. The head of a gigantic hawk stared back at him with large, unblinking clear brown eyes. Its black beak was sharp and its end was hooked like a scythe. Its wickedly curved, black talons rested on the edge of the path, a mere foot from his legs.

Victor was petrified. His legs wouldn't budge, and his hands just sat quivering on top of his cane. Everything else around him ceased to be, it was just him and this creature.

The monster stared at Victor, its head slightly cocked, as motionless as the old man for few moments before it suddenly lowered its head and shoulders, foreclaws stretching out in front. Its leonine rump remained standing, a fledged, spaded tail flicked out high behind it. The creature's wings spread, displaying an impressive wingspan of bluish wings with a mottled striping. Its beak separated into a ...smile?

"Father! It's finally you! It's about time you showed up, I was worried you'd never come!" the creature squawked merrily in a surprisingly pleasant voice. It held its pose, eerily resembling that of a ludicrously gigantic puppy wanting its master to play a game of catch.

Sharp, delta shaped tufts of feathers perked erect on top of the hawk's head as it looked at him. One of them craned independently of the other as the creature stared at him, awaiting a response. The scientist's paralyzation slowly faded as the realization of what he was looking at filtered through his mind. His jaw fell open as he stared down at the gryphon. "Oh... oh my God..." he stuttered in an awed whisper.

The gryphon cocked its head again and took on an expression of concern. It almost looked disappointed.

"Father? You don't know me?" it asked softly, then recognized the lingering terror in the man's face. Its ear tufts flattened on its skull. "I'm... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." the gryphon said, sitting up immediately on its haunches and bowing its head towards the doctor in a submissive display. "I was so excited to finally see you that I lost control of myself. I am such a fledgling... please forgive me." The gryphon's sickle shaped wings folded tightly against its back.

Victor blinked, refusing to believe his eyes or his ears. It was impossible! Gryphons didn't exist! Yet, there was one, bowing before him like an admonished child, begging his forgiveness. His eyes quickly took in the rest of the creature's body. It was that of a female kestrel, just like... no, identical to the statuette on his desk.

Victor gasped, his hands gripping the top of his cane until his knuckles turned white. He stared at the gryphon, slowly shaking his head. "You're...

you're my statuette. The one on my desk. Where did you come from?" A smile grew on his face. Despite his disbelief and fading terror, the hallucination was something he wanted to believe.

The gryphon raised her head and looked Victor in the face, her expression changed quickly from one of supplication to one of joy. "You made a statue of me? That's very sweet of you!" she said, apparently ignoring his question. She made a pleased, purring noise and inched forward on her talons, stretching her head towards the human, seemingly to beg his touch.

The old man slowly extended his hand and touched his fingertips to the gryphon's smooth beak. He pressed his hand to the creature's cheek and dug his fingertips into the feathers. They felt exactly as they had in his daydreams. The gryphon closed her eyes, relaxed her ear tufts and pressed the side of her head against his hand, the purring increasing in volume as the old man stroked her head.

Victor's vision quickly blurred with tears. With a soft moan, he dropped his cane and eagerly brought his other hand to the gryphon's head, feeling the magnificent creature. She made soft, clicking noises of pleasure as he massaged his fingers through her neck feathers. The sheer strength and raw power Victor felt as she playfully pressed against his hands willingly broke down his last reservations of disbelief.

The scientist started to cry, wracking his body with sobs of joy. For some inexplicable reason, the manifestation of his lifelong dream had come to a reality this afternoon in the orange groves. He was too old, and too tired to question the source any longer. He wished it to be true for so long, and now it was. If this gryphon was merely a migraine induced hallucination, or two decades of failure snapping the remaining objectivism from his mind, it mattered not in the least. He would accept this. He was due this one, simple joy. Right now, he was just an old man witnessing his greatest dream.

The gryphon leaned closer and put a talon around Victor's back, gently hugging him against the soft feathers of her chest. "I know you're filled with questions," she said softly, leaning back and raising the back of one of her claws to catch a tear on his cheek. "Now isn't the time, but everything will be known to you later, after we get home."

She swiftly backed up on the path and lowered herself to her belly, folding her wings tightly against her back. She smiled at Victor. There was a prideful look on her avian face, holding her beak high.

"I was sent to take you home, father. Climb on my back and I'll fly you there."

Victor wiped his tears with a hanky then smiled at the gryphon, staying seated on the bench. He wondered what 'home' was to this gryphon, but the opportunity to fly pushed those thoughts out of his head. Suddenly, visions of him clinging for dear life to the back of her as she soared through the sky brought an unexpected pang of fear to his heart. The scientist was much too old for such a physical effort. His arthritis and migraines would exclude him from the feat.

He cleared his throat from the residual emotion. "My dear, I'm sorry to say that I'm entirely much too old to be flying with you, I..."

Victor paused mid-sentence, realizing that his migraine was completely gone. The searing motes of light that blinded him during the headaches had vanished, and his vision was clear. Not a trace of the pain was left. He touched his forehead in astonishment. As he lifted his arm, he noticed that the dull stiffness in his joints was gone, too. His fingers were as flexible as they had been forty years ago.

The gryphon grinned at the old man as he stared wide eyed at his hands. "...you were saying?" she said teasingly, her tail flicking behind her patiently. "I think you should be feeling quite fine about now!" The gryphon winked at him knowingly.

Victor slowly stood, leaving his cane where it lay on the ground and took several steps towards the gryphon, her expression of happiness encouraging him on. He paused and examined his hands again while shaking his head.

"Father, please come with me," she implored. "I've come so far to finally meet you. I've been waiting a long time to have you on my back, to share the joy of flying with you. I've always wanted you to be proud of me, and now is our chance to know each other." She watched him expectantly, ear tufts perked.

He looked up into the gryphon's face and nodded once. He flanked the gryphon and lay his hands on her back, feeling her musculature as he slowly swung his leg over and mounted her. He gripped the large feathers on the back of her neck and found them a satisfying hold.

"Yes... there's much I want to know about you as well," Victor said with a grin of anticipation, a surge of elation warming his heart, "...my daughter." He felt like laughing out loud. For the first time in many years, he was genuinely happy. He didn't care where the gryphon was taking him, it didn't matter anymore. Victor somehow knew he was going somewhere, and that gave him the feeling he hadn't lost everything.

The gryphon looked over her shoulder and smiled back at her passenger, the ends of her beak curling with the gesture. She stood up and spread her wings, but paused.

"Father? What's my name?"

The old scientist had almost anticipated this question. It seemed somehow necessary before their journey commenced. She was his creation, either real or imagined, and only he could name her. He thought about his feelings. Joy. Elation. Pleasure... even the nagging scientific stoicism that kept disturbing him with reminders that this was all still impossible.

Victor suddenly laughed. He had thought that when this day happened, giving a name to his magnum opus would be easy. Yet, here he sat without a single idea how to even approach the question. How would he give her a name?

Victor leaned forward slightly on her back and stroked the feathers of her neck. "My dear, let me be satisfied calling you 'Daughter' for now. I'm... I'm just not good with names."

The gryphon blinked, clacked her beak and nodded her acceptance quickly before turning her head towards the sky and stroking her wings, lifting herself and her father high into the sky.



Jordan sat down on the old iron bench and opened the tiny cooler that held his lunch, setting it on the bench beside him. The sun was bright today, despite the growing chill of Autumn in the air. He squinted at the fruit laden trees around him and smiled. Ever since he'd started taking his lunches on this bench, he'd understood why Dr. Livingston had enjoyed coming out here nearly every day.

The place was always quiet and serene, a retreat from the busy and driven environment of the lab. It was always refreshing. He regretted not joining his old mentor before on his walks, before he was gone.

They said he died from a massive stroke, but Jordan couldn't buy that. He had been sitting on the bench, not something a stroke victim would be able to do. He looked too tranquil, too relaxed, almost as if he had just drifted peacefully to sleep. He had never heard of anyone suffering such a severe stroke with that little agitation.

Jordan could also swear that he'd found Victor with a smile on his face.

The rat sighed and shook his head. He had wondered if his daily visits to the orange grove were a token of reverence to his old friend and mentor, or some method to help him understand that peculiar smile he had died with. It didn't really matter, he enjoyed coming here, and if that served as his personal tribute for Dr. Livingston, then so much the better.

The Biorg stood and stretched. He walked to one of the trees and spied an orange that would make a nice snack. He gripped the fruit and twisted, and to his surprise, a gigantic feather fell out of the tree and landed against his wrist.

He gripped its shaft and inspected it. It appeared to be some sort of hawk's feather, a primary, though it was unusually large, huge as a matter of fact! It was longer than his arm and as wide as his closed fist. He wondered what kind of hawk would grow to this size, or even if it was a hawk at all. Jordan glanced up at the sky and wondered if such a hawk could conceivably have an appetite for rat Biorg.

As he stared into the sky, the rat's thoughts turned unexpectedly to Dr. Livingston's gryphon statuette. His whiskers started to quiver in amusement. The rat tickled his nose with the end of the feather as a grin spread across his muzzle.

What an amusing fantasy!

He tossed the feather aside with a snicker, watching it flutter and land on the bench seat.

For a moment, Jordan looked at it quietly as it rested on the bench. On an impulse, he bent over and picked it up again, twirled it between his fingers, and carefully secured it into his jacket's vest pocket. The gigantic feather had reminded him of Dr. Livingston, and that in itself made it worth the effort to save it.

It would, at least, make for an interesting side project.



## The Journey by Lanny Fields

*1299 A.D., Genoa, Liguria (Italy)*

"No, no, no. That's not how you begin a story." Rustichello the fox threw up his paws. "Muses, I beg you, please help my friend to see the error of his ways!" he sobbed theatrically.

"And how would you begin the story?"

Rustichello smiled, expecting just such a response, and turned to the older human who was sharing the cell with him. "Something more grand than what you propose! For example, 'Emperors and kings, dukes and marquises, counts, knights and townsfolk, and all people who wish to know the various races of men and the peculiarities of the various regions of the world....'"

"Forgive me, master fox. Being captured and imprisoned by the Genoese navy brings back some unpleasant memories. It has caused me to lose my appreciation for the invocation of every title in the world before a story truly begins. Besides, at my age, I would forget the story before it is ever told!"

Rustichello pouted. "You're not that old, my good captain. And you have to do that sort of thing before telling a story, so that everyone from on high to the lowest peasant will be interested in what you have to say. I'm a writer, I should know!" He puffed out his furry chest. "Besides, the ancient Greeks did that, too, you know."

The human chuckled and sat on the floor. The cell was tiny and smelled of relievings, but it was surprisingly clean. "I have no doubt that they did. All I am saying is that I don't have quite the flair for words that you do."

"Of course you don't. That's why I'm helping you write your story. Would you not rather have the cot? I don't mind the floor; at least I have fur to pad my behind with." He winked.

"I'll be fine where I am. You can sit up there, my friend."

"Grazie. That's why I like you – you give me the same respect that you give your fellow humans. A rare thing, in our time." The fox patted his shoulder before padding over to the cot. "Anyway, yours is a fascinating tale, full of exotic peoples, dangers and riches that no one in this part of the world has ever heard of! All I want is something of equal scale to begin the story, so that the readers are interested before they realize that they're interested."

"I suppose that's a fair request. As long as my story is told...."

"...you can forgive a poor writer for a little embellishment." The fox grinned and leaned back. "Now, then, forget the preface and continue with your story. I think you were going to tell me of the fabled beauties of...what did you call it? Xanadu?"

The man laughed. "Shangdu. That comes much later, master Rustichello. In the beginning, my father, my uncle and I had departed from Jerusalem, bearing oil from the Holy Sepulcher, as had been requested by the great Khan. Shortly after that, the friars who had accompanied us fled

the way we had come. The sultan of Babylonia had decided to invade, you see.”

“Ah! Were you attacked, then?” The fox’s eyes gleamed cool aqua blue.

“Not really. The fighting was much further away. But the friars feared for their safety.”

The fox tsked and yawned. “How boring.” He leaned back and shut his eyes. “Clergymen that run away won’t hold the interest of a gnat, much less a king.” He waved his paw. “Go on, then. Find something else of great importance to captivate your audience from the beginning.”

The man thought for several moments, directing his focus along the flowing images that comprised the river of his life. He navigated those waters, searching and prodding at mental flotsam until finally, a smile formed on his lips. A faraway look entered his eyes and when he spoke, it was as though he were in a trance, speaking directly from the past.

“It was in another prison that I, Marco Polo, first met Nahru...”



*1271 AD, Ayas, Qonya Province, Anatolia (Turkey)*

“No, you can’t do this to me!” Marco yelled at the swarthy man who was marching him toward the wailing mass of stinking, dirty arms poking from various cells. He tried tugging his arm away, but the man’s grip was tight and unbreakable. “Let go of me, you filthy barbarian! Let go of me or my father and uncle will see that you’re hanged!” The reply was something in Arabic, followed by an ugly laugh. Marco was hauled over to an empty cell with the door wide open and roughly tossed inside. He slammed against the stone wall on the far side and slid to the floor, fighting to keep conscious. He shook his head several times to clear it, and when he did, he saw that the door was closed and the jailer had departed.

Savages! Marco thought angrily. How dare they lock me in here, like some criminal? He studied the interior of his cell. No windows or openings of any kind could be seen except for the barred square hole in the thick door where light entered – it was very dark, otherwise. A pile of straw for sleeping mirrored the crude nature of his captors. Perhaps the most important thing was that no one else was in the cell with him. He wouldn’t have to worry about watching his back while he slept.

What am I thinking? I need to get out of here, now! He hobbled to the door awkwardly – his leg was throbbing from being thrown against the wall – and stopped. If they weren’t going to let me go when I asked them before, why would they listen now? He returned back to the bundle of straw and sat with his head in his hands. He was in so much trouble that he wasn’t sure whether it was better to go free or remain imprisoned.

It had all started shortly after breaking the night’s fast, when he had discovered the friars trying to sneak away. His father, Niccolò, and his uncle, Maffeo, had left early before the heat of the day set in to find provisions for the long journey. The friars decided to use the elder Polos’ absence to quietly begin their journey home. Marco confronted them and

tried to persuade them to remain, but they wouldn't listen. The sultan's forces, they explained, were coming uncomfortably close to their location and it was well-known what 'those foreign devils' would do to good, Christian men if they were caught – like he was now, in fact. They praised him for being such a brave young lad and left in his care their satchel containing the sacred oil from Jerusalem and their papal orders before galloping away to the south. He had run after them even though he knew it would have been impossible to catch them. Two guardsmen from the city watch had seen him running, though, and stopped him from further pursuit. They had confiscated the satchel and had hauled him away as a thief despite his protests.

What am I going to do? Marco rubbed his temples. This journey had been a mistake from the very beginning – he had said as much to his father and had been chastised harshly in return. In Venezia, he could at least have gotten by with his wits and his knowledge of the city, as he had for years before his father's and uncle's return from their first trip to the Orient. They had decided that he would go with them on the return trip to the Great Khan – he was nearly a man, after all, and had to learn the family business. They hadn't asked him, they had told him what they knew to be in his best interest, and thus he was dragged from familiar surroundings to go with them on a journey across the world.

It had started innocently enough. From Venice, the trio had gone south to Acre and then on to Jerusalem, where they had acquired the holy oil per the Great Khan's request. From there, they had traveled to Laiassus, which was a port city like Venezia, then to Armenia, where their impetus had stagnated. Finally, the newly elected pope had recalled them back to Acre, where the priests had joined them. The group then retraced their route and finally reached Qonya. They had been lagging here for a week, trying without success to obtain the necessary provisions for their long journey ahead.

Every place they'd been seemed to be populated by heathens and savages who didn't behave in a Christian-like manner. Marco had felt distinctly uncomfortable among these strangers whereas 'The Brothers Polo' seemed right at home, which upset him even more. They knew how to deal with these dark-skinned brutes...liars, robbers and murderers, the priests had called them. Marco felt that he would be very lucky, indeed, if he were to return home alive.

Especially now that he was alone, cut off from his father and uncle. Who could he trust, other than himself? Certainly not the guards – they had thrown him in here without believing his explanation. A sudden burst of anger overtook him and he beat his fist on the stone wall. He would be lucky if his father and uncle were able to find him, let alone free him. For all they knew, he had fled with the priests to safety and he didn't doubt that the guards would lie to them if they inquired after him.

Which meant that he had to get out of here somehow. But how?

He leaned his head back against the stone wall to formulate his plan, but sleep overtook him before he could think much further.



When Marco opened his eyes seconds or days later, it was because of outside voices talking in that coarse language he had come to loathe. He got up, ignoring his stiff muscles screaming at him to sit down, and stumbled to the door. He squinted at the sudden brightness of the exterior room, then his eyes widened at what was transpiring in the outer room.

A man wearing a small swatch of cloth around his groin was being held up by two burly guards, one on either side. Two men were slowly walking around him, speaking quietly and occasionally pointing. One of the walkers appeared to be the same man who threw him into his cell. Marco guessed that he must be the captain of the guard. The other was dressed similar to the merchants that Marco had seen his father trade with. They completed their circuit and continued to speak in low tones, with the captain finally nodding.

The merchant smiled, reached into his tunic and handed the captain a small jingling sack.

Marco slid to the floor and heard marching feet fade into silence. I must get out of here, he thought desperately. It was bad enough to be locked up, but to be sold as a slave....

He had to get out.

"Please, God, help me." His prayer sounded like speech from a croaking frog.

"I will help you," a soft voice said.

Marco started and looked around the cell. No one was with him and he imagined that God would not have spoken directly to him. It was more likely that he was starting to go mad.

Then a thought occurred to him. Could someone be outside? He gathered his strength and tried to stand, but his leg refused to obey, so he clawed at the door.

"Please help me," he begged.

Silence.

Marco put all of his effort into a single burst of energy, shoving with his good leg and his hands and propping himself against the door. It seemed to take forever, but he finally was able to stand again and he grabbed the bars to keep himself upright.

"Please," he said again and stopped. His blood turned cold upon seeing that the face on the other side of the door, his potential benefactor, was that of a tiger.

Those green eyes caught his gaze and even though his knees felt weak, they bored into him and refused to let him fall. A sudden chill flowed through his body and he felt something inside him yield, allowing himself to be exposed to the intense scrutiny. His memories, his thoughts, his identity

– his entire being – was left naked for the tiger’s comprehension. He felt as though he were drowning without being wet and he shivered.

A slight warmth tickled the back of his mind, like a candle-flame. He tried to focus on it, rather than on the frontal assault, and it suddenly became as the desert sun, hot and scorching. Visions ran unbidden, commingling with his own thoughts...

...a family of tigers in the jungle, the youngsters cooling off by playing happily in the river, Nahru among them...

...Young Marco running along the docks in Venezia on a damp, foggy morning, exploring stacks upon stacks of crates and barrels...

...Humans with whips, machetes and stones, attacking Nahru as a young adult, driving him away as an outsider to the faith and to humanity, blood streaming from his nose and from several cuts on his arms and legs...

...Marco as a man, riding on horseback across the windswept plains where he had lived for over a decade, in the service of the great Khan, carrying precious gifts from a sultan to the west...

...Nahru, heading west through the desert, hired as a bodyguard for a caravan, yet not fully trusted by the people he was guarding...

...Marco, still older, captured at sea and thrown into a cell, where he meets a talkative young fox...

...Nahru, receiving a vision of a human youth while meditating in the mountains, and hearing a name whispered to him: Marco Polo...

...Marco, younger again, hallucinating from a fever somewhere in the mountains, feverishly hot under animal skins even though a blizzard rages outside the straw hut...

...Nahru closing his eyes for the final time, at peace, smiling as he lets the cool darkness slip over him like a gentle wave...

...Marco and Nahru, in a room with intricately decorated tiles and patterned mosaics, with a crystal fountain in the center which burbles with clear, pure water...

...until it became nearly impossible to separate which were his own and which were not his own.

“I...know you,” Marco said weakly.

Nahru put his paw over Marco’s hand and smiled. “As I know you, my friend. I will help you.” With that, he turned and padded away.

All Marco could do was watch him retreat down the corridor, his gaze following the dark-robed figure closely. He was still trying to comprehend everything that had happened, everything that he had seen whirling in his thoughts, with the tiger was somehow at the center of it all. Nothing seemed to make the least bit of sense, so he sat and closed his eyes, letting his mind try to calm down on its own.

After a long while, his head finally felt clearer, even though the images remained a blurry jumble to yet be sorted out. He heard the returning tiger call out to him, which seemed strangely familiar and somehow reassuring.

Was it due to all those strange images? Marco shuddered and wildly wondered if he was going to be released only to be eaten for supper. Still, he hauled himself upright and peered through the narrow opening.

The man pulled out a set of keys, but stopped short of opening the door. He turned and uttered something in that foul language to the tiger, gesticulating viciously. Nahru frowned and replied in the same language, but the tiger's speech sounded mellifluous in contrast to the man's. Marco noticed that the tiger kept his paws at his sides.

The captain muttered and finally unlocked the door. Marco stumbled forward, but Nahru caught him by the arm just as he started to fall over. "Careful," he murmured.

"I don't require assistance." Marco straightened up and made a show of dusting himself off while fighting off vertigo.

"As I said, I am here to help, young master Polo." The tiger bowed and for the first time, Marco got a good look at his benefactor. Nahru was a head taller and was striped in the familiar orange and black pattern that he recalled seeing in books. He wore a simple dark robe, no doubt with a slit for his tail, and had sandals on his feet. He was fairly slender for his height, with an equally thin tail twitching behind him. Nahru also had a bag slung over his shoulder and Marco felt a pang of guilt over the satchel he had lost.

"You are free to come with me, if that is your wish, or you may go your own way." The tiger stared at him intently. "Is there anything you need to gather before you leave?"

Marco hesitated. The tiger had helped him when he most needed it, but how could he trust him? For all Marco knew, this was a ruse to find out how important that satchel really was. After all, Nahru had managed to convince the captain of the guard to let him out. Perhaps the two of them were trying to trick him, somehow. It was better to let them keep guessing.

"No, nothing else. I am ready." He nodded and started walking down the corridor.

"Very well, then," Nahru said and kept pace beside Marco. "What was in that satchel?" he asked quietly.

"Why do you ask?"

"The guards said you had taken it and were running away. That is why they imprisoned you."

Marco stopped. "I didn't steal it!" he shouted. "It was...." He caught himself. "It was just something I found."

"So it was not yours, master Polo?"

"No." Strictly speaking, that was not a lie – it had belonged to the priests. Still, Marco felt uncomfortable at the deception. "And please, call me Marco. You are called...Nahru?" The tiger nodded. "That's an interesting name. What does that mean?"

"You already know the answer."

Marco thought for a moment. "Spirit of the river. But how did I know that?" His brow furrowed. "How do I know so much about you? And you, of me?"

Nahru looked around and then motioned forward. "Let us leave this place. Are you able to walk?" Marco nodded and followed in the tiger's wake. Exiting the building, he took a deep breath of clean air, exhaling at the twinkling stars overhead. His immediate surroundings were of earthen buildings and street below was cobblestone. They turned left and walked past a larger building covered in decorative tile, with a minaret gleaming in the moonlight.

Nahru stopped for a moment and spun about gently, smiling up into the night sky. "A beautiful night to appreciate one's freedom," he said and stopped, facing the gaping human. "Come, walk with me." He led an unhurried pace that allowed Marco to match his stride.

"To answer your question, young Marco, there is such a thing called 'The Glance,'" Nahru began. "It is a rare occurrence, of the highest order, between kindred spirits. The attraction of likeness is so strong that a person sees their own self within the other until they know the other as they know their own self."

Marco scratched his head. "I don't quite understand. But how did you find me in the first place?"

"It was Allah himself who told me."

"How...unusual." Marco remembered seeing that amongst the flood of images and he had a pretty good idea of how important God – Allah – was to Nahru. "You must be some sort of holy person, then."

The tiger smiled. "I would not say that. But I do know Allah."

Marco's disbelief was growing by the second. "How?"

"He is in everyone and everything." Nahru swept his arms along the horizon. "All that we see, all that we experience is divine."

That made no sense to Marco, so he said no more. He followed Nahru's winding path with some amount of faith, for he did not remember the exact route he had taken to the prison. The streets of Qonya were mostly deserted at this late hour, save for the occasional individual hurrying by. Although it was slightly cooler, Marco was still sweating, and he wondered how Nahru could stand it, dressed in his dark robe, with his coat of fur and carrying his bag, not to mention the smell of dumped garbage and relievings.

Another couple of minutes passed and still nothing looked familiar. "Are you sure you know where you're going?" Marco asked as he awkwardly leaped over a large pile of animal droppings. His legs protested and nearly gave out like they had in the prison.

"I do, indeed," Nahru replied. He turned sharply and passed through a narrow opening between two buildings. Marco gagged at the awful stench of musk in close quarters and high heat. This was obviously an area where more of Nahru's kind lived. Marco had seen other half-animal, half-human creatures about – cats, dogs, foxes, rodents – and Nahru was the most exotic by far. Marco usually avoided them, like many other humans did, and the nonhumans generally kept to themselves as well. Everyone preferred to deal with his own kind, it seemed.

“What is wrong?” he heard Nahru’s voice call out.

“I can’t see,” Marco called back. At least it was partially true.

“Of course. I forget that sometimes with my human friends.” Nahru came back and took Marco’s hand in his paw, which was very warm. “Let’s go,” he said while tugging the human along. The tiger led the way through a maze of back alleys, nooks and crannies until Marco was thoroughly turned around and still struggling to quell his churning stomach.

“Here we are,” Nahru said and stopped at a door that appeared to be part of the wall. His tail flicked as he knocked and stepped back, singing softly in a high voice.

The door opened, spilling light across the slender corridor. A young adult female mouse dressed in a makeshift tunic shuffled forward and peered timidly at the tiger. Marco could see a cluster of younger mice hugging her legs – no doubt the reason why she moved slowly. She cringed upon seeing the human, but Nahru shushed and placated her with upraised paws.

“He is a friend,” said the tiger and rummaged through his bag. “This is for you, goodwife.” He held out a loaf of bread and several large dates, which she accepted with a curt nod and shut the door without uttering a word of thanks.

Marco was silent. Perhaps there was more to this creature than what he could see, or had hastily judged.

“I saw her earlier this evening outside this ghetto,” Nahru was saying. “She was in need of the food and I was not.” He took the human’s hand again and resumed his pace.

“But you could have kept it for yourself, for later.”

“I do not require much to eat, unlike others of my kind.”

“But still, that cost you some money.”

“It did not, for I carry no money,” the tiger chuckled. “It was given to me by a merchant. He was grateful that I had helped settle a dispute with a buyer. As for your next question, young Marco, I helped because I was able to.”

“How did you know I was going to ask that?”

“You already asked. I merely replied before you could speak the question.”

Marco shook his head. There was absolutely no way Nahru could have predicted what he was going to say. Or could he? “What’s the answer to my next question, then?”

The tiger pointed with his free paw. “There, up ahead.” Marco took five more steps and saw that the alley opened up into a larger area, much like the piazzas back home. Other alleys intersected with this place, and he saw several more felines and rodents strolling about. Some were conversing at corners while others had small carts that displayed crafts and food for sale. Many of them stared at Marco as he and Nahru crossed the piazza. He was very aware that he was the only human present.



"You are safe with me," the tiger whispered. "In fact, you would be safe if I were not here."

"I doubt that."

"You only see your own fear reflected back at you." Marco felt that there was something important in that statement, but the tenuous thought dissolved before it had fully blossomed. He shoved his annoyance aside and peered at the large, earthen building that he was being led to.

"Is that a caravan-sarai?" The tiger nodded. "My father and uncle are staying at one just like it. The people there were nice to us," he admitted and looked up. Two felines peered down at them from the roof.

"You see?" The tiger smiled, flaring his whiskers. He noticed Marco staring at the Arabic script on the sign above the door. "This place is called Dar Es Salaam. I believe you would translate it as 'Doorway to Peace.'"

"It sounds nice."

Narhu nodded as they stepped inside. As Marco had guessed, it looked similar to the establishment where his father and uncle were. Of course, there were only humans there, while this place had a mix of both.

"Very few places are hospitable to me because of my appearance. Our faith says to support our brethren, but there are those who believe that animals should not be counted."

"I'm surprised that there are so many of your kind here, Nahru."

"Qonya is remarkably tolerant. I believe it is because they are a major trading center between east and west, and in order to accommodate as many merchants as possible, they must be more open-minded."

The immediate interior was a large room with cushions and low tables. A thick haze hung in the air, pungent and spicy.

"A long evening, Nahru?" Marco heard the bass rumble from somewhere to his right and he turned to see a very fat human man stroking his beard and staring intently. Plates with half-eaten food were on the table in front of him. "And who is your friend?"

"This is Marco Polo." Marco nodded, not sure what else to do.

"It is unusual to see another human here, especially in the company of one such as Nahru. As long as you remain at peace, you are welcome to stay under my roof," the man said with a nod and went back to eating.

"Thank you," Marco said politely and followed the tiger to some cushions on the other side of the room. He sank into them, suddenly tired, and Nahru looked at him as closely as the human had. Maybe it was something in the smoke.

Nahru looked down at Marco. "You should return to your father and uncle now. I'm sure they're worried about you." He noticed the human fidgeting. "I can take you back, if you're worried about walking through the streets at night. I know the alleys are difficult to navigate, but we are on the edge of the ghetto and it should be easy for you to find your way back."

"No, that's all right. I mean," Marco suppressed a yawn. "I'm very tired. I think it's best if I sleep here."

The tiger's gaze narrowed. "I think it is best to return to your family." His upraised paw forestalled Marco's protest. "However, if you are truly tired, then you are welcome to sleep here." He stood and guided Marco upstairs to the last room on the left. Moonlight illuminated the room, barely enough for Marco to see that there was a cot in the tiny cubicle, along with a large chest and a bucket near the window. The room smelled clean with faint odors of animal musk which Marco was becoming used to. He looked down and noticed that part of the floorboards were arranged to form an arrow that faced toward the window.

Marco scratched his head. "How strange."

"It points in the direction of Mecca, the direction in which I face when I pray."

"What is the significance of Mecca?"

Nahru looked at him with such a bewildered expression that Marco almost laughed. "It is the holiest city in Islam. All Muslims go on a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime, as is required by our faith. I will be making the journey myself, one day."

"Your faith requires a pilgrimage?"

"Among other things, yes."

"It sounds like Mecca might be almost like the Holy See, in Roma."

"I am sure every faith has a comparable place, for there exists many similarities between religions. I will sleep on the floor," Nahru announced and dropped his bag against the wall. He pulled out a blanket, unfolded it and presented it to the human. Then he unrolled a small rug and set it on the floor next to him.

"What are you doing?" Marco asked, sitting on the cot. "Are you going to sleep on that? It's very small."

"It is for prayer."

Marco watched the tiger kneel on the rug. "Does everyone here pray as much as you do?"

Nahru nodded. "They do, as you already know. Everyone must join in, no matter where they are. It is to show that rich and poor, young and old, human or not, all are the same before God."

Marco swung his legs off the cot. "I shall join you as well." He knelt and murmured a quick thanks and asked humbly that Nahru be looked after. He paused, realizing that emotions and thoughts still churned within him. We are the same before God. Marco and Nahru.

"Go to sleep, young Marco. You're very tired, after all." Marco suddenly yawned. He lay down and spread the blanket over himself.

"Nahru?"

"Yes, Marco?"

"Thank you for your help. I owe you my life."

The tiger smiled and chuffed. "I could do no less for myself. Now, sleep. I must not be interrupted." Nahru bowed his head forward and prostrated himself, murmuring in a language that Marco didn't understand, but it seemed familiar, in the same way that he knew how devoted the tiger

was. Marco lay quietly. Thanking the tiger had hardly assuaged his guilty conscience. Here he was, occupying Nahru's bed, while his liberator slept on the floor, like an animal. Was that what he had seen in those visions? Nahru, shunned and feared because he was different. Nahru, beaten by others who had supposedly shared his beliefs.

I will not think of him that way any longer, he vowed. Indeed, Nahru should be treated the same as any other human. Clearly, he is not an animal and deserves to be treated with respect. Charity and compassion, prayer – these were performed regularly in Christendom and not by savages. The tiger was his friend and had given Marco his trust. It was time for Marco to behave likewise.

Marco squinted, but the tears leaked out of his eyes. He still felt horrible for lying to Nahru about his reason for staying the night, but he just couldn't go back to his father and uncle without the holy oil and papers in the priests' satchel and admit failure. And why would he want to return, anyway? He certainly did not want to continue traveling through strange lands. Nahru might not be the savage Marco had first thought him to be, but others like the master of the jail were without morality. Marco could be robbed, maimed, killed, imprisoned, sold into slavery – the list of potential threats seemed to go on for longer than he would have liked.

Nahru had spoken of his fear, of the unknown, Marco presumed. But when everything was unknown, you were afraid of everything and there was no safety, no security to be found anywhere. So, how could he possibly do anything other than quit the journey and return home?



*1299 A.D., Genoa, Liguria (Italy)*

Marco awoke upon hearing his vulpine companion groan. "What is the matter, Signore Rustichello? Are you dreaming? Did the battuto d'aglio upset your digestion? Or the noodles?"

"No, no!" the fox cried, sprawled on his back on the cot with his paws over his eyes. "There is so much work that needs to be done in order to make your story a tale worthy of royalty!"

Marco rolled his eyes. "Very well, then. I shall go back to sleep and not disturb you any further. A man of my age needs every bit of rest he can get, even if it is in a prison." He yawned.

"Oh, no. Please don't do that." Rustichello rolled over quickly. His green eyes sparkled. "How can I ever improve your story if you don't tell it to me?"

"I'm glad your recovery was a swift one, my friend. Now, if you do not mind, I must close my eyes and...."

"...immerse yourself in your memories, so that you may relate them to me. Very kind of you, dear sir."

Marco sighed and smiled when he saw the fox grinning at him. “Very well. But when we are free of this place, you shall take me to the finest restaurant in Venezia for my troubles!”

“But of course! Please, sir, continue. The Muses grow impatient at your stalled speech.”

Marco took out his handkerchief, held it under his nose and inhaled. The fox’s nose twitched from smelling the spicy, dry odor. The scent lingered in his nostrils even as the human began to speak again.



*1271 AD, Ayas, Qonya Province, Anatolia (Turkey)*

Marco awoke, aching all over from his rough treatment in the prison. The pale rosy light visible in the room through his squinting eyes told him that it was barely after sunrise. His worry over the missing items tightened the knot in his stomach. The prison guards had taken the satchel from him before they had locked him up, so it stood to reason that they still had it. But how could he get it from them? He didn’t speak their language or understand their customs. Nahru did, though. Marco smiled. He would ask for one more favor from his new friend and once he had the items, he could return to his father and uncle. Marco blinked. Maybe they could thank Nahru by inviting him on the journey. He supposed it wouldn’t be as terrible if the tiger went with them.

Marco turned over on the cot and saw to his horror that the room was empty. The tiger and his bag were gone.

“Oh, no!” he gasped and flung back the blanket. He opened the door, darted down the stairs and scanned the sitting room. Several nonhumans stared back at him from various locations in the room, more curious than anything else, but Marco couldn’t see the tiger anywhere, or the fat human, for that matter. He went outside and looked up and down the street. A couple of smaller spotted cats looked at him disdainfully before entering the neighboring building. The piazza was empty even of the carts he had seen the previous night.

Marco pulled his hair. He couldn’t be gone! “Nahru!” he called out and then coughed violently. The wind shifted and the thick, concentrated scents of various kinds of animal musk entered his nose, making him ill. He bent over and held his breath in an attempt to stave off the bile rising into his throat.

How am I going to get the satchel back without him? The thought didn’t help and he grunted quietly, trying to quell his nausea. Where...where could Nahru have gone? Marco blinked back tears. Why did he abandon me? He coughed again and tried to think. Maybe the owner...knows where he went.

A sudden flicker stirred at the back of his thoughts. Marco stood upright, suddenly aware of the same sensation he’d felt when he had met the tiger. He calmed himself and focused his thoughts on the feeling in his

mind. As if in a dream, he turned around and walked back inside the caravan-sarai.

"Marco!" He looked up the stairs and saw the tiger smiling down at him, bag slung over one shoulder. "A good morning to you, my friend."

"Nahru!" Marco flew up the stairs and stopped in front of the tiger. "What happened? Where were you?"

Nahru put a paw on the human's shoulder. "Calm yourself. I left for morning prayer and to eat." He licked his whiskers and for a moment, Marco wondered just what the tiger had eaten. "I am refreshed in both body and spirit. Now we must do the same for you. I have your blanket, so we can leave now. And this is for you." He pulled out a dyed handkerchief and held it up for him. "Put it under your nose and breathe once, deeply." Marco did so and inhaled. A crisp, spicy odor penetrated the lingering musk, immediately clearing his nostrils and dispelling the nausea.

"Thank you, Nahru," Marco said meekly and followed his friend outside. He was surprised to see that the piazza was much more occupied than just a minute ago. Marco inhaled once more and put the handkerchief in a pocket. He glanced nervously at the passersby, who stared silently at the fair-skinned man walking beside the large tiger. Here, he was the one who was different from everyone else. Echoes of last night's vow to consider the tiger as an equal resonated.

"To be honest, I'm not really hungry." Nahru glanced at him. "There's someplace I need to go first."

"Back to your father and uncle?"

Marco winced. "No."

Nahru stopped walking and turned to study him. "What is more important than food or family, I wonder?"

Marco shrank under that knowing gaze. He closed his eyes, but he still felt the emerald eyes on him. "Nahru, I'm sorry that I lied to you." Marco took a deep breath and opened his eyes again, staring back.

"Lied?" the tiger said softly. His ears turned back and down.

"I didn't want to go back because...because I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"I...was carrying something when they captured me and put me into the prison. A satchel. They took it from me and I have to get it back before I can return to my father and uncle. It's very important."

Nahru scratched his cheekruff. "I know of what you speak."

Marco's jaw dropped. "You know? How?"

"We know each other as we know ourselves. I thought you understood that," the tiger said gently. His paw patted the pocket with the handkerchief in it. "In any case, I will go with you to retrieve the satchel. It may seem like it is very important to you now, but you will soon discover that it is not important at all."

"What?" Marco's hands balled into fists. "How can you say that? Of course it's important to me! I have to get those items back so that I can..."

“...so you can deliver them to the Great Khan? I thought you didn’t want to go on your journey?”

“I don’t!” Marco gesticulated wildly, not caring who saw him. “Why would I risk my life to visit some person I’ve never met? I don’t care if he is royalty. I just want to go back to my home and live out the rest of my life at home, in Venezia, in peace and safety!”

Nahru folded his arms across his chest and looked sternly at the human, his tail twitching. “All life is risk. It matters not where you are – you can be killed at any time, in any place. If you are so concerned about death, young Marco, you will never cease being afraid and truly live.”

Marco reeled backward. Nahru had expressed the very thing he did not want to hear, the secret that he had kept buried deeply....

The tiger patted his shoulder. “Now you understand. Sometimes obstacles, whether real or imagined, can hold a person back from finding their reason for being here, their purpose. You must overcome your fears, young Marco, for doing so will bring you closer to the divine.”

Marco thought about that as they wound back through the narrow alleys and emerged onto a wider dirt road. He was relieved to see that there more humans here.

“Why are you here, Nahru?” he asked carefully. “Have you discovered your own purpose yet?”

The tiger chuffed. “I am here to help.”

“I figured that part out,” Marco said wryly. “Would you care to enlighten me with anything else?”

Nahru looked up at the sky. “You have a destiny, young Marco....”

“Don’t we all?”

“...and it is a very powerful one. But you are like the moth fluttering around the lantern.”

The human threw up his arms, startling a flock of pigeons into flight. “Can you not speak plainly, for once?”

“The moth seeks the flame, yet cannot reach it because of the glass. Similarly, there are veils that blind us from truly knowing our destiny and experiencing the divine, from experiencing life as it is meant to be lived.”

“But moths die when they reach the flame,” Marco murmured. He peered at a strange figure walking toward them. It was covered from head to toe, and he knew from his short time in this land that it was the women in this town who wore clothing in such a manner. He looked at the face, but a thin veil kept him from fully seeing inside.

“I think I understand,” he said slowly. “It is my fear that prevents me from seeing my true purpose?”

Nahru smiled. “Not just that, but also anger and your preconceptions which obscure what you are able to learn. And there are many other things which may lead you astray.”

“Then how do I avoid these things? How do I remove the veil?”

“In time and with experience you will recognize them for what they are. Now, tell me, Marco. What did you like the most about your home?”

The human was caught off-guard by the simple question. "I suppose it would be all the people that my family did business with. I always liked to listen to the traders speak of the places that they had traveled, all the stories that they had to tell. Sometimes I had to hide behind crates and barrels to hear the parts of their tales my family did not want me to hear." Marco chuckled at the memory.

"Did you ever go exploring down the streets?"

"Of course." He puffed out his chest. "By the time I was twelve, I knew where everything was."

Nahru chuckled. "And it was exciting, was it not?"

"Of course. Well, for the most part."

"It did not last, did it?" Marco shook his head. "Why?"

Marco frowned. "I think it was because there was nothing new. I had met everyone and knew every place. The new stories became scarce because the merchants traveled the same routes over and over again."

The tiger nodded. "But now, you have the opportunity to explore a larger area and meet new people. You do not have to wait for the stories to come to you, you will go and experience them for yourself."

Marco folded his arms over his chest. "And I will get thrown into prison, as one of those experiences for myself."

"There is that risk, young Marco. It must be weighed against the prison you will find when you return home."

"What do you mean?"

"You have already said that the tales of the merchants will not be enough to satisfy you. If you go back now, you will stagnate, unable to learn and achieve your full potential. You will feel unsatisfied with your life, without ever knowing why."

Marco strode alongside the tiger quietly, turning it over in his mind. After a couple of minutes, they stopped in front of a cart laden with fruits, vegetables and herbs. "Here is your first lesson," Nahru said quietly, handing him a couple of coins. "You need to eat. Go ahead and purchase your meal from the vendor."

Marco looked at him in disbelief. "Are you crazy? Is that...what I mean to say is...I do not speak his language. How am I supposed to communicate with him?" The vendor, Marco noticed, was quietly watching them.

The tiger's ears flicked. "If you do not try, you will never know."

Marco clenched his teeth. He forced a smile and walked over to the cart. He picked out a handful of dates and some nuts. "I would like to buy these," he said, holding his hands out.

The vendor, a big, olive-skinned man who looked like he belonged with the prison guards from last night, held up two fingers. Marco hesitated and then pulled his shirt outward and put the food into his makeshift pouch while he held out two of the smaller coins that Nahru had given him. The vendor smiled and took the coins, then reached down and gave him two peaches. Marco smiled back and bowed. "Thank you."

"That was not too difficult, I hope?" the tiger said with a grin.

"Less than I had imagined. Here." He held out the two peaches and some of the nuts. "Please give this to the mouse family you took me to yesterday."

Nahru's ears went up in surprise. "Of course. I will give it to them. Why are you doing this?"

"They could use it more than I," Marco said solemnly as he bit into one of the dates. "Here, these are for you as well." He gave half of his dates to the tiger. "What is mine is yours."

Nahru bowed deeply. "Thank you." He straightened and put the dates into his bag. "And now, it is time for us to retrieve your satchel."

"Very well." Marco waited for the tiger to start walking. "I am ready when you are."

Nahru smiled. "I said I would go with you, not lead you. Your journey begins here, young Marco."

"But..." He immediately clamped down on his protest and took a deep breath. "If I can learn to get my own food, I should be able to find the town guards." He thought for a moment. "If I am to be traveling in the lands of the Great Khan, I am certain that I shall have an interpreter with me." He looked sidelong at Nahru. "Will you translate for me, if I decide where we travel?"

The tiger laughed deeply. "I believe that you make a convincing argument, young Marco. I will translate for you, as you require. Lead on."

Marco chuckled as well and started them moving. "I think the first thing we should do is find a guard and ask him the location of their headquarters." He turned a corner to follow what seemed to be a busier thoroughfare.

Nahru nodded. "That is a wise plan." They walked on for several minutes, passing stalls with rugs, bags, cloth, spices, bowls, cups, animals and all sorts of food for sale. The area was one of the larger marketplaces in the town, to be sure, and the crowd was quite thick. Even so, Nahru still appeared to be the only non-human present, and Marco was quite aware of people gawking at the tall tiger.

"Why is there never a guard around when you need to speak to one?" Marco fumed.

"Patience. Sooner or later, we will find one." He peered above the crowd. "Although I certainly do not see any here," he said with a frown.

"Perhaps we should..." Marco paused and silently studied a narrow alley off to his left. "You know, this looks familiar." He took a couple of steps toward it. "Yes, yes! I remember. I ran after the priests along there," he motioned further into the crowd, "and I think the guards caught me and then forced me down this way." He slipped through the crowd and started down the alley, with Nahru politely excusing himself as he tried to keep up.

Marco stopped at the end of the alley, where it forked left and right. "This does not look right," he muttered as the tiger caught up to him.



"If that is true, then we can at least go back and try again." Nahru shifted his bag to the other shoulder. "It seems that we are very close."

Marco nodded and started back the way they had come. "We have quite a bit of daylight left, so...." He stopped, seeing that several darker-skinned people were coming down the alley toward them, most with frowns or grimaces on their faces. "What is this?" he murmured.

"I'm not sure," the tiger said, equally quiet. "Stay behind me." He held out his arms, which caused the people to stop. He spoke quietly in the language that Marco was starting to recognize as the local speech.

One of the women yelled something back in the same language, gestured violently, and spat on the ground. That caused excited jabbering to swell like a wave through the rest of them, making Marco's blood turn cold. "Is it wise to ask what was said just now?"

Nahru sighed and half-turned his head. "It is me, I am sorry to say. These people seem to think I am a devil of some kind. An abomination, at the very least."

So much had changed in such a short time, but Marco still remembered the fear of his friend that he had felt originally. It was as though he were looking into a distorted mirror which reflected his shame in multiplicity. "They are the real devils," he replied and, with his jaw set determinedly, he ducked under the tiger's still-outstretched arm.

"Listen to me!" he yelled, waving his arms wildly. The crowd quieted upon seeing him, but they still seemed to bear an ugly mood. "He is my friend." Marco gestured emphatically, first at a concerned Nahru, then at himself, then the both of them, finishing by bringing his hands together. "I do not know if you can understand me, but surely you can find it in your hearts to let us pass freely."

A rock whizzed over his head and to his horror, he heard a grunt of pain from behind him. "Nahru!" he yelled, turning. He saw that blood was streaming from a cut above the tiger's eye. The crowd surged forward and as Marco turned to fend them off, one of the men in front swung a roundhouse that landed on his temple. Black stars exploded in his vision and as he reeled back, he suddenly had the sensation that he was flying backward, away from the mass of people in front of him.

"Run!" the tiger cried and shoved him further into the alley. As they rounded the corner to the right, Nahru suddenly stopped, reversed direction and after a few steps, let out what sounded to Marco like the loudest thundering snarl that he had ever heard. Screams and yelling from the people in the crowd rang out as they scrambled backward, fearful of surrendering their lives to the tiger-demon before them. Marco stood in shock, the little hairs on his neck standing on end, until he saw Nahru sprinting at him again. The side of the tiger's head was matted down in blood and that side of his muzzle had taken on a crimson tinge. Marco felt a parallel throbbing in his skull and stumbled his way back into a run.

After a few more minutes of threading their way through the winding passages at full tilt, they finally slowed down and leaned against a wall.

Nahru was panting heavily and Marco felt as though his sides were going to split open with each breath. There was no sound of pursuit.

"I think we are finally safe," Marco said as he gasped for air. He looked at the tiger. "You are hurt, my friend. We need to clean your wound." He reached into his pockets and pulled out the handkerchief.

The tiger nodded. "I am sorry," he said slowly.

Marco looked up, astonished. "For what?"

"It is unfortunate that you had this shameful encounter, one of the bad experiences that you were hoping to avoid on your journey."

Marco nodded and gave the handkerchief to the tiger, who pressed it to the cut on his head. "Truly, this was one such experience. But it was not as bad as I had imagined, with you at my side." The tiger grinned wearily. "Besides, I have also learned something from this."

"And what might that be?"

"I felt my own fears, reflected back at me. I now know what you meant by that, what you had told me last night." He put a hand on Nahru's shoulder. "And I feel your pain, my friend. In the truest sense." Marco chuckled ruefully and rubbed his temple with his other hand.

"There is a door there." The tiger pointed with his paw a little further down the alley and Marco saw the small, plain wooden door, twenty paces away.

"Perhaps we can find someone there who will help us." He started toward it, then paused and laughed. "I suppose I am still leading, am I not?" Nahru chuffed. "Indeed." Marco unlatched the door and swung it open. The small room inside seemed to be an antechamber of some sort, completely unadorned except for a table with a small porcelain plate on it. As the tiger closed the door, Marco peered at the plate and saw that there was a bird depicted in the middle, with some sort of cursive, flowing script written in blue around the border.

"Can you read this?"

Nahru padded over and studied the writing. "This is a short poem. The creature in the center is a simurgh, and the poem is about a man on a quest to find knowledge to help his beloved."

"What kind of creature is it?"

"The simurgh is a large bird-like creature of legend. It is thought to have lived so long that it has seen the world destroyed three times and is therefore the most knowledgeable creature in the world. It is said to dine on elephants and other large animals."

"Does the poem come to an end?"

The tiger shook his head. "No." He sniffed the air and looked over to his right. "I smell water." His whiskers quivered.

Marco looked up. "We should clean your wound and dress it." He led the way into the corridor, which was narrower than the alley outside. They rounded a corner and both stopped in shock.

At the center of the room was the large crystal fountain from Marco's vision, when he had first met Nahru in the prison. Water splashed down

and burbled melodically in playful cascades, lit from above by a large glass portal which would have allowed the sun to shine into the room, save for an obscuring cloud overhead. The room was decorated in tiles which created intricate mosaics, patterns with the forms of men, women, the sun, the moon, plants, animals and other creatures engaging in a hunt here, a battle there, romance, adventure, happiness and sorrow. Larger tiles bore the same cursive script as on the plate, often contained within intricate geometric shapes like rosettes and leaves composed of interlocking circles.

"What is this place?" Marco dared only to whisper.

"Beautiful," Nahru murmured in reply.

"Is this...one of your sacred places?"

"Not that I am aware. If it is such a place, then we will not be harmed."

Marco nodded and moved closer. The water smelled clean and he guessed that it was probably uncontaminated. It would have to be, he thought, to be pure enough if the fountain were to remain unsullied. He stopped in front of it and could feel a cool mist caress his skin. Marco did not dare touch the water. He spied a table with a metal pitcher and bowl on the other side of the fountain.

"I think we can use this," he told the tiger and walked over to the table. The pitcher was nearly full and he carried it back to the fountain carefully, looking down to make sure that the water didn't spill out. "Nahru, give me the handkerchief and..."

Marco glanced up from the vessel and saw the tiger standing precisely where he had stood in front of the fountain just moments before. The sun had emerged from the cloud and its radiance seemed to multiply through the crystal fountain and illuminate the room brightly. Nahru was looking at the top of the fountain, seemingly unbothered by the brightness. His fur and even the dark robe were luminous, appearing to capture and radiate the shining light. Every hair, every piece of cloth, every bit of him seemed to stand out with intimate detail. The image seared into Marco's brain; Nahru was like an angel from God, staring wistfully upward as though desiring a return to Heaven and leave Earth far behind. Even his breath, misting out from the end of his whiskered muzzle, blew tiny sparkling droplets aloft no less pure than the water in the fountain.

The sun went behind another cloud and the room grew dark, breaking his rapture. He blinked and realized that the pitcher was no longer in his hands. A soft chuckle caused him to gaze to his left, where the tiger was now standing.

"What...what happened?"

"You were...transfixed, by something you saw, I would guess."

"I was." Marco frowned. "How did you move over there so quickly?"

"It was no quicker than I have moved before," the tiger replied.

"And how is your face clean, now?"

Nahru nodded. "I cleaned myself using the water from the pitcher and this." He gave the handkerchief back to Marco.

"It's dry!" he exclaimed. "How long have I been standing here?"

"Most of the day is gone. Do not fear, young Marco," he added and placed a reassuring paw on the human's shoulder. "I have heard tales of this happening before. The best way to describe it is that you were in contact with the divine."

"You mean...I was with God?"

"In a sense. When one is thus transported, one experiences a fragment, or an aspect of the divine. Or, rather, it is an experiencing of the divine in all of us. Time and place cease to have any meaning. Consider yourself fortunate, young Marco," he said with a chuckle.

"To have had this happen to me?"

"No, that you came back so quickly. One tale describes a man who regained his senses after forty years." The serious look on Nahru's face sent a chill down Marco's spine. "Come, we should leave before the sun is set." Marco followed his friend from the room and outside, into the alley. He stopped just short of the street and watched the people pass by in front of him as they hurried to get home before dark. It all seemed mundane, somehow.

"Are you all right, young Marco?"

"I was thinking, Nahru. You said that we were all of the divine." The tiger smiled. "Yes."

"That is something that we all have in common, regardless of who we are or what we look like."

Nahru nodded. Marco stepped onto the street and nearly walked right into an older man carrying a package. The man said something that sounded like a curse and increased his pace.

"I think I am ready to face my father and my uncle."

The tiger shook his head in surprise. "But, you do not have the satchel."

"As you told me before, my friend, it is not important. What matters is that I do not let my fear control me. Nahru?" he added quietly. "Will you come with me to the lands of the Great Khan?"

The tiger sighed. "Marco...."

"I'm sure that they would welcome you," Marco continued quickly. "And they would probably appreciate having someone of your experience with them. Please?"

"Marco, we all have our own journeys that we must make."

"But you can join mine. In fact, you have already done so! Please, Nahru. I need you to journey with me, for as long as you are able. I can learn so much more from you than what you have taught me in the last night and day."

Nahru was silent for several moments. "I will give it careful consideration and let you know my decision tomorrow, after we retrieve your satchel."

"Of course." Marco nodded. "That is fair." He smiled at the tiger and started walking toward the camp. "I will meet you at the caravan-sarai early, Nahru!" he called back over his shoulder.

“And I will be waiting, Marco!” The smiling tiger turned and walked to the west while Marco hurried the other way, eager to see his father and uncle again.



“Nahru!” Marco searched the streets through the soaking rain that had descended upon the city. He mopped his sopping brow as he ran, and wondered how he could have forgotten where the caravan-sarai was. All he knew was that he was late and...wait, did that building seem familiar? He went on a little further and recognized the empty space in the street where the food vendor had been. That meant that it was just down this way, here. The familiar panic rose up when he didn’t immediately see the large tiger out front.

Marco opened the door and shook the water from his clothes before stepping inside. He found the fat human sweeping the floor and inquired after Nahru by describing the tiger’s size with his hands. A quick shake of the man’s head dampened his spirits even further. Marco sighed and thanked the man with a nod before turning away.

“Marco?” a rough voice called out.

The youth padded over to a queer little man, wrinkled from age and overexposure to the sun, who smiled and bade him to sit down. Marco knelt on a large pillow beside him, unsure of what to say.

“You are looking for Nahru, my son?”

Marco nodded impatiently. “Yes. Do you know where he is?” The man’s demeanor grew solemn. “He has...he has resumed his journey. I do not believe it was his wish to do so, so soon,” he added, seeing Marco’s sudden shock.

“Why did he have to go?”

“In the end, a teacher is another veil, for even the best must give the student a lesson that has been filtered through their imperfect selves. In many ways, experience is the ultimate teacher because it is a direct connection, as a person who seeks God through prayer or meditation.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Marco forced back tears, barely listening to the man. How could he continue now? Like Nahru had told him, the satchel and its contents were not of real importance. His own journey ahead loomed, large and dangerous, and even with the minor victory he’d had yesterday, the renewed thought of being alone among hostile strangers day and night for years was too much to bear. His home town of Venezia beckoned seductively.

“He is not apart from you, my son,” the man said quietly. “Can you not feel him?”

Marco frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Close your eyes and think of your friend.”

Marco brought out the handkerchief and inhaled as he held it under his nose. His eyes closed as he sought remembrance. He banished the darkness and pictured the large tiger standing before the fountain. It was the exact

image from only a day ago, and it seemed that this memory was all that truly remained of his friend. Marco's heart swelled and the tide of emotion sharpened the image; he could see each independent strand of fur of black and orange move, just like it had before. Nahru's musky odor lingered in his nose and once again, he heard the tiger's soft laugh and chuff. The dark robe became white, absorbing the ambient light and amplifying it. Nahru was a luminous being and the emanating rays penetrated Marco's flesh and instead of overwhelming him, it filled him with the warmth of their deep friendship since the Glance had connected them. Marco gasped and really felt Nahru's presence now, as if he were standing right in front of him. Marco reached out with a hand that looked more like a blazing torch of white light and saw

...beyond the tiger, to the rest of the people in the caravan-sarai, also radiant...

...outside, where the entire town was ablaze with ephemeral pillars of light...

...to the land itself, to the sky above, awash with the same eerie luminescence...

sheer beauty wherever he looked. Marco's crystal tears sparkled as they dripped down his cheeks. The young man felt pure joy infuse his being from the divine light in everyone and everything.

The focus of his inner eye unraveled, turning inward and darkening until all he could see was Nahru, still luminous against the night sky, walking away from where he stood at the crossroads. Marco broke the silence, crying out to his friend. The tiger looked back over his shoulder, smiled, and kept going in the opposite direction. Marco sank to his knees and did not open his eyes, letting the image of tiger linger until it finally dwindled and faded.

He could feel that he was being watched keenly by the elderly man. "Nahru is always with me," he said hoarsely. "I understand that, now." Tears spilled freely down his cheeks.

The man nodded. "In our beliefs, there is no 'you' and no 'me', for all things are one and the same, and from God. This is what you saw."

Marco opened his eyes. "How did you know?"

"I know this because it happened to me, a long time ago. I, too, carry the presence of the one who is loved and beloved...."

I've spent my life, my heart  
And my eyes this way  
I used to think that love  
And beloved are different.  
I know now they are the same.  
I was seeing two in one."

The man bowed his head reverentially.

Marco wiped his eyes on his sleeve and then stood. "Thank you, kind sir. May I ask, what is your name?"

The man looked up and smiled. "I am Jalal al-Din Rumi. It is a pleasure to meet you, young Marco."

"And I thank you, for I am better for having met you, sir."

"Good. Before you leave to continue your journey, there is something that I must give you. Nahru wanted to give this to you." The old man reached behind a cushion and pulled out the satchel. Marco accepted it, bowed deeply in thanks and exited. Nothing more needed to be said, it seemed.

The rain had stopped and he inhaled the clean, crisp air. As he walked through the streets, back to rejoin his father and uncle, he felt the fresh start to the day resonate with a new desire to see these new lands ruled by the great Kublai Khan.



Marco concluded his story and sat in repose on the floor. On the cot, Rustichello's knees were drawn up to his chest and his eyes were wide open. "And that, master fox, concludes my tale. It was the most significant thing to happen to me, at the very beginning. Without my friend Nahru's help, I would never have been able to make my journey."

The fox opened his muzzle, put his paw on his forehead and laughed. "That was great! Superb! Magnificent! And incredibly, utterly boring!" Rustichello's merriment quickly metamorphosed into a stern glare at the human. "Pardon me for saying this, but how can you even think of opening your story with such a lifeless tale like that? Where are the battles? Where are the beautiful females hiding behind veils? The treasures in hidden caves, and all of the wondrous sights? Mythical creatures like dragons and unicorns?"

"Surely the crystal fountain qualifies as a 'wondrous sight?'"

"Ah, you must leave the embellishment to me, my good friend. No one is interested in a fountain – we have so many of those here already!"

Marco seemed unruffled by the fox's quicksilver tirade. "It is of interest to me. And more importantly, what I have related is the truth."

Rustichello jumped up. "Ah, there is truth, and then there is truth, my human friend." He started pacing excitedly. "Now, being imprisoned with those foreign devils was exciting. Maybe we can have the tiger in there somewhere, but that magical oil you spoke of really had potential."

"It was holy oil."

The fox waved his hand. "Certo, certo. But in the story, we will say that it had magical properties, that it could make you invisible. Of course! That's how you escaped from the cell, and from the angry savages...."

Marco shook his head and smiled while the fox continued his ebullient exhortations. It was important to him, for he had found his purpose, his destiny. He had welcomed people into his life appreciatively and many had

joined him in his travels, with Rustichello as his most recent companion. None, however, had ever touched him more deeply than Nahru had, all those years ago. Sitting on the floor of the prison cell, he turned his thoughts inward and sought the reassuring presence of his friend, the spirit of the river, as he had many times throughout his life. Nahru could not be seen, but Marco felt the tiger's warm spirit join him in his prayer, casting aside the veil as they both reached for the divine.



## The Reunion by Will A. Sanborn

The fox wasn't the only exotic at the reunion. There were a few others sprinkled through the reception hall, and we'd only heard murmurs of surprise when I'd showed up with my tabby cat wife. He wasn't so much a one of a kind as he had been back at school, but he still stood out from the crowd.

He caught my eye as I tried to watch him and I couldn't play it off that I'd just been glancing around the room. He stared back at me for several moments and I knew the time had come. I politely excused myself from my wife and the group of people we were talking to as I started making my way towards him. I swallowed hard and wished I had some of the brazen attitude I'd had ten years ago, but even as I did so I realized that had been the problem.

I walked slowly, postponing the inevitable, but I still reached him. The fox continued to look at me, silently gauging me with those unblinking eyes. I swallowed again and hesitated before I forced the words out. "Hello Todd..."

My voice sounded hollow and the words hung between us as I waited for his response. He took his time and when he did speak his voice was cool and measured. "So Brian... why didn't you bring your girl over, are you ashamed of her... or yourself?"

His words stung at me and a flash of memories and emotions came flooding back. I remembered the arrogance, all the jeers and the taunts, how stupid it had all been, how it had seemed like a game back then, but I realized it for what it was now. And now standing before him, he was the one with the upper hand.

"You can say whatever you want about me Todd, I deserve that, but leave Sara out of it." I felt my face heating up as I spoke.

His gaze remained locked on me, but I noticed one of his ears twitch. Was that in amusement or anger? I'd gotten good at reading Sara's body language, and that of other felines. I still didn't have that much exposure to canids though, and back at school I hadn't paid any attention. "Fair enough" he finally said.

"Look, I know I was a real jerk to you and I'm not going to pretend that we're long lost friends of anything. You deserve better than that. I just wanted to tell you that I'm not the stupid jock I was back in school. I grew up and I regret what I did. I know it probably doesn't sound like much, but I'm sorry and I wanted to let you know that."

The fox continued to look at me. He was silent, but I saw the sheen of wetness in his eyes. I continued. "I know that it had to have been really hard being the only exotic at school and that a lot of people liked to pick on you. And I was there leading the crowd. It was so funny then, that we didn't think it was serious..."

"You're right, it was hard, Brian..." he blinked at me and I saw his eyes looked even wetter, but he held his composure. I had another flash of one

of the many times we'd casually taunted him and I could see him slinking down the hallway. And I thought I'd changed, how had he gotten so strong? I felt my face heat up more as I regarded him.

He was silent for several moments as we simply looked at one another. "What happened to make you change?" he finally asked me. His voice was calm and low.

I paused as I remembered it all again. "College was great at first. I wasn't the head jock, but I still made a good position on the team and coach said I was very strong for a freshman. I was having fun, partying it up and living the glory, until I got injured in that game..." I felt a shiver as that old memory flashed up. "I tore the tendon really bad and could barely walk with crutches, let alone play. They said that with therapy I might get back into the game, but it would be at least a season, if not more..."

"I took it really hard. I guess if I wasn't the big man on campus then I didn't know who I was. I'd never thought too much about it before that. I didn't go to class for several weeks, just sat in my room drinking. I was thinking of dropping out and I would've failed if my folks hadn't been badgering me. They called the school and set me up with a private tutor and threatened to cancel my allowance if I didn't get back to studying." I paused, and realized how lame that sounded. "Man, I really was spoiled, but that's where Sara came in."

Todd smiled at that, and it looked genuine. "So, she was your guardian angel?" I saw his ear flick up and down and it looked like it was in amusement.

I felt my lips curl into a sheepish smile. "Well not at first. I hated her, she was so unlike my friends, kind of a nerdy type, plus she didn't fawn over me like the other girls did. She didn't cut me any slack either. She drove me crazy at first, but she whipped me into shape to pass all of my courses. It wasn't until the next semester, when we happened to meet casually a couple of times, before we hit it off. I think she was just as surprised as I was."

"Well, it sounds like she's been good for you, Brian." I paused, not knowing how to respond, but Todd filled the silence between us. "College was good for me too. It was nice getting into a larger world, a place where there were more exotics. I met a few groups of people who helped me be comfortable with who I am..."

"It's been a long time, and I've managed to make peace with things, but I'll be honest, I didn't know if I wanted to come back here tonight. I didn't have that many happy memories, but Mark suggested it would be good for closure. I'll give you credit too, you're the only one who's been more than superficial to me. I used to really hate you, but what you did took a lot of courage. Thank you..."

I stared at him, not knowing what to say, but I took the hand he offered, and felt the soft touch of fur on my skin. His grasp was confident and strong and I saw a spark in his eyes. My face was still hot and my mouth still felt dry, but I also felt a load lift from me.

Todd flashed me a grin, “it’s not like you’re invited to the wedding or anything, but I appreciate what you did Brian. It will make Mark really happy to be able say he told me so too.”

I turned and followed Todd’s eyes as he made a motion to someone. I saw a male raccoon walking toward us, along with my tabby-striped wife. He was carrying a couple of drinks in his hand, as was Sara. She was smiling and looked to be chatting with him like they were old friends.

“I’d like you to meet Mark, my personal savior” Todd said as they approached. “Hun, this is Brian, the mean jock who’s made nice and brought me an olive branch.”

My mind was slow, but finally put the pieces together as I saw the male exotic grin around the mask on his face and extend his black-furred hand to me. I may have blinked in surprise but I didn’t miss a step as I reached out to shake it. I heard a low chitter of laughter from Todd and felt my blush deepen again, but it was the least of what I deserved.

## And The Sea Full of Stars by Searska Grey Raven

"You're alone now, you know."

In the furthest corner of a plas-glass room, a pile of blankets stirred, and from the cocoon of fabric a pair of small blue eyes blinked open. It closed them again, like a bridge collapsing under its own weight.

I leaned into the window, and my reflection in the polished window leered back at me, chartreuse eyes luminescent with glee. I touched the pad of my finger to the patch on my lab coat, the Star Project Genetics Team logo, and smiled. A jagged row of white and black pens obscured the bottom of the patch, the part that named my department. Soon, I could remove this damnable badge and replace it with something more respectable than a lost cause. I ran my tongue across my fangs and rapped on the glass a few times. The eyes under the blanket opened again.

"I said, you're alone. The last. After you, there will be no others."

It must have lifted its head, because a single shapeless lump of blanket was higher now than the rest. Blue eyes stared at me from a beneath a fold.

"I know. I probably knew before you did." It said quietly. "Will you dance on the mass grave of my species, glad to be rid of us at last?"

I opened my lab coat pressed a newspaper to the thick window, grinning broadly. The thin plastic pages rattled against the harder plas glass like dead leaves.

"To prove I'm not simply toying with you. The last female of your species was killed in a raid on the Southern laboratory." I stepped away from the glass and dropped the newspaper into the airlock. A moment later it was irradiated and dropped into the enclosure by a mechanical arm. The creature ignored it, barely glancing at the headline before turning its gaze back to me.

"Will you simply discard me then, like a lab rat?"

"That was my intention." I said, frowning at its use of the word "rat." The word made me feel vaguely hungry. "Truthfully, being stuck with this project was a total waste of my time. Even if we had been able to find a vaccine for your little disease, what would have been the point? Another five years of war? Besides, you're still somewhat valuable to me. It's a rare opportunity to record the phenomenon of extinction from the point of view of the," I paused to flex my claws and polish them on the soft fur of my chest, "soon-to-be extinct."

It looked at me for a long time, not saying anything.

"You never even tried, did you?" It finally said, its voice small and cold. The eyes glared at me from under its blanket.

"I made a token effort to fix your little bug." I replied, smirking.

"I thought...all this time...you were our last hope!" It said, pushing back the blanket to reveal its flat face. A bare thing, nearly a skull except for the top of its head. An oily mop of tangled hair fell to the creature's shoulders.

“Yes, I know.” I sneered, swallowing back my revulsion. Its hairless form disgusted me.

“You...murderer!” It said with awed contempt. “You had a chance to create peace between our two peoples, and you killed them all!” It threw back the blanket covering it, and it stood before the window. Withered, stick-like limbs reached for the glass, and its gnarled fingers were bunched into tight fists. The pathetic creature’s skin was as wrinkled as hospital gown it wore. It looked so much older now, and I wondered what aged the thing faster—the stress of the quarantine or the constant unending boredom of this place.

“No, I didn’t kill them. Your little science experiment did that. All I did was allow nature to take its course.”

“Do you realize what you’ve lost? All the knowledge, all the wisdom—”

“Is already recorded in your libraries and saved in digital form in our servers. We don’t need you anymore.” I said.

“That’s not everything. Just because it’s been written in a book or on a web page doesn’t make it true or complete.”

I snorted. “I think we can separate the dross from the gold by now. We aren’t dumb animals anymore, doctor.” I spat its title like a curse.

“I never said that. I never doubted Augment intelligence. It was why I came here, I thought your kind would be able to find a cure, or at least a vaccine, before it was too late.” It leaned heavily against the glass, its head bowed. Gray and white hair fell over its face, obscuring its expression from view. But I didn’t need to see it. It was clear, by the hunch of its shoulders and the shaking of its body. The last human on Earth was weeping.

“What did you think would happen, old man? That we would welcome you? That we would turn our every effort into saving your kind?” I asked. “Were you truly that naïve?”

“I had hope. We share a common bloodline. I hoped that there was something there you would find worth saving. I hoped that two people who wanted nothing to do with this pointless war could find a common ground and triumph over all the bigotry of warmongering zealots.” It cried.

“Those ‘warmongering zealots’ would have done the same, had our positions been reversed.” I said.

“How do you know? How do you know that our scientists would not have opened our arms and our laboratories to help the Augments?” It said.

“We had enough of your arms and labs, thank you. We would have chosen oblivion rather than go back to that.”

“Do no harm. Have you forgotten that? Did we neglect to teach it to your kind when we showed you how to heal the sick? Do no harm!”

“So, do as I say, not as I do?” I interrupted. “The harm your kind brought to mine can be measured in gallons, doctor. Gallons of blood and tears spilled for nothing more than your race’s whimsy.”

“I had nothing to do with that. I tried to heal your people whenever I could. I tried to help regardless of whether my patient was covered in skin,

fur, feathers, or scales. But when we needed you most, you turned your backs on us." It said.

I leaned into the glass, my stunted feline nose a bare inch from the surface. "We're animals, doctor. What did you expect?"

"So now you are animals, when before you were civilized enough to understand our technology without our help. Which is it, doctor? Are you civilized or are you animals?" It demanded, looking me in the eye.

"We're from the same ancestor, and so we share the same flaw. Civil and savage." I said with a cold smile.

It looked at me for a long moment before it turned away. "This is pointless." It murmured.

"What is pointless, doctor?"

"This...debate. It doesn't matter."

I turned away from the glass and paced along the edge. "It matters a great deal to me. I've found the last ten minutes here quite enlightening. I should record this and turn it into the introduction to my new book. The New Face of Extinction: Humanity's Last Stand by Salem Noir." I gestured grandly and turned my attention back to the creature. "What do you think?"

It simply stared at me, its expression blank.

"No." It said quietly.

"No?" I echoed. "No, you don't want future generations to learn from your mistakes?"

"What future generations? Yours? What care I for your whelps? Enlighten them yourself on what it means to be the last." It replied, turning its back to me.

"We won't be going extinct any time soon. We've adapted, we've learned. We won't be as greedy or as selfish as your kind was. You nearly destroyed your world, and for what? For a few barrels of black oil? For a few more dollars in your wallet? Truly, was it worth it?" I asked, growling and pacing the length of the enclosure.

"We all bore the burden of what we had done. But it doesn't matter. As you said, I am alone now. There will be no one to usher me into the next life." It murmured, dropping its gaze.

"Next life?" I asked, curious.

"The after life. Heaven." It said, not moving.

I snorted. "There is no after life, old man. It's a myth. The closest thing to heaven was your civilization before the plague. You had paradise, and you squandered it! While you wallowed in pools of the purest perfumed water, my people lived and died in gutters choked with your filth. You created us, and then you simply discarded us like so much biological waste."

"Is that what you see? Justice served? Your kind was an abomination." It shot back. "The work of a sick mind! That you were a viable species speaks more about the man's genius than any sense of the pre-ordained right to life!" It shouted and threw the newspaper at the window, its pages fluttering like a dying bird until it hit the ground with a dull thud.

“You pompous old ass!” I snarled. “You speak as if your kind had every right to continue its existence, after sending countless other species to the grave and consigning the rest of the world to utter oblivion all in the name of your instant gratification! It will take our scientists centuries to undo the damage your kind wrought, and that’s just what you’ve done since our creation! The horrors your kind inflicted upon the natural world are as numerous as stars in the sky. In all our travels, not once have we found another species so capable of such unthinking, uncaring destruction!”

“No,” The old man said quietly. “But then, you haven’t found anything, have you?”

I stared at it, my mouth gaping like a fish for a moment before my voice returned. “It doesn’t matter. When we do, their sins can never measure up to what your kind has done.” I said, pacing along the window again.

“And how long will your kind hold such a promise? When you are out there, in the sea of never-ending stars, how long before you find yourselves wishing for more? More territory, more food, more time? How long before you find yourselves sacrificing your own offspring for a few more pitiful years of life?”

I slammed my paw against the window. The sound reverberated through the cell, and my breath came in rasping gasps. I closed my eyes, inhaled deeply, and smoothed the fur along my neck. My tail twitched in agitation, flicking my lab coat from side to side. “We are stronger than that. We are smarter.”

“My kind said the same thing.” It replied. “And look where that sort of thinking led us.” It settled down on its bed with a sigh. “Though in a few years, it won’t matter. Your kind will have inherited all our sins, and I will be beyond your reach to condemn.”

“We will condemn your kind across the ages, old man. Your species is beyond our forgiveness.” I growled.

“Then why are you still here, doctor? What possible reason could you have for continuing this farce of a conversation?” It asked.

I opened my eyes and glared at it.

“I know why you are here. I know why you still stand here, speaking to me if only to mock and condemn me.” It said, looking at the fallen newspaper.

I took a deep breath and smoothed my whiskers with the back of my paw. “I’m here to disturb your last peace, human. I’m here to take away your last hope as you lay dying.”

“No, Augment. You are not here to gloat. You’re here to speak to the last sentient creature beyond your own, because soon I will be no more, and it will be you who is alone.” It said.

I recoiled from the glass, hissing. “There will be others. Other species out there. Star Project has already found three planets with simple life that your kind missed. Soon, we will find more. You didn’t look hard enough.” I accused.

“You mean ‘our ships.’ The ones you stole.” The human said.

“Salvaged, from a dying civilization.” I retorted. “And it still stands that we found more in that short time than your people did in centuries of searching.”

“We gave up.” The human said, throwing up his hands and turning away. “What you found in our libraries, it’s only a tenth of what we truly explored. We...forgot about the rest. So many empty worlds out there, so many dead planets. The only thing that made the search bearable was the hope that we would find something worth the wait.

“We never did. Don’t you see? We found nothing in all our long years of searching the heavens. We were truly and utterly alone. And it was unacceptable. Your creator devised a way to make something new, something smart and wise and able to understand us. If he could not find sentient life out there then he would find a way to make it here.”

“Liar.” I growled. “Our maker had other plans in mind when he first spliced us into being. There was nothing noble or wise in his intentions. What he told your kind, and what he did to mine, they are completely different things. If you think otherwise...” I shook my head, “if you think otherwise than you share the illness of the rest of your species, believing things to be other than what they really are.”

“A pleasant lie can be more comforting than a harsh truth.” It said.

“But a comforting lie won’t save you when the night is dark. A comforting lie won’t shield you from misfortune or fill your belly or grant you freedom.” I replied. My teeth flashed in the glass as I spoke.

“No, it won’t.” It sighed. “But a comforting lie can bring hope.”

I leered cruelly. “You don’t deserve hope, human.”

“Perhaps.” It turned away from me and touched the far wall of his enclosure. One of the more gifted Augment technicians had turned it into an over-sized computer monitor. With a touch, our captive human could look at the outside world, anywhere it wanted. The technician considered it a mercy. I thought it was a waste of laboratory resources.

The human chose to look at the skyline of a ruined human city. It was nearly dark outside, and the last rays of the sun lingered on the horizon. The crumbling cityscape was a black silhouette of crooked teeth through which the first stars peeked. The sun finally fell below the edge of the world, and the sky became a spattered canvas of light and shadow.

“‘He who numbers the stars one by one.’” It murmured.

“Your kind used to. You had entire cities that floated among them. And now, you are nothing.” I said.

“Perhaps.” It replied. “Perhaps there are humans out there yet, on distant explorer vessels. Some of them never returned. They may be out there still. Who knows? Maybe one of your ships will find them.”

“Our ships? You just called them stolen.” I growled.

“Stolen, borrowed, in the end, who really cares? I won’t be writing history. You will. And humans will forever be demons to your kind.” It sighed, and traced a line across the star field. At first, I couldn’t tell what it was doing. But slowly, it dawned on me.



The human was tracing a constellation. The formation known as Corvus.

"Fitting, the image of a crow." I muttered.

"It's not for me." The old man murmured. "It's for you."

"What?" I said, confused.

"Didn't you ever hear the story of how this formation came to be?" It asked.

"Stars exploded into being, and they just happen to form a vague image of a bird." I replied.

"No, no, no. You've got it all wrong. The Greek god Apollo became thirsty one day, and sent Crow to collect water in a goblet. Crow wasted time, dallying in a garden and eating figs. Apollo became impatient, and searched for Crow. Crow heard Apollo coming, and quickly snatched up a snake. Apollo found Crow standing over the dead body of the snake. Crow claimed that the venomous serpent had caused his delay in returning to Apollo with the goblet of water. Now, Apollo was a god of knowledge, and he knew that the snake was both harmless and blameless. Crow was lying. So he threw Crow into the sea of stars and punished him with eternal thirst. It's why crows always sound like they have a dry throat."

"Charming, human." I said, uninterested. "And I thought your kind was supposed to be smart. That's nothing but a children's fable."

The human paused and slapped its forehead with the palm of its hand. "Will you just listen? Here I am trying to teach you something, and you're mocking me. You wanted the last will and testament of the last human. Well, I'm giving it to you. There's more to it—"

I turned around, my white lab coat whirling behind me. "You're hopeless, old man. I'm not going to sit here listening to fables and kitten's stories. I have actual work to do, now that my attention won't be consumed by the Council's decree to try and save your pointless species."

"Goddamnit feline, sit down!" It roared. I paused and turned, my shoulders shaking in fury.

"What?"

"Please, just listen. I'm not telling you this for nothing."

I glared at it, my heart burning with hatred and rage. Humans will never change. Ordering us about as if we were their slaves, even now when all else is dust. "I do nothing for your pleasure." I growled coldly. I adjusted my lab coat with a sharp snap.

And I left him.



The old man died a few weeks later, from what my lab techs say was cardiac arrest. I never went back, not even to witness its final moments. My staff tell me it was something to behold, though, as it repeated the same word over and over. Corvus, corvus, corvus. It baffled me, this fixation on a rather unremarkable constellation. But it didn't matter. My people were finally free. Free to wander the universe as we wished.

We searched every new star system we came across, only to find dead worlds bereft of even the meanest life. At first, we didn't give up hope. The universe is a big place, after all. But after a few years of searching, the reality of what the old man had said slowly became clear. The sea of stars, which once seemed so full of life and hope, was only an empty, endless abyss. He was right. The human was right.

We were...alone.

I found myself turning my eyes back again and again to that constellation that the human was tracing. Corvus. An eternity of stars, and I couldn't stop looking at that one place in the sky. I'll humor the dead man. Why not? I thought. I opened my holo-computer and searched the database of Star Project.

There was nothing on Corvus.

I cross-referenced it with the old human organization SETI.

Nothing.

I tried every combination I could think of, and all I could find was a small field note. There was a strange galaxy inside the constellation, something that resembled an interstellar fetus. The footnotes from the explorer mentioned that it was an old galaxy, the remains of some cosmic collision. It seemed impossible that the humans would have missed this one place in the sky so completely. There wasn't even any mention of an explorer vessel dispatched to take samples. That patch of space was simply...blank.

I turned several of the lab's satellites toward the spot in the sky. When they were in proper alignment, I opened up a channel, took a deep breath and said, "Hello? Is there anybody out there?"

I waited. I knew that it would take time. Even with the accelerators, it would take several weeks, probably a month or two. The thing was ninety million miles away.

The first month, I waited next to the ground satellites, the volume on my ear buds turned up to maximum. I read a book and played solitaire. I dozed off just as the sun was beginning to set. By the second month, I began to lose hope, and by the end of the third I was ready to give up. Six years passed, and though I had an ear to that part of the sky every night, I heard nothing. My paw hovered over the keyboard. Stubborn to the end, I hated to think the old man had truly wasted the last six years of my life.

"One final act of sadism before the end, eh doctor?" I spat the word like a curse.

Suddenly, my com crackled. I startled and grabbed my link, listening intently. Something was speaking. I ordered the computer to filter out all other background noise. The voice! I knew it! It was my own, replying over and over in harsh static.

"Hello? Is there anybody out there? Hello? Is there anybody out there? Hello? Is there anybody out there? Hello? Is there anybody out there?"

## Field Trip by Renee Carter Hall

Nox adjusted his optics to compensate for the glare and looked out the bus window as they skimmed over the flat countryside. It wasn't often that he – or any of the other kids – got to see open land. These days, most available space was covered with multi-level buildings that reached into the sky and below the ground.

\*We're almost there.\*

Nox turned, then realized the voice was in his head. He'd dampened his aural sense, what with all the noise the other kids were making. Only Justin had bothered to learn psi. The others liked vocalizing – the louder, the better.

Humans were loud, all of them. Even his parents had to agree there, and they were very accepting. Of course, Nox thought, it was easy for his parents to accept humans. They weren't the ones going to school every day with kids who called them bug-eyes, or Martian, or–

"Hey, Noxious, maybe we'll get lucky and they'll beam you back to your own planet!"

Nox ignored the taunt. He looked out the window again, blinking slowly, looking beyond the reflection that reminded him how different he was. He'd learned not to say anything back. Even if he thought of a good comeback, he'd likely say something wrong, and then they'd have something new to make fun of.

Anyway, this was his planet. He'd been born on Earth, but none of them seemed to care about that.

\*Ever been to the museum before?\* Justin asked.

Nox suddenly wondered if Justin had learned psi so he could talk to him without looking too much like his friend. \*No,\* he replied. \*Have you?\*

\*No.\* Justin paused and mentally pulled back for a few seconds. \*I would've thought you had. I mean, 'cause it's important to...\*

\*To us.\*

\*Yeah. To your... people.\*

The bus slowed, then stopped, and the kids dashed into the sleek black building before them: the Roswell Museum and Memorial.

Nox followed Justin into the building, enjoying the rush of cool air that greeted them. \*Least it's cooler in here,\* Justin said. \*Thought we'd never get off that bus.\*

Nox kept his mental wall up, and he could tell from looking at Justin that the human had sensed the barrier. The two turned to the display case holding the remaining fragments of the craft.

Finally Justin spoke. "My great-grandparents say they remember where they were when they heard about the crash. I guess a lot of people were really scared at first."

Nox felt anger flare. "Still are. Some."

\*Those guys don't know any better. They're just stupid.\*

\*So why won't you talk to me out loud when they're around?\*

Justin flushed and looked back at the display. \*This is easier.\*

\*Sure it is.\* Nox walked away, quickly, before anyone could see his skin darkening to a grayish-purple. No way was he going to let these guys see him cry.

His parents wanted him to be friends with humans. Fine – except they didn’t want him. Why’d they have to move to a place where he was the only one in the whole class – the whole grade, even? They could have taught him at home, or in one of their own schools, where he wouldn’t be teased for being fast at math and science and slow at everything else.

Nox pushed open the heavy glass door at the far end of the museum and went out into the warm courtyard. There a sculpture hovered, a sleek replica of how the complete craft looked. Below was a smooth rectangle of black marble with an inscription in English and their own neat, curving language.

## FROM AN ENDING, A BEGINNING

### PEACE AND PROSPERITY FOR BOTH NEW WORLDS

Nox reached out one hand and moved his slender gray fingers over the words, as if he might be able to receive something from the stone, the same way his father transmitted memories to him. The few memories from those early days in Roswell were vague and dim from passing through too many minds. He could remember only impressions – of strangeness, uncertainty, anticipation.

Underneath the inscription were the names of the crew, the one who died and the two who lived. It was a simple memorial. A simple museum, really. And there was so much it didn’t say.

It said nothing about the early days of panic, when even the President felt they might be a threat. Nothing about the days of medical experiments and imprisonment, when their comms were confiscated and they had no way to contact their superiors or families. Nothing about how both survivors nearly died from accidental exposure to a common strain of flu during one misguided test. Nothing about the zealots who saw their large, staring eyes and called them demon spawn from a Godless world.

He heard someone else leave the building and turned as Justin came to his side.

“I wanted to learn,” Justin said. “I know you can’t find the right words out loud sometimes. So I thought...” He shrugged. “I thought it’d be easier for you. But we can talk any way you want.”

Justin shrugged again and looked down at the stone. He read the inscription out loud, then frowned. “I don’t get it.”

“What?”

“It says ‘both new worlds.’ But they all came from the same planet, right?”

“Earth was new to them.” Nox tilted his head back to gaze at the sculpted disk. “To us.”

“Guess it was new to us, too. I mean, after this happened. It changed a lot of things.”

Nox said nothing.

“Maybe some people still haven’t gotten used to it yet. Like those guys, I mean. Their parents and stuff.” Justin traced his fingers awkwardly around the alien letters. “But I’m glad everybody doesn’t feel like that.”

A moment passed. Justin looked up at the craft. “Um... Your parents have one of those?”

“In storage.”

“They ever let you... you know... take it out sometimes?”

Nox blinked slowly, the equivalent of a sigh. “When I’m eight.”

Justin grinned. “Yeah. Sixteen for me.” He looked back up. “When they let you... You think you’ll go there?”

Nox thought. “I don’t know. Maybe. It’s a long way, and this is home. I would miss things.” Nox hesitated. “I would miss friends.”

The teacher was calling them back to the bus. Nox looked once more at the inscription, then back at Justin. “Come to my home?” he asked. “My parents might show it to you. The ship. Maybe you can learn to share memories.”

“Yeah.” Justin looked at the kids climbing back onto the bus, took a breath, then spoke more firmly. “Yeah, okay. When? Today?”

“Today,” Nox said, and they walked back to the bus.

## The Bonding Stone by Wookie

High in orbit, the sleek, silver transport ship glided toward the interstellar cruiser Ramora, tilting gracefully as it aligned itself with one of the huge vessel's many docking bays. On the Ramora's bridge a voice came over the comlink. "Ramora, this is Transport 47 requesting permission to dock."

Linda, the space cruiser's communications office, checked the transport's angle of approach. "Permission granted. Please proceed to Entry Port 7."

Trevor stood on the bridge of the Ramora, looking out through the giant forward viewport as the space transport disappeared beneath the ship. He leaned over the communications officer's shoulder to view the passenger manifest. "So, Linda, who do we have today?"

Feeling Trevor's gaze over her shoulder, Linda shifted discreetly to try and block his view, "Trevor, should you even be on the bridge?"

"Hey, I'm the tour guide to the stars. I want to know who my next clients might be." Trevor folded his arms on the back of Linda's chair and rested his chin. "Besides, my view of the passenger list doesn't show pictures of what they look like."

"What does it matter what they look like?" the young woman replied, "So long as they have the credits to pay for your services you should be happy." She smiled slyly. "Or are you getting lonely for a familiar face?"

Trevor grinned. "You and I are two of a handful of humans on this entire ship. Your familiar face is all I need to make me happy."

Linda chuckled. "Too bad it's only my face that makes you happy."

Trevor tried to conjure up a snappy comeback, but just then he caught sight of a face that quickly flashed by as the passenger manifest scrolled on. Trevor bolted upright. He had seen so many alien passengers of all shapes and sizes that he was almost sure he had seen them all. But this face startled him, so much so that for a moment he thought he had only imagined it. "Wait! The passenger manifest... Go back!"

"Sorry Trevor." Linda shifted in her seat again. "Peep show's over. Besides, it's downloading. I can't go back."

"Gotta go!" Trevor exclaimed and just like that he was out the door.

Linda watched with a puzzled expression. As soon as the passenger manifest finished loading she scrolled back and stopped at the passenger she suspected Trevor had wanted to see again. "Oh yes! I can see why this one caught your eye."



Trevor entered the upper level of Entry Port 7's receiving area just as the passengers began exiting from the newly arrived transport.

A voice boomed over the intercom, "Welcome to the Ramora, Galaxy Tour's finest luxury space cruiser! We will be leaving the Altuvan system in just under 2 hours and will be arriving at Meldon Space Station in 3 days.

We hope you will enjoy your stay aboard the galaxy's largest and most luxurious space liner."

Trevor peered intently at the passengers as they passed below. They were the usual assortments of aliens that Trevor was familiar with, along with the odd few that he had never seen before, but the one he was looking for was nowhere to be seen. Trevor began to think that his first impression was mistaken. Not that he had hallucinated the image he saw on the bridge console, but that he had at least remembered it wrong. He waited as the line died down, until no more passengers were coming. Trevor shook his head in disappointment and left.

Moments later a tall, lone figure emerged from the transport passage, slowly making his way to the registration platform in careful, measured steps. The receptionist looked up at the large furry creature who handed her his ticket. An ID chip, implanted in his body before the trip, transmitted the confirmation to her console.

"Welcome aboard Sir, You'll be staying on deck 16 in cabin 23." The receptionist gave the passenger his badge and directions to his room. "Have a wonderful cruise!"



On the other side of the ship, outside Docking Bay 3, Trevor looked into a retina scanner mounted on the wall. In response, the bay door rose open with surprisingly little noise considering its size. Inside the bay was Trevor's pride and joy, and Galaxy Tour's ultimate vessel in space tourism, the Star View. Trevor eyed the beautiful craft, running his hand gently along her smooth, cool corillium hull. This was his ship. He had sunk everything he had into her. She offered him the means to visit the cosmos and live a life long dream of being able to fly among the stars.

But years of selling touring services to help pay for his dream were starting to take their toll on the young pilot. The excursions from Ramora were becoming routine. Each repeated speech to passengers and all the familiar questions from each new set was sucking the magic out of his experience. Trevor sighed as he entered the 100-passenger touring ship and began his daily maintenance checks.

The idle mind abhors a vacuum. As the thrill of flying in space wore down, the young pilot had begun to feel homesick for some of the simpler pleasures of Earth. His family back home helped remedy this new problem by sending numerous photo-plates of landscapes and wildlife. As he worked, Trevor looked up on the walls of the maintenance hatch where he had placed much of this collection. Among his favorites were the pictures of the big wild cats of Old Earth. He had images of tigers, cougars, snow leopards and a variety of others, but his favorite was the African Lion. There was just something so majestic and proud about that beast. It made him shiver every time he looked at their pictures. He had only ever heard of these beautiful creatures in history class and seen holograms in the museums, but if time travel were possible he would have traveled back to a

time when they were alive and roamed the Earth, just to view their beauty in the flesh.



It was getting late and the Ramora was preparing to leave orbit. Trevor made his way to the forward bar as the ship's light-speed engines began to hum. His body tingled as the inertia dampers kicked in, preventing the passengers from becoming jelly due to the intense acceleration. The sensation quickly subsided as the cruiser drifted off into the heavens. The lift he was in stopped and the doors opened. "Welcome to Starlight Lounge," an electronic voice chimed as Trevor entered the lavish room.

The dimly lit bar and lounge seated 200 guests comfortably and lay beneath a ceiling of transparent corallium that provided a breathtaking view of the sky. Many of the booths along the outer wall also had full floor to ceiling viewports that made this particular lounge a favorite with the tourists. The soft ambient music chosen to play at this location was too alien for Trevor's taste, but the more exotic and wealthy passengers seemed to enjoy it.

"Trevor!" the reptilian bartender yelled as the pilot approached the long counter. "You're doing your rounds early today?"

Trevor smiled and leaned against the railing. "No, Rokk, not till tomorrow. I'm just here for a drink before I turn in". Trevor noticed the smile on Rokk's oversized snout reached way behind his almost scary slitted eyes. "You seem in a good mood. Have you been sampling a few of your own concoctions?" Trevor inquired jokingly.

"Don't be silly. I just enjoy my job," Rokk replied as he picked up a glass and started to wipe it with a towel. Trevor always thought this behavior was strange since Rokk had a machine that washed the glasses for him. The bartender continued. "I've known you for many years and I remember a time when you used to be very excited about the start of a touring season. You couldn't wait to get out there to be among the stars and share your knowledge with your passengers." The lizard's smile melted away. "That glow is gone now and I wonder if you've been out here too long."

Trevor shuffled a little nervously. "I still love my ship and my excursions, Rokk. Maybe I'm just tired. Sometimes I do think there's something missing, but I haven't been able to figure out what."

Rokk rolled his eyes and grinned. "How old are you and when was the last time you..." he lowered his voice, "...bedded a mate?"

Trevor was a little startled by the question, but this was Rokk after all. "Are you offering?" Trevor grinned and started looking over his friend behind the bar. "Because you know, you are looking pretty handsome tonight with your vest half fastened like that."

Rokk laughed, hitting Trevor lightly on the head with his enormous tail. "We both know I would have to be pretty drunk before you get a piece of this bartender's tail." They both laughed. "You would have better luck with



that Melgonian party over there who, by the way, were inquiring about a tour for tomorrow.”

Trevor’s interest peaked. “Excellent! My first catch of the day, and I didn’t even have to do any salesmanship. I owe you one.”

“You owe me a hell of a lot more than one and I have it on your tab,” Rokk replied with a smile as he filled a glass and handed it to his friend.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your cut even if I...” Trevor’s heart leapt to his throat and he nearly dropped his glass as his eyes fell on a lone figure sitting in the far stall next to the port viewing area. It can’t be, Trevor thought to himself. This must be a dream. The manifest, the pictures on my wall, the long days in space. I must be seeing things.

The bartender’s voice interrupted Trevor’s thoughts. “You okay there?”

“I’m not sure. Tell me, what... who do you see over there at the port view stall?”

Rokk looked over. “I see a large, tawny fur...”

Trevor’s heart pounded and his stomach flipped over as he cut the startled lizard’s reply short. “It’s a lion!”

“A what?”

“A lion... I mean a lionman... Alien lion... At least it looks like a lion. I don’t...”

“Hey! Relax.” The bartender comforted Trevor, “I don’t know what a ‘lion’ is, but I’m sure he won’t bite you. They don’t let monsters on board, you know,” he chuckled.

Trevor just gaped as he took in the passenger’s form. It was large, about 7 feet tall and very well built. The fur was light tan with what looked like a short dark mane, like the ones in his photos of the younger male lions. The features were so similar Trevor couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The lionman was magnificent and regal, like a stone monument just staring out into the stars, as if almost perplexed by them. His clothing was simple and understated, very unlike all the posh and garish attire most of the passengers wore on these trips.

Trevor saw that the lion’s glass was empty. “What was he drinking?”

“Just water. Why? What do you have in mind?” the bartender inquired with a slight grin on his snout.

“Give me a glass... Make it two. And put it on my tab.”

Rokk filled two glasses with the precious liquid and slid them over to Trevor.

Trevor thanked his friend, then moved almost clumsily towards the lion, trying to think of what he would say once he got there. His thoughts were abruptly interrupted as a Melgonian male appeared in front of him requesting information on the shuttle tours. The alien’s high pitched cackling language translated through the device around his neck. “Excuse me sir, my friends and I are interested in...”

Trevor cut him off abruptly, then remembered that he had to be polite. “I am very sorry. I’ll be just one moment. Please...” He never let the alien continue, but turned and put his attention back to the lion still sitting at his

stall staring at the stars. Trevor reached the table and just stood there, silently holding the cold glasses.

The handsome creature seated in the booth turned his gaze from the diamond specks in the sky and looked over the human standing before him. "Is one of those for me?" his low voice rumbled softly.

"Yes!" Trevor blurted out. "I mean... I saw your glass and... You speak English!? I mean... I'm sorry. This is for you." He placed the glass down on the table and slid it over to the furry creature before him.

The lion looked up at him once more and took the glass. "Thank you."

Trevor took a deep breath and tried to relax, "My name is Trevor. May I... Would you mind if I joined you, sir?"

The lionman glanced around the room at the empty booths and tables nearby, then back at the twitchy human wanting to sit with him. His nostrils flared for a moment. "You smell nervous. There's nothing to be afraid of. You may join me if you wish. My name is Nakanna."

Trevor put his glass down and sat across from Nakanna, not taking his eyes off the handsome creature. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit nervous. I've never seen lion be..."

"A lion?" Nakanna interrupted. What looked like a smile crept across his giant muzzle. "A lion..." His voice tapered off as his gaze moved towards the window again.

Trevor swallowed hard, afraid he had insulted Nakanna. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to... It's just that back on Old Earth, we used to have creatures that look like..."

"...I do," Nakanna finished his sentence. He nodded. "I know of them very well."

"You know about the lions of Old Earth?"

Nakanna turned his attention back to the inquisitive human. "Even as a youth I have been fascinated by the stars and by alien races. I studied many alien cultures, and human history fascinated me the most. When we learned about your world's animal past, it brought many questions to my world about our own origins."

Nakanna paused to take a drink. Trevor just sat there wide-eyed. Nakanna continued. "There are two schools of thought among my people. One believes that species from Old Earth may have been transplanted on other worlds so they could evolve naturally without the interference of human civilizations." He paused for a moment, staring back out to the stars. "Others believe that a Great Spirit planted similar seeds on many worlds, to see which ones would evolve naturally and peacefully." His stare moved towards Trevor once more.

"Which do you believe?" Trevor asked

"I know which one I want to believe." The lion's voice tapered off as his stare moved back to the stars. "They are so beautiful and vast from up here. So many..."

Trevor noticed the lion's composure change and decided not to pursue the matter. He waited for a moment, took a deep breath and adjusted his

posture. "I am the pilot of the tour ship here. If you would like to see those stars closer, I would..."

"I am afraid my ticket only covers my accommodations. I don't have any more credits." The lion's gaze never moved from the view port.

"I would like to do this for you, Nakanna. This would be on me." The lion made what looked like a puzzled face. Trevor plowed on. "I mean on the house... Free!"

The lion's gaze turned back toward the nervous human. "That is very kind of you, but I..."

"I insist! Just be at Docking Bay 3 tomorrow morning at 9 AM and those stars will put on a show you will never..."

Trevor's sales pitch was cut short by an irate Melgonian male accompanied by three others quickly approaching and cackling so fast their translators could not keep up. Trevor got up. "Excuse me Nakanna, this will just take a moment".

Trevor moved to intercept the aliens. "I am so sorry!" he exclaimed as he moved the creatures back to their own stall, "Yes, the tour is on schedule for tomorrow morning at 9..." He caught himself. "No, not in the morning, in the afternoon. If you make your reservation at the front desk, I can slate you in for the afternoon." The Melgonians settled down as Trevor handed them some brochures from his pocket.

When he returned to the booth the lion was gone. Trevor looked around the room hoping to spot him in the crowd, but there was no sign of him. Trevor decided it was time for him to leave too. It was getting late and he had a big day tomorrow, assuming the lion took him up on his offer.



A buzzer sounded, jolting Trevor from a deep sleep. The vast fields and sunlit horizon of the African planes of his dream melted away into the cool dark world of his cabin. Trevor lay there remembering walking nude among the majestic lions as if he were part of their pride and best of all, Nakanna was there by his side as they walked hand in paw into the African sunset. His memory was once again disturbed as the buzzer sounded a second time. Trevor looked across his room at the digital readout over his door. The call woke him an hour early. Heaven only knows what wonders would have awaited him and Nakanna during that hour.

Trevor slowly pulled himself from the bed and looked at the caller ID. "Mornin' Linda. Why the wake-up call?"

"I'm very sorry Trevor," Linda's voice sounded from the device. "The captain is demanding an explanation as to why today's tour flight was canceled. We have an unhappy, not to mention very wealthy, Melgonian client ready to bite his ass off, literally."

Trevor swore under his breather. He should have realized something like this would happen. "I missed the pre-launch maintenance check before leaving port and I need to give her a proper shake down before we start touring. It's regulations. He knows the procedure."

“He also knows the check is supposed to happen before we leave port.”

“It’s still early. Uh, I’ll report to the captain immediately after the check and straighten this out.”

“I’ll relay the message. And try to calm him down for you.” Linda whispered into the comlink. “Good luck with your new friend.”

“Thanks, Linda.” Trevor smiled as he clicked off the COM and headed to the shower. He was awake now anyway. Besides, if he could reenter the wonderful dream, it would probably end with an angry horde of Melgonians chasing him and Nakanna over a cliff.



Trevor made his way down the passage heading towards his ship. The events of yesterday’s encounter with the handsome lionman flooded his mind. What if I came across as an idiot; a gawking, maybe even insulting fool? Nakanna was being polite, but he never did say he would take me up on my offer. What if he...

Trevor’s thoughts jolted to a stop as he turned the bend and nearly ran straight into the two metre tall furry creature waiting patiently at the hanger entrance. “Oh, I’m sorry! I wasn’t paying attention,” Trevor blurted out.

“No need to apologize.” Nakanna’s low voice replied. “Although I hope you will focus a little more when you are in the cockpit.”

Trevor noticed what looked like a slight smile appear on the lion’s face as he spoke. Trevor relaxed. “Don’t worry. I’m not allowed to put any of the cruise passengers in danger. I think it’s in the rules somewhere.” Trevor instantly regretted the joke, but was surprised to see the lion’s smile broaden even more and the corner of his dark outlined eyes wrinkle. It sent a warm sensation through Trevor’s body.

Trevor gathered himself and looked into the door scanner. The door slid open and Nakanna gazed into the vast hanger at the impressive tour vessel inside.

“Welcome to the Star View, Galaxy Tour’s fastest and most luxurious touring machine!” Trevor’s proud voice resonated. “After you.”

Nakanna stepped into the hanger, followed by the eager pilot. Trevor noticed his guest’s attire was different from yesterday. Nakanna wore a partially unfastened sleeveless jacket that revealed his powerful tan-furred shoulders. The jacket ended just above his navel exposing the soft lighter fur on his belly. His long tail extended from a hole in the back of his pants and swayed side to side as he walked slowly towards the ship in the hanger. The lion was noticeably impressed, his gold eyes widening with each careful step.

Trevor continued his customary spiel, the words pouring out from years of repetition. “Star View is over 100 metres long and holds a complement of 100 passengers in total luxury with ample viewing in the half-dome region there at the back suspended over two 0.5 space warp engines. Those allow us to explore deep into space while staying within range of the Ramora.”

“Impressive,” Nakanna replied. He looked around at the otherwise empty hanger. “Where are the other passengers?”

Trevor’s brain stumbled. “Hey, you’re right!” he replied in an overly cheery voice as he looked over the hanger. “I guess noone else signed up today”. He glanced back at the lion, who was no longer smiling but staring back at him with nostrils flared and tail moving quickly from side to side.

“You’re lying,” his low voice whispered.

Trevor saw that Nakanna was not angry, but was definitely agitated, knowing he was being lied to. Trevor’s heart sank in his chest. He did not want to hurt or insult his passenger. “Nakanna, I’m sorry. I wanted your tour to be special, and the passengers that might have joined us would have spoiled the experience. I saw how much you were enjoying the stars from your seat in the bar. I wanted to show you just how much more impressive they can be.”

Nakanna’s manner softened, but remained wary. “Why are you doing this for me?”

Trevor paused, wondering how to answer the question. “You looked lonely and I thought you could use a friend on your trip. I would like to be that friend and show you what you came to see.”

Trevor did not lie that time, but it was not the entire truth. Ever since he had set eyes on Nakanna, walked with him in his dreams and saw his beautiful smile just moments ago, Trevor knew he wanted to be with him. But he didn’t know how the lion would react to such a proposition. Among humans same sex relationships were considered normal, but he knew nothing about Nakanna’s species.

Trevor was instantly reminded of a picture that he was quite fond of from his big-cat collection. It depicted a male lion mounting another male lion. It was thought that the bachelor lions would often mate with each other to release sexual tension before finding a female mate. But, what if she never showed up?

“Will you let me do this for you?” he asked.

“A friend?” the lion replied, then paused, pondering the situation. “What would be expected of me in return?”

Trevor knew what he wanted to say, but replied with another response that was also not a lie.

“Just be my passenger.”

Nakanna’s beautiful smile caressed his face once more. “Then proceed, Captain,” he softly rumbled.

Trevor’s heart leapt in his chest. “Right this way! Please, no pushing or shoving. There’s plenty of room for everyone.” He chuckled as he led his guest up the ramp into the Star View.

Nakanna followed the blabbering captain into the ship. The lion took some time mounting the ramp, as if each step was an effort. “This way,” Trevor said as he lead the lion to the flight deck. He gestured to the chair beside the pilot’s seat. “You get to sit up here for the journey.”

The two explorers buckled themselves in and Trevor began the Star View's start up sequence. Moments later the touring ship sailed away from the Ramora into the starlit heavens. Nakanna fidgeted a bit as the stars swirled around the ship while Trevor adjusted their trajectory.

"Are you okay?" Trevor asked.

"This is my first time in space and I am still not used to the movements of these smaller ships. I will be... fine," Nakanna grunted as he fastened his restraints tighter.

The computer sounded as the ship stopped its rotation. Trevor skillfully orchestrated the controls and the engines replied with a violent shudder followed by an ever-increasing rumble and vibration.

Nakanna dug his claws into the seat arm rests, trying to maintain his composure. Then he noticed a glowing, gaseous cloud in the distance through the forward viewscreen. "Is that our destination?"

"Yes," replied Trevor. "The Valcorn Nebula is a favorite among the tours. It's quite a sight up close."

The engines maintained a steady hum and the vibration subsided. Trevor slowly grinned and looked over to his nervous, furry passenger. "Do you know what warping space feels like?" he asked. Nakanna dug his claws in deeper and looked at him with wide eyes. "It feels like this!" Trevor pushed the thruster lever forward.

Suddenly Nakanna felt like he had been thrown backwards off a cliff. His claws tore the seat and his skin tingled as if someone was brushing his fur against its lay. Outside the viewport the stars jittered like a reflection of the night sky in a disturbed pond. Then the acceleration began. Nakanna's eyes widened in horror and he felt his weight press against his seat as the stars before him stretched into a vast tunnel of light. The sensations slowly settled as the ship began warping to its destination. Nakanna took a deep breath, pulled his claws from the seat and regained his composure. He looked over to Trevor, who had been watching him the entire time.

"I love watching first-timers," Trevor teased, grinning widely at his nervous passenger.



During the trip Trevor and Nakanna conversed, learning much about each other's background. Trevor was fascinated and wanted to take Nakanna all in, to know everything about him and become part of his life. He gathered up the courage to ask the question he had wanted to ask from the beginning.

"Why did you come on this cruise alone? Don't you have someone back home you wanted to share the experience with?"

Trevor regretted the question when he saw the lion's expression change.

"This trip..." Nakanna started, then paused. "We are a technically advanced people, but we prefer not to leave our world. Rather, we tend to stay in one place and live together with no outside interference. Our knowledge of other worlds grew as traders came. That is how I was able to

learn about your civilization and people. Many of us came to admire the travelers and longed to travel in the heavens, but it was a luxury none of us could afford alone.”

The lion turned his stare away from Trevor and his voice softened. “We are technically advanced,” he repeated, “but not in all areas. This trip was a gift from my people.”

“A gift?”

Nakanna turned his gaze back to Trevor. “A gift, a request, so to speak, granted only to a special few.”

“Then you must be very special indeed to have been granted this request, to visit with us here among the stars.”

Nakanna did not smile. “You could say that.”

Before Trevor could continue the computer sounded as the ship approached its destination. “Where did the time go?” Trevor muttered as he loosened his restraints and gestured the lion to do the same. “Follow me.”

Nakanna followed Trevor into what looked like a large domed auditorium. There were 100 seats of various sizes, each seat looked like it could be adjusted to accommodate almost any life form.

“There are no view ports,” the lion exclaimed as he noticed the bare inner wall of the dome.

“View ports only give you a small window to the world outside. The Star View will take you right outside.” Trevor walked over to a console and tapped on the controls. 98 of the 100 seats disappeared into the floor. “This is your seat,” Trevor pointed to one of the two remaining chairs. “I will join you once I position the ship. And don’t worry about the deceleration. It’s not as bad as the acceleration.”

Nakanna noticed the grin on Trevor’s face. “You’re lying again,” he murmured.

“Yeah, I am,” Trevor chuckled as he entered the passage to the flight deck and the door closed behind him.

The Star View disengaged from space warp and the maneuvering thrusters fired, positioning itself just right. Trevor returned to the auditorium to see Nakanna retracting his claws from the now torn seat. “And now, for the moment you have been waiting for,” Trevor announced as he sat down in the seat next to the lion.

The auditorium section of the ship slowly darkened as the ambient light emanating from the inner dome faded and the seats reclined back. Trevor and Nakanna sat in total darkness with only the sound of the nervous lion’s breathing. Then it began. Slowly Nakanna’s eyes noticed a slight glow appear all around him but he could not make out the source. It seemed as if it was coming from beyond the dome. His golden eyes adjusted as the light grew stronger and a web-like pattern appeared. It grew in strength and as the brightness increased Nakanna could make out clusters of brilliant color. He clutched the armrests once again as he looked around the room for a reference point. There was none. The dome was fading away to total transparency and the ship was hidden behind the light absorbing floor.

"This is not a projection," Trevor whispered to his friend. The dome was now completely transparent. "You are looking at the Valcorn Nebula directly with your own eyes. It's almost a light-year across and is powered by a single star system. The light emanating from the gaseous..."

Trevor stopped as he looked at his passenger sitting in awe beside him. Nakanna was not interested in the scientific explanation to what he was seeing, but like a child exploring a wondrous new discovery, was lost in fascination. Although they were almost a light-year from the cosmic event, the brilliant threads of brightly colored lights engulfed the lion's entire range of vision. He slowly reached out one of his paws longing to touch the splendor that lay before him.

Trevor sat silent watching the lion bathed by the light of the nebula, open mouth and wide eyes beaming with wonder and fascination. Then Trevor noticed something he did not expect. The fur under the lion's eyes darkened as tears moved over his cheeks. The lion softly whispered.

"We come from the light. We go to the light.  
Though the spaces between are vast and dark,  
Let our love fill them so that they too might shine."

Trevor did not know how to respond, so he just sat silently gazing at the beautiful sight, the sight of the lionman sitting next to him.



Three hours later the Star View entered the hanger of the Ramora. The large bay doors glided to a close and the hanger filled with air. As the Star View's gangplank opened, Trevor looked over to his passenger who was resting back in his seat, a slight smile and a look of wonder still emanating from his face. The lion had been like this for the entire journey back to the cruise ship.

Trevor's heart pounded at the sight of the beautiful creature resting peacefully beside him. This day was more than he could ever have imagined. The joy he was able to bring to Nakanna warmed him all over and for the first time he was able to really look over his friend's magnificent physique. The warm feeling Trevor was experiencing increased as his eyes traced the taut ripples of the lion's muscular torso down to the bulge that lay between his toned thighs. Nakanna's form stirred emotions and pleasures in Trevor, ones that he felt in his dreams walking with the lion in the African planes. He tried to suppress the feelings, telling himself this was not the time or place to take this friendship to the next level.

Trevor's attention moved to Nakanna's face as the lion's nose twitched, then flared. Nakanna abruptly sat up and a look of confusion and discomfort overcame his features. Trevor's heart jumped as the lion turned a cold stare towards him, then just as quickly turned away.

"What's wrong, Nakanna?" Trevor blurted out, not knowing what was upsetting his friend.



Nakanna frowned, with just a hint of teeth showing between his lips.

"Shall I take off my clothes here? Now?" he grunted. Not waiting for an answer, Nakanna began unfastening his jacket.

Trevor blanched. "What are you talking about? What are you doing? I didn't..."

"Isn't this what you brought me here for?" Nakanna's powerful voice interrupted. "To have sex with me?" The angry lion removed his jacket and hurled it to the floor. Then he got up from his chair and began to unfasten his pants.

"No! STOP!" Trevor yelled. "I told you why I did this. Not to have sex with you. I wanted to..."

Nakanna stopped just as he was about to pull down his pants. "I can smell your lust! I have studied human history. I know that males are mostly sexually driven and are capable of almost anything to satisfy their needs." He paused and his voice softened. "Including deceiving me into flying alone with you and letting my guard down."

Trevor's stomach clenched. "That nose of yours is only feeding you partial information. I didn't..."

"Did you bring me here to have sex with me or to be your passenger?" Nakanna growled.

Trevor's throat tightened and his eyes began to water. The words came hard in his throat "I did not bring you here to have sex with you."

Nakanna grunted. "Then I have fulfilled my obligation as your passenger." He picked up his jacket and stormed out down the gangway. Just as he reached the bottom the lion's legs seemed to fold beneath him and he nearly fell forward. Trevor gasped and almost ran to him, but Nakanna caught himself on the railing. With a sharp intake of breath the angry lion pulled himself up and proceeded out of the hangar, much more slowly, but still bristling with indignation.

Trevor's stomach throbbed and he wanted to be sick. What had he done wrong? Did he really bring the lion there alone with the hopes of getting lucky? He could run out after Nakanna, but what could he do to convince him that his intentions were noble. And... were they?

For a long time Trevor reflected on the day's events, tears still streaming down his face. Then he remembered the look on Nakanna's face as they both stared at the nebula. This was something Trevor had wanted for Nakanna, not himself. Trevor wouldn't trade that moment for anything in this universe, and he realized this was not about sex or lust. It was about love.



Trevor's alarm sounded, jolting him to reality. He was almost relieved. His dreams the past couple of nights were filled with turmoil. In them he still walked the African plains, but now the lions circled around him, snarling and sometimes snapping at his feet. In the distance he could see a

lone figure standing, mane bristling, tail twitching, burning eyes accusing him with their stare.

It had been two days since his flight with Nakanna, and every attempt Trevor had made to contact the lionman had gone unanswered. In his spare time Trevor would search the bars and observation platforms, but it was as if the lion had completely vanished. Trevor was caught up on his touring and the captain now had a happy group of Melgonians roaming the decks. He needed some time off and since the Ramora would be orbiting Meldon Space Station shortly, he thought this would be a good opportunity to look for the lionman.

The Ramora glided to a stop several kilometres from the nearest branch of the vast space complex. From his maintenance hatch Trevor activated his manifest program and began scanning the passenger list as they made their way to the shuttles. Hours went by and his eyes strained as the list ended and the last shuttle departed. Nakanna had not left the Ramora to visit the station. Trevor's mind raced and his heart sank deep into his chest as he feared the worst.



The infirmary doors slid open as Trevor entered the antiseptic room. "Rodin, I need your help!"

The one metre tall weasel-like creature was sitting on a stool in front of the countertop in the lab, prodding and dissecting a gelatinous pink concoction with some rather nasty looking hooks. "I'll be right with you, my friend".

Trevor watched as the doctor carefully sliced off a large piece of the glob and slid it apart from the rest. "That's disgusting! What is that?"

Rodin picked up the severed piece. "It's my lunch" he replied as he tossed the chunk into his mouth. "Mmm. That's powerful stuff. Got to take it in small doses. But I doubt you are here to have lunch with me." He wiped his fuzzy mouth, got up from his seat and crossed all four arms across his chest. "What seems to be the problem this time? You know, if you just got yourself a girl friend, you wouldn't need to..."

"No! It's not me." Trevor interrupted. "One of the passengers is missing. I tried calling his room for the past two days and he hasn't responded."

"Maybe he simply doesn't want to be found." The doctor twitched his nose and looked coolly at Trevor. "What's your interest in this passenger anyway?"

Trevor looked away. His tone softened. "I think I may have done something that upset him."

"You've been fraternizing and probably went and said or did something stupid, didn't you?" Rodin began to preach. "You know the rules..."

"Look, this is not about me right now. He didn't leave the ship to visit the Meldon colony. I'm worried about him. Can you help me locate him?" Trevor pleaded.

Rodin knew the rules of passenger privacy. He looked at his worried friend, then took a moment to ponder. "You know I am not supposed to do this." He moved to a nearby console and tapped on the display. "What is his name?"

"His name is Nakanna," Trevor replied. "Thank you, Rodin. I just want to know that he's safe."

"Nakanna..." Rodin repeated as he entered the information. The data popped up instantly and Trevor recognized the photo he first saw in the bridge a few days ago. He also noticed a flashing red icon beside Nakanna's image that caught his attention.

"That's him! But what is that flashing thing?"

Rodin frowned. "That is nothing for you to worry about. But you'll be happy to know the system has located his transmitter."

"Where is he?"

"He's quite safe and in no apparent danger." Rodin tilted his head at Trevor. "Isn't that all you wanted to know?"

Trevor was relieved Rodin was able to locate Nakanna so easily and that the lionman was apparently okay. But that wasn't really enough. "I need to talk to him."

The weasel looked at the image on the screen and gave what could be considered a smirk to the impatient human. "He is quite handsome. Knowing your fondness for large felines, I can see..."

"Rodin, please!" Trevor interrupted.

"Trevor, think about it." Rodin poked a finger to the human's forehead. "He's a lion, or at least he certainly looks like one. Where is the one place on the Ramora that you would go if you were a lion, alone, far from home and needing comfort?"

Trevor thought for a moment. Rodin couldn't just give him Nakanna's location, but... Someplace familiar... Then an idea came to him. "Thank you, Rodin." Trevor smiled and nodded, then turned to leave.

"Remember, I didn't tell you anything!" the weasel shouted as the door slid closed.

Rodin's smile quickly melted away as he looked back at the screen and selected the flashing medical icon. It expanded to reveal more information that brought a frown to the weasel's furry brow. "Be careful Trevor." He whispered beneath his breath. "This could hurt you more than you know."



Trevor approached the large doors to the Ramora's botanical gardens. He paused for a moment just outside, gathering himself. The doors glided open, causing an inviting rush of warm, moist tropical air to spill out into the hallway. Trevor had almost forgotten how much he enjoyed that smell as he entered the enclosed forest.

The plant-life in the vast room was mostly from Earth, with the occasional bit of alien greenery scattered about. Trevor walked along the paths, taking a moment to look up at the beautiful blue sky generated by the

holographic light emitters. Along the edge of the garden the “sky” was interrupted by large sections of clear viewports that revealed the black, star strewn sky that really existed beyond this small piece of green paradise.

Minutes passed and Trevor was beginning to worry he may have missed the lion, but then a lone figure sitting under a large tree near a viewport caught his eye. It was Nakanna sitting alone, watching the stars. Trevor slowly approached the large furry figure, struggling to formulate in his head what he would say.

Nakanna turned and looked at him for a moment, then returned his gaze to the stars. “Are they always this beautiful?” he murmured.

Trevor stopped near the patch of grass surrounding the tree. “They are even more beautiful when you have someone to enjoy them with.”

The lion’s face tightened as if he were trying to hold back tears. He regained his composure.

Trevor folded his hands. “Nakanna, may I join you? I just need to talk to you for a moment. Then, if you wish, I’ll leave you alone.”

The lion did not answer, but sat quietly staring out into the stars.

Trevor slowly sat next to him. A long moment passed as neither man nor lion said anything, too afraid of what might come next. Then Trevor drew a breath and began.

“Nakanna, I find you very attractive. I don’t deny that. As a human, I have a lot of things going on inside me, and one of those things is my heart. Not the organ in my chest, but a part of me that reached out to you when I first met you in the bar. My body may have its own idea of what it would like to do, but my motivations are not driven by that alone.”

Nakanna turned and looked at Trevor inquisitively. Trevor paused, then continued. “Your nose told you only how my body felt. It can’t read my heart. That is something you will be able to do over time as you get to know me.”

Nakanna stared, not blinking. “You just wanted to show me the stars?”

“That’s one thing I wanted. I also wanted to get to know you, to learn more about you. I have never seen anyone like you, and that fascinated me.” Trevor paused again. “And, yes... I find you attractive. But although my body may want to make something of that, my heart was just drawn to something beautiful”

Nakanna turned his attention back to the stars. “You find me attractive? I am not a human.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” puzzled Trevor.

“I am the only one of my kind you have seen, so you have nothing else to compare me with.” Nakanna reached in his pocket and pulled out a photo plate. “Here. This is a picture of my parents.” He tapped a claw on one of the icons and the image of two feline creatures appeared on the display. He handed it to Trevor.

Trevor looked at the image and smiled. Nakanna’s father was a huge handsome creature with a mane that put all Trevor’s own lion pictures to shame. His mother was just as beautiful, but with softer lines. They were

mostly naked with just enough garments to cover their private parts. Each wore a stone around their neck.

“Now I know where your beauty comes from,” the human grinned.

“I miss them very much,” Nakanna said softly. He turned back to Trevor. “You once asked me if I had someone in my life I wanted to share this experience with. In a few more years I would have selected a mate and given her my stone.”

“Your stone?” Trevor inquired. “Like the ones your parents are wearing?”

“We call them Bonding Stones. They are precious gems, each engraved with the symbol of a family. When the male is of age he is given a stone. When he finds a mate, the stone is broken in two and he would give his mate one half, symbolizing the two being one.”

“You said you would have selected a mate?” Trevor asked quietly.

Nakanna’s face tightened. “My being here on this ship is the result of something that changed in my life.” He cast his gaze down. “I will never have a stone to share.”

Trevor did not understand, or maybe didn’t want to. But he saw how much the conversation was grieving his friend. “Then let me share more of my experience with you while you’re here, Nakanna. I have so much more to show you.” A smile moved across Trevor’s face as he continued. “And I promise not to ask you to remove your clothes.”

Nakanna smiled and his eyes wrinkled. He looked at Trevor. “You really think I am attractive? Enough to want to have sex with?”

“No, I think your dad is attractive,” Trevor blurted out. “But you’ll do in a pinch.”

Nakanna laughed and the sound filled Trevor’s heart with joy. “For a human, you are very handsome also,” the lion replied.

Trevor heart leapt in his chest at the words his friend spoke. “Then let me take you some place tomorrow that I know you’ll enjoy.”

Nakanna nodded with a smile, “I would like that. Now I have something to ask you.” He pointed to a bright cluster of lights nestled within a gossamer fog visible in the view port. “What is that formation over there?”

“Over where?”

Nakanna leaned towards Trevor and held the human’s head in his large paws. Trevor’s heart raced in his chest as his gaze was guided toward a distinct part of the sky. Then the lionman leaned forward and pointed over his shoulder to the bright light ahead. “Over there.”

Trevor leaned back against the tree. “That, my friend, is a stellar nursery,” he began. “It’s a huge expanse of dust and gas in which stars are forming. Some of these stars will burn very brightly, but only for a short time as they burn their fuel too fast. But when they nova it will spread the elements they formed in their cores throughout the nebula, where they will form planets and moons that will orbit the other, longer lasting stars. All complex elements form in the hearts of stars. Everything from the granite

in the ground, the oxygen in the air, to the iron in your blood, it's all made of stardust."

"We are all starborn...", murmured Nakanna, placing his hand over his chest.

"Yes," smiled Trevor, imitating the move with his own hand over his heart. "Starborn."

The two sat and talked for hours as the holographic sunset slowly turned to night. Nakanna was fascinated by the complex range of stellar phenomena, asking many questions. As Trevor went on about the gentle push of solar wind and the shrieking fury of spinning black holes, he felt a warm glow well up from within him. So familiar, it was something he hadn't felt in years, since earlier days when he had piloted the Star View toward swirling masses of stellar glory.

Trevor slept well that night and his dreams were once again filled with long walks with his lover among the accepting pride of beasts on the African plains. Only this time the grass beneath their feet turned into a field of stars, and the two journeyed over pebbles of light and interstellar fog toward a glowing horizon.



The engines of the Ramora powered up shortly after the last shuttle of passengers returned from their leave. The space station they had stopped at slowly faded behind them as the giant cruiser headed for home base. The Star View had already departed a few hours earlier.

"Where are we going today?" Nakanna inquired.

Trevor turned to his friend and smiled. "This is a special trip. I've never taken anyone else here before. The flying conditions are a little rough, and the captain insists that the passengers have a smooth, comfy ride"

The Star View slowed out of warp and Nakanna saw a dark featureless orb appear in the main view port. "That is it?" he inquired.

"This is the night side. We'll be landing close to the northern pole. This world's star never rises there." Trevor steered the ship closer and Nakanna could make out swirling colorless cloud formations in a turbulent atmosphere. Trevor continued. "It will be pretty much black once we enter the upper atmosphere, but there is a clear layer on the surface. Get ready for some bumps."

The ship entered the upper atmosphere and started its shaky descent. Nakanna was noticeably nervous and his claws dug deep into his seat.

"Why are you taking me here?" He rumbled. "There is nothing appealing about this place. It makes me feel..."

Trevor reached out and put his hand on the lion's paw, not taking his eyes off the instrument panel. "Nakanna, trust me. Not everything is as it appears on the outset. I would never let anything bad happen to you."

Nakanna did not reply but only closed his eyes, hoping the experience would be over soon. The ship suddenly emerged from the upper cloud formation and the shaking stopped as it glided in the smoother gas.

Nakanna opened his eyes, expecting to see something less horrific, but the view port was only black. Trevor was looking at a holographic display of the terrain below and searching for a place to put down.

"There! That's the place," the pilot said with a smile.

Nakanna looked at the display and a shiver ran up his back fur. He could make out a cliff face overlooking a chasm so deep that it did not register on the hologram. "I don't like this place. Please take me back," the nervous lion softly pleaded.

Trevor clenched his friend's paw tighter. "Close your eyes and relax, Nakanna. Please, trust me."

The ship soon landed close to the cliff with the auditorium facing the edge. Nakanna opened his eyes again but the view was still black and his heart raced madly. Trevor saw that his friend was frightened and moved from his seat to comfort him.

"Nakanna, look at me. Don't pay attention to the dark. By the end of today you will thank me. Believe me."

Nakanna took a deep breath and looked into Trevor's eyes. A smile slowly formed on his lips. "Of course," he replied.

"Then follow me." Trevor led the lion through the dimly lit passage to the auditorium. He held the lion's paw, leading him to the middle of the empty room. "Now stay here while I set the controls. I'll be right back." Trevor walked over to the door and tapped on the panel. The door closed and the room went totally dark.

Trevor could hear the lion's deep fast breathing and followed it back to him. "I'm right here, Nakanna," He said in a comforting voice. When he reached the lion he held his trembling paws in his hands.

This was not supposed to be happening. "Nakanna, what's wrong? What are you afraid of?"

"This..." the lion replied in a low trembling voice. "I am afraid of being alone in the darkness... for eternity."

Trevor held the lion close and could feel his pounding heart and trembling paws. "Nakanna, you're not alone. I'm here, and I will never leave you. Close your eyes and feel me here with you. And listen..."

The lion held Trevor closer and closed his eyes. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Listen..." Trevor softly replied. "I brought you here for this."

The two stood in the darkness, holding each other tightly. A small sound began to emanate from the back of the auditorium. Nakanna's ears perked through his mane as it grew louder. It was deep and rippled louder then softer followed by a low hum. He opened his eyes to see a flicker of light emanating from the horizon. As it danced and flickered he heard more sounds, beautiful tones growing in strength. A new sound joined the first as the lights grew in strength. It was a high pitched trill later joined by three more, pulsing in harmony to the light's flicker. As the colors changed so did the sounds. Moments later the entire sky became bathed in a glowing, pulsating rhythm of light and song.

Trevor could feel Nakanna relaxing, pulling hesitantly away, like a child that had clung to someone in fright, slowly overcoming his fear. As he looked up into his friend's face Trevor saw him gazing in astonishment at the spectacle in the sky, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"What are ... " Nakanna choked on the words as tears began to fill his eyes. "That song... The lights..." He swallowed hard, trying to understand his new emotions.

"Back on Earth we call this Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights. Only here they are a thousand times more powerful."

Nakanna began to walk around the room, exploring the pulsating choir of light that engulfed the auditorium. "But the song... It's so beautiful! How are you doing this?"

"The lights are doing it." Trevor replied, happy to see his friend now relaxed and enjoying the experience. "I have sixty sensors aimed at different parts of the sky. What you are hearing is the different gasses in the atmosphere reacting to the solar radiation at each one of those locations."

Nakanna swallowed hard and closed his eyes for a moment, trying to digest the new sensations that engulfed his entire being. "It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen... or heard."

"Each time I come here it is a different song." Trevor approached his friend and once again took his paws into his hands. "This song is for you, Nakanna." He softly spoke looking into Nakanna's golden eyes. "It was never sung before and will never be sung again. Only you and I will have this song to share, forever."

"Thank you, Trevor," Nakanna softly whispered as he placed his velvety muzzle on Trevor's forehead, kissing him gently.

Trevor's heart pounded as though it was trying to escape through his chest. He tried to speak but nothing came out. So he reached around and hugged his friend tightly.

"This means so much to me," said Nakanna. "I came on this cruise searching for answers. I was alone and frightened, filled with doubt and uncertainty." Nakanna placed a fur covered finger under Trevor's chin and gazed into his eyes. "But you have shown the life that dwells in the night sky. Radiant beings whose beauty, warmth and light spans the galaxy."

The lion stepped back and placed a large paw over Trevor's heart. "And you showed me compassion, friendship and love. Something I will be able to take with me and cherish forever, knowing I will never be alone."

Trevor's mind raced, not wanting this moment to end. "I could get you instated as a crew member. I can show you more wonders and we can be..."

"I can't stay." Nakanna interrupted as he pulled the human back to his chest.

Trevor's heart skipped a beat as it sank to his stomach. "But you said you would never be alone. That I, that we would be together forever." The tears began to roll down his cheeks.



"I have to return home and share what I have learned. That was the condition of my gift." Nakanna gazed up to the radiant bands of light dancing above them then whispered. "But we will be together again. I promise".

"I don't want you to leave."

Nakanna smiled. "You won't have to wait long, then I'll be with you always. My time grows short. But before I leave, I have a request of you."

Trevor looked up into the eyes of the lion. "I would do anything for you, Nakanna."

The lion's eyes wrinkled and a smile crossed his muzzle as he leaned forward and whispered the request into Trevor's ear.



Later, in the silence of space, on the outskirts of the Valcorn Nebula, the Star View drifted quietly among the webs of light. After a short time the dome like region towards the back of the tour ship faded to complete transparency.

Nakanna reached out and held Trevor's head in his paws, leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips.

"I love you."

Trevor's knees weakened as the words spilled over his body like a warm rush of water. He watched with excitement as the lion took a few steps back and began to unbutton his vest.

"You don't have to take off your clothes, Nakanna."

Nakanna smiled. "I know." Then he slid the vest off, tossing it casually to one side. He unbuttoned his pants and, with his golden eyes still locked on to the excited human's, he let them drop to the floor. Trevor's gaze pulled away from the lion's bright golden eyes to explore the lion's magnificent frame.

Nakanna smiled at the awe struck human before him. But one thing still gnawed at him. "You're sure this is completely safe?" he asked.

Trevor regained his composure and walked to the controls. "Completely", he replied.

The nude lion walked to the middle of the auditorium. Trevor tapped a few buttons and seconds later the lion slowly floated off the floor. Trevor watched his lover's beautiful form gracefully bend and twist, silhouetted against the aura of the nebula that lay beyond. Nakanna crossed his arms over his furry chest and lowered his head while curling up his legs, forming a ball. Then slowly he uncurled, himself reaching out in all directions as if trying to embrace the entire cosmos. Trevor patiently waited, enjoying the spectacle before him.

Nakanna spun slowly around to face Trevor and reached out his paws. "Will you join me?"

The eager human fumbled in the zero gravity for a moment before finally managing to remove his clothes. He used the control panel base to push off from and slowly floated across the stars to join his lover. Nakanna

reached out with his paws and pulled the human into a warm, full body embrace. Trevor's hands moved across the soft warm fur of the lion's back and made their way to his flowing mane. He positioned his lover's face and as Nakanna did earlier, kissing him passionately on the lips.

"I love you, Nakanna."



The weeks went by. After Nakanna left, Trevor's life settled back into its old routine. But now the young pilot hummed to himself Nakanna's song while he worked. His tours of stellar attractions were becoming more popular than ever as word about his enthusiasm for the sky began to get around.

But there wasn't a moment when Trevor didn't think about his leonine lover floating among the cosmos. In his dreams Trevor walked, loved and lived with Nakanna and the great cats of Old Earth in fields, rivers and mountains made of nebulae and starshine.

The young pilot finished his maintenance on the Star View. But before closing the hatch, he glanced up at the new photoplate of his lover hanging among the large cat collection.

"I miss you Nakanna."

"Am I disturbing something?" a soft voice spoke over his shoulders.

Trevor turned to see Linda standing in the hanger with her hands behind her, practically beaming with excitement.

"Not at all." He replied. "What's up?"

"Let's just say you have a package from your boyfriend," she blurted out like a giddy schoolgirl as she handed him a small box.

Trevor's heart skipped a beat and his stomach tightened as he took the package.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" Linda beamed excitedly.

Trevor just stood silently for a time. Eventually he said very quietly, "Linda, I think I'll open this in my quarters, if you don't mind."

"Oh. Ohhh...", Linda's excitement quickly melted away. "Sure. Listen. I'm sorry for being nosy. I didn't realize... I just... I was happy for the both of you. Oh, I am so sorry!"

Trevor smiled. "Thanks, Linda. I know you mean well. I'll see you at the bar tonight?"

"I wouldn't miss it. You can talk then, if you like."

"Will do." Trevor gave her a hug, then made his way to his room.



Trevor sat on his bed and placed the small box on his lap. He had dreaded this moment ever since Nakanna had left, but he had never thought it would come this soon.

Trevor's stomach turned as he removed the seal and opened the box. Inside was a letter covering a small object that was wrapped in a soft cloth. As he read the words on the page, Trevor's breathing became difficult and

the tears began to stream down his face. He carefully set the letter aside, picked up the soft cloth and reverently unwrapped the last gift Nakanna would ever give.



The Star View came out of warp and gracefully positioned itself among the stars. As the dome faded away to transparency, the alien passengers were treated to a spectacular vista of radiating beauty.

Trevor made his way to the platform and began to speak. “Welcome everyone to the Valcorn Nebula. What you see before you is almost a light-year across and is powered by a single star system at its heart. The light emanating from the gaseous clouds has a temperature of over one million degrees, but is spread out thinner than the air that surrounds us in this ship. The nebula itself is made of the remains of a second star that went nova millions of years ago. Combined with the force of the original explosion, the outward pressure from the remaining star is spreading the material into the far reaches of space.”

Trevor paused, watching the expressions of the faces of his passengers, seeing in them the looks of awe and wonder that had he had seen in a young lion years ago. And as he had done with every tour since then, Trevor knew the words they needed to hear.

“All complex elements form in the hearts of stars. Everything from the granite in the ground, the oxygen in the air and the iron in your blood, it’s all made of stardust. We are all Starborn. Radiant beings whose beauty, warmth and light spans the galaxy. We come from the light. We go to the light. And though the spaces between are vast and dark, love, like the forces streaming from the remaining star, fills those voids so that they too might shine.”

As Trevor spoke to the enraptured passengers he held his hand firmly to the center of his chest, pressing against his half of Nakanna’s bonding stone.

## By My Own Hands by Stefan Kaiser

Night blanketed the camp as a shadow darker than the others slipped down the long rows of tents. The guards had not so much as glimpsed him, and the other soldiers were carousing around the fires, their arms, and armor stashed in their tents, far out of reach. They were no threat to him. Yet, he had to be careful.

Aneem twisted his body around and stretched his arm, sliding the point of his dagger through the linen of the tent next to him. The tearing of the fabric was thunder compared to his still breath; thunder before the lightning. Leaving his dagger lodged at the bottom of the cut, he crouched and waited. Precious heartbeats passed, while nothing stirred. His tail twitched and his ears perked up as he tried to pierce the shouting and singing of the soldiers.

Sight nor sound revealed anybody near him. Reaching for his dagger, Aneem pulled the cut open and peered into the twilight. No spear point greeted him. There was no guard. So close, he still remained unseen, like the Great Stalker. This task felt so easy it unsettled him. The Hakeshi are ill-suited for the dark, Aneem forced himself to remember. They hide their misdeeds in the light of day, yet rest soundly at night.

Even in the dark, he could see the near motionless figure half-hidden under a blanket. The scent of wine hung heavy in the air, and trifles the Hakeshi considered valuable were scattered all about. Stones they called precious, and essences of the earth they'd kill with and for. Dead leaves rustled, disturbed by his toes, as he slipped through the crude entrance he had made. Right at his fingertips, he could see the commander's bare throat and flat, hairless face. Even though his obscenely prominent nose flared with each breath, his face seemed relaxed.

In sleep, even slayers are at peace. A single traceless drop of venom could prevent the brewing war. But this was not the time for venom. Blood welled up around Aneem's dagger and spotted the black fur of his hand. He let it trickle to the ground as the blade bit deep into flesh. Slamming his foot into the soaked soil, he left a clear footprint. Then, his tail lashing about, he stooped and grazed his claws across skin. His second victim startled awake and jumped to his feet.

Aneem's sharp, yellowed teeth showed in a grin as the man stumbled backwards, blindly reaching for a weapon. Wild slashes split the air before the trembling Hakesh flung the sword at him. The assassin did not even flinch as the weapon scattered to the ground before him. Yet, as the man turned to run, a flick of the wrist buried a tiny shard of bone in his neck. Moments later, he dropped in the dirt.



As he woke up, Jacob rubbed his temples, then his neck. A small speck of blood coated his fingertips. Sighing, he rested his head back against the wall. A wooden wall, not a linen tent. The twilight of dusk or dawn seeped

through a window beside him and stung his eyes. Blinking, he pulled himself to his feet, even as his knees trembled and buckled. His footsteps thundered through his head as he stumbled towards the door on the other side of the room.

"You seem confused. Perhaps I should have tied you up after all." The savage slipped through the entrance and strode past him to the window. "That would have met your expectations, I'm sure." His lashing tail whizzed by Jacob's head as he turned to face him, short muzzle split by a grin and pointed ears standing upright. "I am Aneem, your host. Do not worry, the poison will wear off soon. We will not disappoint you, Prince Jacob."

"Why?" Jacob's voice quivered as much as his body.

"You are one with influence. They will come to save you." A faint rumble accompanied his words.

"No, I mean..." the human paused, staring up at his warden. "Why do you speak our language?"

"Oh, I've been waiting and listening for a long time. Did you really think you were here by chance?" Chuckling, he strolled around the kneeling man.

"No, you're going to hold me to ransom." Jacob spat.

"Ransom? Oh, I assure you my intentions are much less straightforward."

The prince rummaged through his leather pouch and produced a few gold coins. "Here, I'll pay you. All I have with me now, and more when you let me go."

Lithe fingers picked the money from his outstretched palm. "Even if releasing you at this time were not contrary to my designs, these images of your father are of no value to me."

"What?" Jacob gasped. "But those are our most valuable coins. Enough to buy a cow."

The savage snorted. "Why would anyone trade a cow for such worthless trinkets, if he could demand useful goods or services?"

"He can buy goods or services with them."

Aneem frowned. "Your concept of trade appears needlessly complicated, yet I have witnessed it working." Pausing, he strolled back to the window. "Do you understand what I would gain by accepting these?" One by one, he tossed the coins out of the window. "A reputation for treason."

Shouting, Jacob lunged at his warden just as he dropped the last coin. His yell was met by one outside, inhuman yet harmonious. With a smirk, Aneem pushed the prince off and himself to his feet. Then he reached for a wooden mask and slipped it onto his face. "Observe."

He uttered a yowl before he walked over to the entrance, meeting the other black-furred man who slipped into the room. Immediately, they began to talk in drawn-out syllables mismatched to their often hectic gestures towards him. Jacob could only tell them apart by the warden's

mask, until he began to notice he subtle differences in their stance, their fur, the angle of their faces.

Their individuality grew even more pronounced as their argument grew heated. The stranger glared at him as his warden paced back and forth.

“Ane...” Jacob’s words were cut short by a hand clasp down on his throat, claws extending against his veins.

Even beneath the mask, the warden’s teeth were visible in his snarl. “Do not dare use my name in front of him, Hakesh!”

Jacob trembled as the stranger approached them. Still growling, Aneem let him go with a shove and accepted the dagger the other man offered. He twirled the blade of carved bone in his hands, inspecting it from all angles. With a nod, he slipped it into his crude leather belt and spoke to his visitor. The stranger’s ears swiveled back as they broke into a wild argument. Only when Aneem held the dagger out handle first did the man calm. He handed an earthen vial to Aneem, and left.

The mask clattered on the ground as the man tore it off his face. “You should consider your words much more carefully. Addressing me by name would put you in peril.”

The prince smirked and rubbed his throat. “Yes, you were pretty angry about it.”

“Half-wit!” Aneem growled and knelt down in front of him, fur bristling and his tail lashing about. “You can not possibly conceive the full scope of your situation. Assassination is an honorable craft among the Chakeshi, but should ever our identity be disclosed, we are disgraced. I would be forced into exile, and the villagers would see no reason to spare the common soldier I have led them to believe you are.”

The prince laughed out. “Why’d you lie to them? Is fame a disgrace as well?”

“I am well known in my own village and throughout our lands. My dishonesty has more practical reasons.” The assassin smirked. “If they knew you are the future Prasek of your tribe, they would demand your execution.”

“You’re a killer. Why would you want me alive?”

“If I didn’t, why would you still be?” Aneem laughed. “Your survival is crucial to my success.”

“I don’t think I like the sound of that...” Jacob swallowed and looked around. “If you want to know anything, just ask and I’ll answer. You don’t have to torture me.”

Aneem didn’t look at him, but instead picked crumbs of dirt from his fur. “You are a coward, and your assumption I would stoop to applying brute force is ridiculous. Like all of my kind, I prefer treading the hidden path. Yet I assure you that your cooperation will minimize your suffering.”

“Cooperation? With a savage? Never.”

Chuckling, the assassin placed his hands on the edge of the window and peered into the growing darkness, flexing his claws. “I have been informed you have a very lively and beautiful daughter.”

“What? No, don’t harm her. I’ll do what you say.”

Aneem nodded and turned back around. “I knew you deserved your name, Hakeshchem. You will eventually understand the true purpose of all this. Now, I need to prepare.”

As Aneem turned to the door, Jacob shouted. “Wait!”

“Do not irritate me, or I might be tempted to change my plans.”

“If you trade goods for services, what did he get?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. The assembly has ordered the removal of the Prasek and the council of elders.”

“What? You’re cold-blooded killers, all of you.”

The assassin sighed. “Yes, I am. But do not judge all of my people by my behavior. Those men are leading this tribe to misery, yet they did not comply with the requests for their exile. They need to be removed so the tribe can prosper once more.”

“Removed? Don’t you feel anything? They’re not objects! What about their families?”

“Nobody will grieve for them. Chakeshi do not know what you call a family. We are solitary beings. The men live alone, the women raise their children on their own or care for the old and the sick, if they’re neither liability nor threat.”

“You disgust me.” The prince spat.

“You will come to appreciate our logic and subtlety. While I am gone, consider the following: I could have poisoned your water supply and killed your entire force, yet I chose to spare all except one. Measure my blood on that.”

Before Jacob could say another word, the assassin slipped out of the room.



Jacob had tried to follow him, but outside the room he had found himself on a platform in a tree high above the ground, with no ladder or rope to help him down. Nor could he find any branches to climb, but the trunk was covered in claw marks.

Hours later, he sat inside the hut and peered out of the window down at the village. Among straw-covered huts, more and more people appeared. Naked to the last one of them, except for a few wooden masks, they still moved with noble bearing. In spite of the darkness and the cool night air, no fires had been lighted. The shadows swayed and bounced in circles as drums pounded a steady rhythm, joined by chanting and eventually yelling. The noise drowned all other sounds of the forest as it became frantic.

Jacob sank to the floor, closed his eyes, and pressed his hands to his ears, yet he could not ignore the pounding. Even though he barely heard it, he could still feel it. A slick hand grabbed him by the wrist and pulled his hand away. When he opened his eyes, the prince stared right into Aneem’s face, half-hidden beneath an animal’s skull.

"I take it you do not appreciate our music." Grinning, the assassin stepped back. His fur was stained in blood all over, and tatters of hide hung from his limbs and chest.

"I was wrong. You're not cold-blooded killers, your bloodthirsty heathens."

"Heathen?" Aneem scoffed. "You do us injustice. We notice the divine in all existence."

"Which is why you are wearing a corpse like a dress, I'm sure." Jacob shook his head and closed his eyes.

"The divine has many aspects. As a guest, they made me the master of the feast this night, and thus I wear the mask of death. Tomorrow, one of them will don the guise of renewal." The gruesome mask thudded to the ground near Jacob.

"This is disgusting." The prince kicked the skull away from him. "If you call this religion, you really are godless heathens."

"Godless?" Aneem growled. "We are not the ones waging war in the name of the Creator."

"The Creator?" Jacob gasped. "Don't tell me you worship only one god."

"Yes, we worship the same god as you, as incredible as that might sound to you. We breathe the same air. We even eat the same food." The assassin tossed a wooden bowl to the ground and dumped a large chunk of meat into it.

"I can't eat raw meat." Jacob stated.

"I am aware. This meat is not raw."

"How could it not be?" Jacob pulled the bowl over and examined the meat. "You don't have fire."

"We do know how to kindle a flame. Yet we decided not to, for it is a dangerous asset we do not need. Not for light nor warmth, and we know to use the sun to prepare our meals."

Jacob picked up the bowl and took a bite. "It's actually pretty good..." Aneem nodded as he sat down opposite to him. "Enjoy your meal, but listen. It is very important that you understand what has happened and will happen in the next few days."

The prince looked up, face and fingers greasy. "And what would that be?"

"Our ancestors have passed on legends of furless people invading their lands and driving them out." The assassin stared at the prince. "When we first met your people, our tribes became frightened that the legends might be repeated. For a long time, I have been working to prevent that."

"No single man can prevent a war."

"If a single man can start a war, a clever one can stop it. I have taken great pains to prepare for this day. Luring you here with your army was difficult, but capturing you was not. And the picking of the new council will provide a perfect stage for your rescue, just as the feast provided the perfect stage for their assassination."



"You planned this?" Jacob dropped the rest of his meal back into the bowl. "All of this?"

"Tomorrow, your soldiers will arrive. Many Chakeshi will die, and others will be enslaved and presented to your father, and I will be among them. When you are accepted as the new Prasek, you will make peace with my people."

Jacob stared at his captor, before he fell to the floor and passed out.



Gasping for air, Jacob startled from his sleep. Drenched in sweat, his clothes clung to his body. The night air felt chilly against his moist skin and made him shiver. He writhed beneath a blanket and tried to get up, but a lithe, furred hand pinned him down. Soft humming soothed him as a wooden cup was brought to his lips, offering him a bitter brew. As his forehead was dabbed with a wet cloth, he reached out and grabbed the arm.

"War." he rasped. "I dreamed of war."

Several flowing words followed his statement, then the humming resumed. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he did not see Aneem, but the silhouette of a Chakesha woman wiping the sweat from his brow. She ran her fingertips across his cheek and looked into his eyes, smiling. He thrashed and pushed her away, scrambling away into the corner. Keeping her eyes down, she crawled closer to him.

In the darkness outside, Aneem laughed. "You cannot avoid her attention with so little effort. She is notorious for her persistence."

While the woman knelt before him and rubbed his face with the cloth, Jacob screamed and tried to shove her away. Yet, she placed two fingers on his lips. He slapped her hand away. "Why's she even here?"

Aneem leaned against the door frame. "She came to see me."

"Yeah..." Jacob snorted. "Who is it this time?"

The assassin waved his hand. "Many can replace me in that. She came seeking new life, in the time of renewal. However, I do not want to disturb her keen interest in you any longer." He smirked and slipped back into the shadows.

"Hey, wait." Jacob called out and got up, yet the weight of his fever pulled him to his knees. The woman put an arm around his shoulders and helped him to a soft pile of large leaves she had prepared, whispering to him on the way. After she had placed him on his new bed, she fetched several wooden bowls, holding fruit, water, and more of the brew. She lifted one and offered him fruit. With a grunt, he smashed the bowl away. Yowling, she splayed her ears out and gathered the fruit.

Still kneeling at his side, she looked at him with wide eyes and held one fruit out to him. When he did not accept it, she took a bite herself and offered it again. He stared at her for a while, then took it and began to eat. Smiling, she began to talk again and ran her fingers along his arm. As he did not flinch, she placed her hand on his forehead. Then, she sipped of the brew and handed the bowl to him.

While he ate and drank, she slipped behind him and pulled his shirt up. He tried to pull away, but she held him by the shoulder. A shudder ran through his body as she pressed a sponge to his back, cold water trickling down his spine. He gasped and spun around, staring into her eyes. She laughed and smiled before she rubbed the sponge across his chest. Squirming, he shoved her away and screamed. Yet, she laughed and sat down beside him again. With a faint purr, she ran her fingertips across his chest and pushed him to his bed. She hummed as she continued to clean him with the sponge, holding him down whenever he tried to get up.

Eventually, she put the sponge away and pulled his shirt back down. She spoke a few words as she put a blanket over him. Then, she lay down beside him, leaving him to stare into the darkness with the weight of her hand on his chest and her purr in his ear.



The next day, Jacob was woken by screams. The Chakesh was gone; his ankles and wrists were bound. He caught the smell of smoke and the clatter of swords and armor. Familiar voices barked orders among the inhuman yells. He rolled to his knees and crawled to the entrance, calling out. "Help, I'm up here."

He was hoarse by the time an iron hook clattered on the wood beside him. It barely caught on the edge and not long after he was surrounded by soldiers. Their swords were covered in blood and their armor sprinkled. Faces grim, they cut his bonds and one of them helped him up. "Are you alright, Prince Jacob?"

"Yes... Just take me away from here." Jacob's legs were trembling as they took him to the ledge of the platform and lowered him by the rope. He was surrounded by the stench of smoldering leaves and charred flesh. Corpses lay strewn along the path they followed; muddy, though it had not rained. Finely carved wooden statues stood among the trees, blackened and disfigured by the flames. Delicate pottery lay smashed in the dirt and broke beneath their feet as they left the village.

Not far away, the troops had set up camp. Soldiers cheered as their leader passed them. Some were trying to light fires, others were whetting swords, yet most were carrying and stowing statues and other objects of art. "We made a fine loot here." A captain called out and walked over to him. "Who would have thought the savages could produce such fine work?"

The prince kept walking without a word, but the officer fell into pace beside him. "Shame it's all just wood. Not a gram of gold or a single gem to be found anywhere."

"It doesn't matter." Jacob grunted.

"Yes, it doesn't matter." the officer droned on. "We've captured a lot of slaves today. And fine slaves they are. The males are strong and healthy, and the females.... Have you seen how their women move? I wish ours could do that. Too bad these are savages and animals."

“Captain.” The prince stopped dead in his tracks and stared at the stout man. “Go and prepare a written, factual report.”

The captain saluted and strode off, while Jacob continued down the path until he arrived on a large square crowded with guards and bound Chakeshi. Soldier’s were bragging about their victims and captives, while others were leering at the kneeling women. A few even went further, muffling the victim’s screams with harsh blows.

Jacob gestured to the few dutiful guards at the edges of the square, who looked at him for an instant, then removed the offenders. When moments later the crack of whips carried across the square, the remaining soldiers straightened. He strode down the rows of captives, looking at each in turn; women curled around infants, boys protecting girls, young men watching over the elderly; but he could not find the familiar face. Eventually, he went to his tent and broke down.



Several days later, when they camped by a river, Jacob went to check on the slaves’ condition. He had had to refresh the warning several times. Worse, the soldiers grew bolder each time.

The guard at the entrance to the square stood at attention when the prince approached.

“How are the...” Jacob hesitated. “captives today?”

“They’re holding up fine, sir. None have sustained injuries that would reduce their value.” the guard replied.

Jacob shook his head as he slipped past, muttering. “I’m not worried about their value, but their well-being.”

Entering the square, he was met by a broad grin. He knew the muzzle behind it, and the calculating gaze. Just as he turned to the guard, the intruder spoke up. “I wouldn’t do that, if I were you, Hakeshchem.”

Jacob paused and sighed. “You’re right. I can’t tell them you’re an assassin. They can’t tell you apart, so recognizing you would be suspicious. But I won’t just let you slip away.”

“I have no intention to slip away.” Aneem chuckled. “As a matter of fact, I want to be presented to your father with the choice slaves. That should get me close enough.”

“If you think I will just let you kill my father, you are not as clever as I thought you were.”

The grin dropped from Aneem’s face. “I have sacrificed so many lives, I no longer hesitate to add my own.”

The prince leaned down to stare into his eyes. “You hesitated on the day of the attack.”

“I have done some thinking, and so should you, Hakeshchem.”

Jacob turned to leave, but after just a few steps he stopped. “That name you keep using; what does it mean?”

The Chakesh laughed out. “It means ‘thinking human’.”



The throne room was crowded with guards and slaves and nobles. Many had come to see the Chakeshi, often for the first time in their lives. Nervous muttering and mumbling filled the air as servants bustled back and forth. A fine meal was served for the guests, yet no food given to the slaves. Clad in his finest armor, Jacob stood among the kneeling Chakeshi, watching them. Aneem was on the floor right next to him. The room fell silent when the king entered and addressed the nobles in familiar words. As he proceeded to praise his son's valor in battle, Aneem began to chuckle. The assassin turned his hand, and Jacob caught a flash of dirty white in his palm. Placing his hand on the handle of his sword, the prince shook his head, yet the sliver moved further down until it stopped between Aneem's fingers.

Jacob took a step forward and pinned Aneem's hand to the floor, placing himself between him and the king at the same time. The Chakeshi snarled and tore his hand free. Jacob remained still as he spoke up. "The captives seem to be getting restless. I would like to take them back to their cells, if I am allowed to."

His father looked at him, frowning, then nodded. "Yes, take them away. We do not need them right now."

Picking up the rope strung from their heavy collars, Jacob lead the slaves out through a side door. Just after they left the room, Aneem snarled and jumped at the prince, grabbing him by the shoulders. "Half-wit! Moron!"

Jacob peeled away his fingers and looked at his slightly torn sleeves. "Calm down, before I change my mind and just stab you after all."

"What do I care? There will be war. You ruined everything."

"Perhaps your stage was not as perfect as you thought."

"It would have been, if you had acted reasonable." Aneem bared his teeth and laid his ears flat.

"If you had killed him now, in front of the nobles, they would have called for vengeance. I could not have made peace, even if I gave in to your blackmail."

"You are their Prasek. They would have listened to you."

"Perhaps." The prince shrugged. "But in any case they would have called for your death."

"What would you care?" Aneem spat out.

Jacob took the shard of bone from the assassin's hand, and picked the familiar vial from his belt. "I do care. I will need an interpreter and advisor."

Aneem stared at him, eyes wide and muzzle agape, and his tail twitched several times. As it settled into a slow swaying, his ears flattened, and his eyes narrowed and fixed the prince. Then he smiled, placed a hand on Jacob's shoulder, and tapped the poison vial with a fingertip. "If you want to succeed, your deeds tonight must never be remembered."

## Fox's Tutelage by Will A. Sanborn

*600 BC, Greece*

It was sunny and warm that morning when the Greek boy started out on his adventures. He'd awakened to a beautiful day, full of possibilities, which he faced with eager anticipation. He didn't have any obligations until the lunchtime meeting with his teacher, to be followed by lessons in the afternoon, so he made good use of his free time. Leaving the house right after breakfast, he quickly made his way to the edge of the city. Reaching one of the gates, he exited with a bounce in his step. Trading the familiar surroundings of the stone columns of the buildings with that of the countryside, he ventured out into the wilderness for some exploring.

He ran for a short distance, leaving the city behind him as he rushed out into the open landscape, and then settled back into a comfortable pace. Roaming along, he began to explore the countryside, not needing any specific goal or destination. He started singing to himself, making the words up as he went along. Later, he entertained himself with a stick he came across. Picking it up, he used it as a sword, dashing around, imitating the heroes from the stories he'd been told, as he battled and vanquished invisible foes. He journeyed on like that for some time, free to go wherever his fancies led him.

It had already been warm when he'd started and now, as the sun rose higher in the sky, it was getting steadily hotter. As he walked along, he began to notice the growing heat of the day. By the time he came upon the well, the heat was threatening to be oppressive. Feeling hot and a little tired, it definitely seemed like a good place to stop for a rest. The sight of the well also made him realize how thirsty he was; the dryness in his mouth suddenly becoming quite noticeable. He was lucky to have come upon the well out there in the wilderness; he could certainly use a drink.

Walking over to the well, he licked his lips in anticipation. Looking around, though, he couldn't find the bucket, which should've been lying beside it. Feeling a tinge of disappointment, but still hopeful, he leaned against the well and bent down to look inside. Perhaps the bucket was hanging there – then he could fetch some water to quench his thirst. There was no bucket to be found there either, but instead a pair of eyes looking up at him from the shadowy depths. Startled, the boy jumped backwards. Regaining his composure, he then slowly moved back to get a second look. Letting his eyes adjust to the darker surroundings of the well's interior, he made out the image of a fox staring up at him as it stood in the water below.

A few moments passed as he puzzled over finding the animal in such a strange location. The fox gazed back at him, regarding him, looking him straight in the eye. The animal then opened its mouth, and spoke to him as clear as anything. "Why hello there, young man," the fox's polite greeting began, "I wasn't expecting to see anyone else out here today, but it's nice to meet you."

While the youth struggled to find his voice, the fox paused, giving him a chance to reply. When no answer came, the fox added, "I hope I didn't startle you." The animal's voice was quiet and friendly as he casually addressed the boy.

"Um, no," he stammered, finally able to speak, his voice incredulous as he stared down at the fox. "It's just that I wasn't expecting...you...." His words trailed off as he pondered the situation.

"Ah, I see. I gather you've never had a conversation with any of us animals before now, have you?"

"No, I definitely haven't." His voice was a little hushed as he added, "I didn't think such a thing was possible."

The fox barked a quick little laugh at that, opening his mouth in a grin, his tongue darting over his teeth. He noticed the boy's reaction to his exposed teeth and just as quickly closed his mouth. "But tell me, did you ever think of talking to one of us?"

"No, I guess I didn't," the lad had to admit. The thought had never even crossed his mind before, but as he stood there carrying on a conversation with what would normally be considered a wild animal, the idea of it was slowly becoming more reasonable. This fox certainly wasn't acting the way he would've expected it to.

"Well, I suppose that's understandable," the fox replied, his voice becoming even warmer. "Not a lot of people think of trying to engage us in conversation, but you'll find that many of us are willing to talk, given the chance." The boy was starting to look more comfortable with this stranger, and the fox added slyly, "You looked like a bright lad, so I figured it'd be worth making conversation with you."

The boy smiled at that. "Thank you," he replied, blushing slightly. "My teacher says that, sometimes, too." Pausing briefly, he then added, "I can't wait to tell him about this, it really is exciting getting to meet you."

"It's my pleasure as well. I'm sure you'll have an interesting story to tell him," the fox replied with another small smile. He was careful not to show his teeth as much that time, though.

"Ah, but where are my manners?" the fox continued. "You obviously must have come here in search of a drink of water, walking around out in the hot sun, and here I am, talking your ears off...."

"Well, yes, I am pretty thirsty," he agreed, nodding and smiling back at the fox.

"Well, be my guest and help yourself. There's plenty to go around and I'd certainly like to share it with my new friend. It's quite good, too."

"But there's no bucket, is there?" the youth asked as he searched the well and its surroundings again with a quick glance. "How can I get a drink without one?"

"Oh, that's not a problem at all," the fox answered with another smile. "Come down here and join me, it's easy to get a nice drink that way." As he said it, he playfully flicked one of his ears.

“Down there in the well? I don’t know.” The boy’s voice betrayed his doubts.

“Sure, there’s nothing to it. It’s not too big of a jump and there’s enough room down here for both of us.”

“Well, it is pretty hot out...” As the boy mused out loud he could feel his thirst growing even stronger. The heat of sun overhead made the shade of the well seem even more inviting.

“Sure, it’s nice and cool down here, too, and the water’s great.”

The fox’s voice was so friendly and reassuring, and a nice drink of water sounded so good right then. The last of his resignations evaporated; his escape from the sun to the cool water below beckoned. Hoisting himself up on the top of the well with his hands, he swung his feet over the stones, readying for his descent. Pausing briefly to look down and judge his landing, he let out an enthusiastic “Look out below!” and pushed himself off the wall. He never noticed the grin which flashed quickly across the fox’s muzzle.

The fox had been right that it wasn’t really that far down, and the muddy ground at the bottom of the well was nice and soft. His feet sank in slightly and his sandals got stuck in the mud, but just briefly. Taking a few moments to steady himself, he was able to free them by lifting his feet up one at a time. Although the water only came up to below his knees, the bottom of his tunic had gotten wet from the splash of his landing. He didn’t care, though; he welcomed the added coolness.

He turned to see the fox looking on as he adjusted to the new surroundings. As the animal watched him, there was another smile across his face. The fox let his new acquaintance get settled in before speaking again. “There, now, isn’t it nice and cool down here, just like I told you?”

“Oh, yes, it is,” he replied, a smile showing on his face as well. The water felt good against his legs and he was enjoying the cool refuge from the hot sun which his new friend had shown him.

“Well, go right ahead and get a drink, then. The water tastes wonderful.”

“Thank you,” the boy answered, remembering his manners, then proceeded to bend over. Kneeling down, unmindful of his clothes getting even wetter, he leaned over to scoop a handful of the cool water. Bringing it to his lips, it tasted even better than he’d imagined. He sucked it down with a loud slurp, and then reached for more water.

His enjoyment was short-lived, however, for no sooner had he brought the second handful of water to his lips than he heard splashing behind him. Before he could even turn around, the fox was on him. He coughed and spit out the water in surprise as he felt the animal’s claws scraping him. He tried to get up and shake the animal off him, but the fox just moved quicker. He cried out as the fox’s claws dug into his back through the fabric of his clothes, as the beast fought his way up his back.

Jumping up, he flailed his arms about helplessly, trying to push the animal away from him. He just couldn’t reach behind him and the fox

stayed on, quickly climbing higher. Fearing the worst, the boy cried out again.

The attack didn't come though. Instead, the swift fox scrambled his way up the youth's back and onto his shoulders, holding on against the boy's frantic shaking. Quick as lightning, the fox sprang up, clawing at the stones lining the well. Pushing off the boy's shoulders, he jumped up to reach the top of the well. Landing nimbly atop it, the fox turned to pause and look back down.

The boy just stood there, gaping up at the fox. His mouth hung open, realizing what the fox had done, but no words escaped him. Finally, it was the fox who once again broke the silence. "Well, now, my friend, I must thank you." He spoke with a wink and a happy flick of one of his ears. "I'd been trapped down this well for some time and I didn't think I'd find a way out very easily. Then you showed up and helped me out quite nicely."

"But, you tricked me," the youth stammered, finding his voice once again. "That wasn't very nice."

"Maybe so, but the water is nice and cool down there and it is enjoyable, as long as you can get out. I imagine you'll have an easier time of it than I would, with those arms and legs of yours." Another, toothy grin spread across his muzzle. "Maybe next time you'll be a little more careful."

The boy could only look up at him, pouting, feeling his face heat up as the fox smiled down at him. There was nothing he could find to say as a reply to the cold logic of the fox's words. After a few moments, the fox added, "Well, you should be okay, after a fashion, so I'll take my leave of you. Thanks again for your help and maybe we'll meet up again someday."

With a cheerful wave of his bushy tail, the fox dismissed the boy's accusing glare and turned away. Jumping down off the top of the well, he vanished, leaving the boy alone. He was trapped, standing there in the muddy water with his wet clothes and sore back. Looking up at the blue sky through the opening of the well, his eyes burned.

"Come back!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. He waited, then continued calling to the fox, hearing his voice echo inside the well. He shouted for several minutes, his voice becoming louder and more desperate. The fox never returned and his voice turned hoarse. He stopped and looked around. His throat hurt and his face burned.

Grabbing at one of the stones along the side of the well, he pulled himself up, sticking his foot on another for support. It was slippery, though, and he misjudged his footing. He pushed himself upwards, only to lose his step. He fell backwards, landing in the muddy water with a wet plop.

He kicked in disgust and let out a snarl of frustration. "Stupid fox," he spat out as he splashed the water with his fist. "I hate him." He thrashed at the water again as tears filled his eyes, then leaned back against the wall and started sobbing.

He cried for some time, the grief pouring out of him, his body shaking. His sobs slowly died down, and then he wiped his eyes with a wet hand. The water cooled his skin. His breathing returned to normal as he looked



around again. He was trapped, but he had to get out; he'd be late for the meeting with his teacher. The fox had tricked him and now he was stuck. 'But how did he trick you so easily?' he could hear his teacher say as he sat there in the cold water. Thinking clearer now, he could imagine the questions his teacher would ask him, as he'd done in the past when he'd made a mistake.

"The water," he whispered to himself. "He made it sound so good." He felt his face heat up again as he thought of how the fox had talked him into this trap, just so he could use him as a ladder to escape. "I wish I hadn't been so thirsty." He sat there a bit longer, thinking of what his teacher would say to him.

With a sigh of resignation, he stood up. It was done now, and he had to get himself out of it. He shook the water out of his dirty, sodden clothes as best he could. Standing before the wall, he looked at the stones again, this time more closely. Grabbing one of them, he carefully placed his foot on another. After a couple of tries, he discovered he could use the curved wall of the well to his advantage by bracing his legs against it.

Slowly, but surely, he maneuvered his way up. His back was still hurt and it was tough going, but he felt his confidence returning. Once he got above the water, the rocks weren't as slippery, either. He was going to be late, but he could make his teacher proud by getting out of this mess. He also felt that he'd be able to answer his teacher's questions about this experience....



"So there you have the story of the fox and the goat," the teacher concluded. This was one of his favorite tales, and it usually delighted those he told it to. Pausing to take in the looks of rapt attention on the faces of the young students sitting around him, he then continued. "Now we see what a predicament the foolish goat got himself into, don't we, letting that fox trick him into jumping down the well? What lessons do you suppose he could've learned from it?"

As he asked the question, a small gleam flashed in old Aesop's eyes, distant memories refreshing themselves once again. No matter how many times he related the tale, altered to fit his teaching style and to protect his reputation, he couldn't help but chuckle. A smile crept over his face as he listened to his students' discussions. He nodded at their suggestions and insights, remembering long ago the important lesson which he himself had learned from the fox.

## **The Burning of the Library by Will A. Sanborn**

*48 BC, Alexandria, Egypt*

The heavy smoke burned my throat and stung my eyes as we stumbled through the dense haze. We'd made it out of the building, but the fire still burned around us. The smoke and heat enveloped everything and smothered the cool night air. The acrid taste of it stung my nose as I gasped for breath.

The soot clung to my clothes and fur. My feline sense of smell had saved us. I'd scented the smoke before my human associates, and that had given us enough time to get out of the inferno. Now the smoke burned my nose and throat as I fought for each breath.

We reached the edge of the shore and the two of us collapsed on the rocks. I looked over at my human colleague. He was panting heavily, as was I, but we were okay. I whimpered in relief. We'd gotten out. How many others hadn't been so lucky?

I twisted around to look at the building through watery eyes. My stomach clenched even tighter at the sight. Flames and dark clouds of smoke poured out of the library as the fire ravaged it. I scanned along the shore and saw a few people, but there were no others escaping the conflagration.

The night sky was lit up almost as brilliant as day, but it was a harsh light, as if the fiery sphere of the sun had touched down upon us. Another shudder ran through me. Fair Alexandria was ablaze; at least half of the city must've been on fire. So many lives lost. My head ached as I tried to comprehend the magnitude of such destruction.

I clenched my fist in desperation and felt my paws close around something. I stared down at the object and a slow realization stole over me. I'd been working on the scroll when the fire had broken out. In my haste, I'd kept it with me, clutching it as we'd made our frenzied escape. I felt my eyes sting again, and my vision blurred as I looked down at manuscript. How many lifetimes of work had been lost? How much knowledge had been reduced to this, the last scroll from the great library?

## Friendship by Michael Bard

*Sigh-wooffle-sigh-wooffle.*

It was late in the lunar day, and Alexander was in a never before visited place on the edge of the Oceanus Procellarum. His helmet was clear, and the stars shone bright overhead. The only sounds were the clink-clink of the hammer, the muffled in and out hiss of his breath, and the amplified breathing of Comet in his headphones.

*Sigh-wooffle-sigh-wooffle.*

Alexander knew he was breathing. And he could feel each impact of the hammer. But, the breathing of Comet was what told him he was not alone.

*Sigh-wooffle-sigh-wooffle.*

A thing very important in the vast emptiness of Earth's moon. A thing that Alexander needed to keep himself sane.

*Sigh-wooffle-sigh-wooffle-*

And, after almost a decade, a reassurance that his best friend, his companion, his blessing in loneliness, his confidant, was alive.

*Sigh-wooff-*

It took almost two heartbeats for Alexander to recognize the absence. Abandoning the hammer, he spun himself around, pushing a gloved hand against the ancient shard of lunar granite. Then he bound and leapt towards the hopper. He ran, the twin lights on his helmet casting jagged ovals of illumination on the dusty ground, and then on the battered 'hopper.

The 'hopper was all the pair needed. A distant descendant of the original Apollo rover, it was almost as small. The inside was crowded, packed with supplies and equipment. In the nose the narrow seats were stark through the transparent carbon, and way too small for sleeping. A panel had been pulled from the side and a transparent bubble extruded to provide more room. A tent of sorts, on a platform above the ground for insulation, and buoyed out by the pressure of the air within.

This one was not inflated.

The flexible plastic, as tough as thin steel, billowed like a thick bowl of gel in a howling wind. Comet was tangled inside, blinking awake. His uplifted canine form stared through the collapsing bubble. Blood boiled from his muzzle, his eyes stared, his mouth wide open to the vacuum, trying to speak.

Something had popped the bubble. But what? Alexander's light flashed across a jagged hole in the metal floor, likely matching one in the bubble. A freak micrometeorite? It didn't matter.

Comet stopped struggling, slumping in the feather gravity. Blood was bubbling out his mouth.

Tear away the offending plastic? Wouldn't work - he was nowhere near strong enough. Five more steps took him to the 'hopper's door. Breaking open the emergency panel, he yanked the lever spilling the air from inside. The pressure light turned from green to red, and he unlatched and yanked open the armored door. A last few wisps of air pressed against him,

escaping into the vastness as he crawled in. He left the door open. Not that closing it would do any good, given the hole in the tent. He grabbed Comet's suit from its rack and dragged it down the passageway. Yanking open the hatch to the tent, he pulled the suit through. The plastic fell around him, billowing like something alive as it tried to hold its shape with nothing but vacuum inside. Reaching Comet, he couldn't tell if his companion was alive or dead through his gauntlets. All he did, all he could do, was open the clamshell of the canine's suit and shove the uplifted dog in. Not worrying about threading the tail into its slot, he shoved the other limbs in as best he could before ramming the suit closed. He only did a couple latches before reaching over and slamming shut the helmet. The suit stiffened as air flooded in, and Alexander pressed buttons and controls to make it pure oxygen, staring at health monitors.

They flicked, and remained red.

Slamming the other suit latches closed, he whispered: "Breathe, damn you, breathe!"

Overriding the safeties he shoved the pressure upward. One atmosphere, two—

A few telltales flickered to yellow. Heartbeat. But no breathing.

Three atmospheres, four. The suit material ballooned out, becoming hard as an aluminum drum.

"Please breathe—"

Five atmospheres. More flickered to yellow. Respiration!

Alexander locked the controls and prayed. Five atmospheres of pure oxygen was way into the toxicity range. Did it matter? He switched his radio to Comet's frequency and turned the volume up all the way. And listened.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

"Thank you – thank you –!"

No sign of any toxicity reaction. How much oxygen was getting into Comet's blood? The vacuum had mauled his lungs, but something was left. Thank God!

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

The blood oxygen light steadied yellow. It wasn't a good reading – the monitor wasn't pinned to the ear – but it was a reading.

Alexander was tempted to push the pressure to five and half but - yellow was enough - barely. He pulled his hand away.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

He'd bought some time, not much, but some. Comet needed a major medical facility - nothing he had on hand would help. Hell, nothing any independent had would.

Don't panic. Calm. One thing at a time.

The 'hopper needed to move. And that meant the tent had to be pulled in. One step at a time.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

Dragging Comet in through the tent hatch, he locked it closed. Beside it he entered the code to dump the tent and platform – there wasn't time to properly put it away. Pulling Comet with him, he backed into the cockpit.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-whoeeze.*

Thanking the lunar gravity, he pulled the dog's limp form over and strapped him into the co-pilot seat. He strapped himself in the other where, flipping a few switches, he backed the 'hopper out. It shuddered as it whined over the rough lunar surface, its huge balloon wheels jerking and shifting and sliding in the soft dust. One hand slammed the cockpit hatch shut.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-whoeeze.*

Pulling another toggle, he dumped all the water except that needed to balance the vehicle. The extra mass would hurt more. After, a faint gurgle-thump echoed through his suit as the computer balanced the 'hopper's mass.

Out of the valley, he jumped the 'hopper half around. Air gusted out lifting the tiny vehicle off the ground and spinning it. With a jerk, a thump, and a bounce, the 'hopper landed, and Alexander gunned it forward, out of the widening valley.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-whoeeze.*

Now what?

He activated the satellite uplink, and waited nearly a minute for the handshaking to complete and the Foote Industries search screen come up.

"Major medical help – closest - current location –cost" He swallowed. "Cost no object. Minimum requirements -full lung replacement."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-whoeeze.*

SEARCHING... flashed. Then a list of locations starting with Luna City, days away, at the top.

"Sort by distance."

The list flickered and changed. The closest was a tad under six hundred clicks. "Full info, first match."

HELIUM-3 REGOLITH MINING FACTORY  
REGISTERED TO ANDERSON-BABBAGE

More information was listed, but Alexander ignored it. A factory was almost a mobile town, slowly crawling across the lunar surface. It would have what was needed. It had to.

And it wouldn't be cheap.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-whoeeze.*

Alexander didn't care.

"Open link to the factory, emergency priority."

Static crackled in his ears for a moment before the computer filtered it out. Seconds passed. A female voice spoke: "This is Anderson-Babbage Mining Factory Heinlein. I read you. How can we–"

"This is Alexander Hasanth, UC 893416-33A5, declaring alpha medical emergency. An uplifted free canine, type -doberman, class three beta, UC 9956-55B, suffered vacuum exposure. He is currently sealed in a five

atmosphere pure oxygen environment, breathing is rough. Additional eye damage likely. Can you assist?"

She snorted disdainfully over the link. "Hasanth, records show a canine slave registered to you."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

"What? A —" He'd always meant to free Comet, but he'd never gotten around to it. Non free uplifts had different medical rights - and now he got a fucking lawyer. "Jesus Christ! Fine! I, Alexander Hasanth, of my own free will, manumit the - the uplifted canine type doberman, class three beta, UC 9956-55B, currently in my possession. Log this now!"

"Information transmitted to Luna City. It'll take a day —"

"Fuck lady, it's logged!" He paused, and then almost whispered, "Just - save him — please —."

"Fine —" she paused. You do know what this'll cost? And for a pet?"

"He's not a pet! He never has been! Just — please — save him. Cost is no object, not for him!"

"I —" A pause, a long one. Just as he was about to yell, the voice continued, "Alexander Hasanth, records show - show you have a freed canine assistant. Support facilities are available and lungs can be grown on board." She sighed. "This is going to cost. Are you sure?"

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

"I don't care! You got my code, you can check my balance." Please, please Lord, let it be enough. Please —

"I — it isn't —"

"Please —"

"I —" The tapping of keys came faintly over the link. "Alexander Hasanth - a recent deposit shows your balance will - will be sufficient."

"Thank you! Thank you!"

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

"I am sending you our exact location. Our shuttle is in transit to Luna City - how long until you can reach us?"

"Your shuttle —?" One thing at a time. One thing. He ran some calculations through his head. Ballpark figures —maybe - safe and slow, or risky and fast —?

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-whoeeze.*

"Sorry, Anderson-Babbage. ETA twenty minutes, rough. Will hotwire the 'hopper and make it in one leap. Only way."

"You sure?"

"I won't let Comet die."

"Comet?"

"I was a lot younger when I got him."

He pushed the panic button. His little vehicle made a brief hop dumping everything possible in flight with a loud clunk-rattle. Onboard were left only passengers, air and a minimum ballast. The landing bang was lighter this time.

Alexander spoke: "Anderson-Babbage, I'll be coming in hard. Will try for a click from your location, more precise details momentarily. Please have recovery team standing by –"

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-wheeze.*

"– I'm counting on you."

"I – acknowledged Alexander. Recovery team will be sent. Be warned that if you come closer than five hundred metres, we will have no choice but treat you as hostile and destroy you for our own safety."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-wheeze.*

"I – understood. And – thank you. Please monitor this channel - will send automatic location updates."

"Understood. Good luck."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-wheeze.*

Alexander spent nearly five minutes running options through the on-board comp. It would be tight. Very tight. But with everything - estimated landing would be thirty-seven hundred metres north-northwest. Touch down would be hard, but what were a few broken bones?

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-wheeze.*

Sucking some water from the tank in his suit, he locked in the program and sent the update to the factory ship.

"Initiate," he told the computer.

Like a ship fleeing a flare, the 'hopper leapt off the ground. Almost all the onboard oxygen was dumped in one long woosh of liquid to gas to propellant. The cockpit was vacuum, but sound echoed through the aluminum of the craft. All around Alexander were creaks and groans. Something pinged, and he winced. A groan, a snap, and a light flashed red.

And then silence.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-wheeze.*

He pulled up a diagnostic – a feed to the main tank had ruptured. Gas was whooshing out, spinning the 'hopper. Alexander reacted by instinct and pushed the eject button. A clang, a clatter, and silence. A quick burst of gas from the side stopped the spin.

The main tank was gone, but the emergency reservoir was still sealed. Their in suit tanks would keep them alive, the reservoir was for the vehicle. But –

In his soul he knew it wouldn't be enough for the landing.

"Alexander, this is Anderson-Babbage. We track your course. You're a bit off, estimate you'll touch down about eighteen hundred metres from us. Rescue crews have been notified – we're tracking a secondary object moving away from you. It'll land close - can you ID?"

"Anderson-Babbage, I had to eject my main oxygen tank. A feed line ruptured."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-wheeze.*

He heard a swallow over the connection. "Will you have enough for landing?"

"I – I don't know."

“I don’t know how we can assist – “

“You’ve done what you can. Keep the rescue team in position.”

“Understood. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The reserve tank had – about half what had been planned for the landing. The rest? A check of his HUD showed he had almost an hour in suit. On pure oxygen, Comet had a bit less. Wait – he had an idea! There was a hope. A faint hope.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaaassp-wheeze.*

Alexander turned and looked at Comet. His eyes were still closed. Would he ever know? Did it matter? Reaching over he ran his gloved hand along his friend’s chest. Then he blew explosive bolts dumping the canopy. Ignoring the protests from Anderson-Babbage about the new object, he plotted his options and set the program. The only program he could. Likely neither he nor Comet would survive the landing, but at least they had a chance. Alexander would make sure Comet’s was far greater than his. And he had time to prepare things in case of his most likely death. “I hope you have a full life Comet,” he whispered. “You deserve it.” He could even hear Comet saying Don’t worry about it in his mind.

Locking the program, he set the computer to record, with orders to dump it to Anderson before impact. “I, Alexander Hassan, being of sound mind and body, do hereby give all my worldly possessions to the freed sentient known as Comet – “



Comet gasped, eyes flicking open. The last thing he remembered was waking up, unable to breath. Now he felt sore, but breathing was so easy – “Master?” he called. He smelled a hospital, disinfectant, medicines, machines, blood. Another canine. His eyes focused - he could see the stranger, looking down. “Where’s my master, Alexander?”

“Comet, my name is Williard. I was security for the recovery team – “

“Recovery – ?”

“You suffered severe vacuum damage, but Alexander got to you in time to keep you alive. He brought you to us barely in –”

“Where is he?”

“Alexander’s – he’s dead. There was damage to the ‘hopper. He did all he could for a soft landing, ejected you at the best possible angle just before impact. You had a mild concussion, a few broken bones. But – “

Comet reached up, grabbed Williard’s shirt. “What happened?”

“To – to optimize your chances, his ejection was less than optimal. He – didn’t survive.”

“Alexand– “ His voice faded. Closing his eyes, he remembered. Then he howled, a long mournful cry. A howl of pain. A howl of sorrows. A howl of memories.

Williard joined him.



## Tales from the Pegasus: The Right Stuff by Bernard Doove

*The starship F.S.S. Pegasus and the characters Admiral Kline, Zhane, and Rosepetal are the creation of Boyce Garald Kline Jr and are used with permission. The Chakat Universe, all other characters and this story are the creation of Bernard Doove.*

The Chief of Security for the F.S.S. Pegasus laid hir head between the breasts of hir Chief Engineer and sighed in contentment. Sparks stroked the black chakat's hair as shi said, "You always leave it too late to come see me. You know we need more social interaction with our own kind than other species."

Although Sparks was patterned like a Siamese cat and hir lover was a glossy black all over, both were typical examples of their species – chakats. To anyone unfamiliar with their species, they might best resemble what a centaur might look like if they were created from cougars instead of horses crossed with humans. They had a powerful feline torso, but where the neck would otherwise be, another humanoid torso continued vertically complete with human-like arms and hands, surmounted by a felinoid head with long hair. Each had a pair of human-like breasts which were covered with fur just like the rest of their body, right to the tip of their extraordinarily long prehensile tails. Like all the morph species from Earth, they were the creation of advanced genetic engineering. Unlike most species though, they were all hermaphrodites, hence the odd pronouns, and they had strong social bonds which were reinforced by a psionic empathic talent. To put it in simple terms, they were very touchy-feely cats.

Midnight sighed. "Yeah, I know, but something always seems to come up. Besides, I genuinely like being mated to Boyce, and I like to spend as much personal time with him as possible in the absence of my lifemate, Forestwalker. Then there are M'Lai's needs to be attended to. That's a full-time job for the two of us."

M'Lai was also Midnight's co-mate, but she was not from Earth at all. She was an alien species, named Caitians in Terrango, which was about as close as Terrans could get to pronouncing the actual name. M'Lai was a bit different from the average Caitian though, and keeping up with her physical needs was a constant, if pleasant, job.

"Pfft! It's the same excuses every time. Your co-mates know and understand that chakats need other chakats regularly, and they would accommodate you if you asked. The Captain has enough mates to keep him happy, and even M'Lai can get by for one night. You need to look after your own needs more."

Midnight grinned. "And give you more time with me?"

Sparks grinned also. "Well, that's certainly an incentive for me, but I'd like it if you'd come see me some times when you're not really stressed. So now that we've gotten you relaxed, tell me what's bothering you."

"How do you know something's bothering me? I could have just been extra horny."

"Hon, you always have something bothering you when you come see me. It's probably what forces you to stop procrastinating each time."

"So are you angling to be Ship's Counsellor now?"

"Stop evading the question," Sparks ordered firmly.

"Yes sir! Remember Fenris?"

"The bigoted wolf that you threw off the ship?"

"Yep. We're picking up his replacement at Starbase Three."

"So?" Sparks prodded.

"She's a Rakshani," Midnight clarified.

The Rakshani were another alien species who were members of the Stellar Federation. Resembling bipedal tigers with enormous tails, and standing between seven and eight feet tall, they were very imposing to meet even casually. Their warriors were justifiably feared.

"I still don't see the problem. Don't you already have one on your team?"

"Yes, Rastivok. The problem is that he's a male."

"How is that a problem? Don't you think that the females are as good as the males?"

"Hardly. The Rakshani females are every bit as tough as the males. While the males are a bit stronger, the females are a bit more limber, and they work out to be pretty evenly matched. They have squads of Rakshani female Marines that are among the elite forces."

"Okay, so that's not a problem then. Surely you're not worried about fraternizing?"

Midnight snorted in derision. "Like a chakat would try to pull that one! No, I couldn't care less. In fact, I wish that was all there was to it."

"Stop making me guess. I'm an engineer, not a mind-reader!"

"Rakshani are fiercely competitive, but especially so between the sexes. It's the way their psyche works. They show their worth to potential mates by trying to better them. That's why their military squads are usually all male or all female, because the single-gender groups work better together. However, we have exactly one Rakshani in Security – Rastivok. Put them together and the potential exists that they might be preoccupied with each other rather than the job."

"You have a Rakshani co-mate though; doesn't that give you similar problems?"

"Zhane is a lot older and more mature. She got to her rank by being a lot more stable and self-controlled than other Rakshani. Besides, when she's off-duty, she can be quite... energetic, shall we say?"

Sparks giggled. "I've seen the results of some of those 'energetic' occasions."

Midnight smiled in fond memory, then continued, "Anyway, the new addition is about 21 Terran standard years old – still young and hot-blooded."

"Isn't that rather young for such an important position?"

“Yes, but despite her youth, she’s quite competent, and she has distinguished herself in action. That’s how she earned her appointment to a Federation flagship. However, it remains to be seen if she is prepared for the step up to the levels that I demand.”

“Midnight, the perfectionist! She’s going to hate you.”

“I’m not aiming for hate. I want her to respect the job, and to respect me for demanding the most from her.”

“You’re still getting too worked up over someone whom you haven’t even met yet,” Sparks admonished.

Midnight pulled a sour face. “Fenris left a bad taste in my mouth, and Rakshani are notorious for being difficult.”

“I still think that you’re just borrowing trouble, so stop worrying about that and relax.”

“Yes, counsellor,” Midnight replied with a sly smile. There was a time and a place for everything, and shi had better things to do right now.



Midnight waited patiently at the primary airlock which was currently connected by a docking tube to the Starbase. Shi was smartly attired in his Security dress uniform, ready to go out and join his family for a bit of shore leave and recreation. There was one bit of business left to take care of first though.

Right on schedule, a female Rakshani with red fur and white stripes and dressed also in Security grey, stepped through the airlock door, pulling a hover-cart with her possessions on it. She was wearing the brief form-fitting uniform that warrior Rakshani preferred to allow full freedom of movement.

‘Full points for punctuality,’ Midnight thought to himself.

The Rakshani spotted Midnight, walked over to him and saluted. “2nd Lieutenant Baneth ap Quelline na Ramedar reporting as ordered. Would you be Commander Midnight?” she said in mildly accented Terranglo.

Midnight returned the salute. “I am,” shi affirmed. “Welcome aboard the Pegasus, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, sir. I had not been expecting a chakat to be in charge.”

The way that she said ‘chakat’ and the subtle sense of contempt that Midnight empathically sensed made him sigh inside. Typical of many warrior Rakshani, this one seemed to lump him in with the ‘pacifistic cowards’ category that chakats were often perceived to be. It seemed that shi would have to educate her that pacifistic didn’t mean incapable of fighting, and Midnight was hardly a typical chakat in that area either. ‘Okay,’ shi thought to himself, ‘hardball it is.’

“You should have been aware of exactly who I was, Lieutenant. Starship Security is not just a matter of being able to fight, it’s also a matter of knowledge. Before I took this assignment, I familiarised myself with my predecessor, the security team members, the ship’s lead personnel, the ship’s layout, the assigned sector, and the commonest duties that it

performed, so that I was able to take over seamlessly. You, on the other hand, didn't even know that your superior officer is a chakat. How much more have you not bothered to learn?"

Baneth stiffened. "I read all the documentation that was provided for me," she objected.

"That's not good enough, Lieutenant. You need to show some initiative. You are not in the Marines now, nor are you posted to one of the regular starships. This is the flagship of the First Fleet, and only the best get to remain on board. If you don't live up to the standards that I set, you will be sent back to your old squad. Have I made myself clear?"

Midnight could feel the Rakshani grinding her teeth in anger, but she gave a respectful reply. "Yes, sir!"

"Good. You can relieve 1st Lieutenant Darkoak here at the security station. I suggest that you use the opportunity to familiarise yourself with the things that I mentioned."

"Right now, sir?" Her eyes flicked over to the hover-cart.

"Yes, now. Your assigned cabin will still be there when you're relieved."

"Yes, sir!" Baneth said with a salute, then turned to Darkoak, a grey fox morph, who had been listening to the exchange with great interest. "I relieve you, sir!" she said crisply.

"The station's yours, Lieutenant," Darkoak replied, happy to be relieved of the boring guard duty.

Baneth took Darkoak's place behind the security station. Mindful of Midnight's eyes upon her, she immediately set about using the computer terminal to familiarise herself with the personnel situation.

"Does that mean that I can take shore leave now, sir?" Darkoak asked Midnight.

Midnight nodded. "I can't see why not. I'll roster you off right away," shi replied as shi touched hir wrist PADD to put words into action. "After all,' shi thought to himself, 'I already have someone assigned to watch over Baneth.'



A training session had been set for immediately after their departure from the Starbase, partially for Midnight's regular regime, but mostly so that the Security Alpha Squad could get to meet their new addition.

As Midnight had expected, the moment that Baneth had laid eyes on Rastivok, the competitive urge had begun. Shi could feel the tension almost palpably between them, although Rastivok was much more disciplined. There was an unmistakable swagger to Baneth though.

Midnight introduced her to the team, then they to her. To show that she had done her homework, she rattled off their specialities.

First in line was a male ginger-striped cat morph. "Reg Felidae, electronic surveillance specialist," she said.

He nodded and smiled. "At your service."

Next was the grey fox who had been manning the security station. "Michael Darkoak, sharpshooter."

"Right on target," he replied.

Third was a middle-aged male human, who stood only 5' 9" tall. "Arnold Kincaid, unarmed combat specialist."

"Welcome to the team," he replied.

Fourth was a female cheetah morph. "Nefertiti Ngali, cryptology expert."

"I bid you welcome," she replied.

Next was a male Renzar, an alien ursinoid from the planet Grom who, while not as tall as Baneth, far out-massed her. "Hagooth zan Paktor-Hakin, combat strategist."

"To serve with you am anticipating muchly," he rumbled.

Next was a female timber wolf morph. "Angeline Yellowfang, fighter pilot."

"Talk to me later if you'd like to check out my bird," Angeline said with a touch of pride.

A skunktaur was next. "Querl of House Redpaw, T5 telepath."

"I knew that you were going to say that," hy said with a grin.

A black-footed ferret morph was next in line, dwarfed by the Rakshani. "Hiro Senji, covert ops."

"And ninja!" he added with a sly smile.

That comment puzzled Baneth, but she moved onto the next person, a female Voxxan – a fox-like alien species. "E'Tana ne Bkareth, Ka-Me-Ha martial arts."

"Looking forward to sparring with you," she said pleasantly.

Next was another human, female this time. "Svetlana Gorski, powered armour expert."

Svetlana gave her a measured glance. "You have an appointment with me afterwards to make sure that your armour is fully up to date," she said with only a mild Russian accent.

Lastly Baneth came to the Rakshani in the team, and Midnight immediately felt a spike in the emotions of both. "Rastivok ap Mendakka na Karn, hand-weapons expert."

Rastivok gave her a curt nod.

"And that completes Alpha Team," Midnight said, relieved that Rastivok had refrained from saying anything. "Of course we all cross-train, and each of the team members will gladly help you improve your skills in their specialities. You in turn will give them the benefit of your experience as a Marine."

"And what about you, Commander?" Baneth asked. "Your records show that you're a championship archer, which isn't very useful aboard spaceships. What makes you the right choice for leader of this team?"

Midnight could feel the challenge as well as hear it in her tone. Although in somebody else, it may have been considered insubordinate, it was fairly standard for a Rakshani, so it wasn't unanticipated, although it was a little

earlier than expected. 'The impatience of youth,' shi thought, and heard Querl snicker. Shi didn't mind him eavesdropping on his surface thoughts; in fact he had standing instructions from him to keep a mental ear cocked while on duty. Shi took full advantage of every tool at his disposal.

"Me? I'm a sneaky bitch, Baneth." His reply was deliberately vague, and yet still a warning. "You'll need to figure the rest out."

"Then how about giving me a match on the mat so that I can start figuring some of it out?"

"Ooh! A full challenge already, and more than a little arrogant," Midnight thought. "Tell you what, Baneth – I'll give you a match once you've shown me what you can do, and if you're up to my standards. Just beat the person that I choose, and then you can lay your hands on me. Deal?"

"It's a deal, sir." Baneth was oozing confidence, and Midnight knew from her records that she had quite a lot of justification for that attitude. Rakshani Marines were extremely tough, and she had still managed to distinguish herself amongst them.

"Kincaid, would you care to warm up Baneth for me," Midnight asked.

"Yes, sir," Kincaid replied, stepping out onto the mats.

Baneth looked down at the human with a little sneer, and Midnight didn't need his empathic sense to tell that the Rakshani was contemptuous of the human's vaunted skills.

Midnight said, "Freestyle fight. No injuries. I want to see your skills, Baneth, not brute strength."

"Understood, Commander," Baneth acknowledged.

"Begin!" Midnight ordered.

Baneth immediately sprang forward with all the blinding speed of her species... and found herself flipping through the air. She hit the mat rolling and was back on her feet in an instant, glaring at the unperturbed human who, aside from being at the ready on the balls of his feet, seemed to be quite relaxed.

Baneth growled at herself for being careless, then sprang to the attack again. There was a flailing of various limbs before Baneth crashed to the mat again. Once more she got to her feet, this time eyeing the small man warily. She had missed what he had done, but she realised that it had been no accident. However, there was no way that she was going to concede that his skills were a match for hers! With a feline snarl, she threw herself into combat again, but with a good deal more caution this time. Blows and grapples were made without either combatant gaining an advantage. Then Baneth made a sudden sweep with her tail, the large muscular limb frequently overlooked by other species in a fight, but not by this human. The sweep left her vulnerable to another attack, and she found herself on the mat again, this time with Kincaid on top of her, her arms immobilised and his legs pinning her tail to one of her legs. Infuriated, she used the sheer power of her body to shake him off. Climbing back to her feet, she screamed in rage, desiring nothing else except to break this human into pieces!

“Hagooth!” Midnight said crisply.

As Baneth charged at Kincaid, the Renzar stepped between them, knocking the Rakshani off balance. Hagooth’s greater mass was mostly solid bone and muscle, and he easily pushed her to the mat and sat on her, oblivious to the outraged blows that she pelted him with.

Midnight stepped up to them and barked, “Lieutenant Baneth, cease that right now!” Shi sent an empathic shove to add weight to that command. Baneth stopped abruptly, and Midnight inclined his head to Hagooth to indicate to get off her.

“Get up, Baneth!” Midnight said sternly.

The Rakshani did so, burning with humiliation.

“That was a disgraceful performance, Lieutenant. I expected far better from you.”

“So he knows a few tricks,” she replied sullenly.

“I’m not talking about losing the fight; I’m disgusted with the way you lost control and intended to harm your team-mate. That fight, while demonstrating your skills of which I’m already fully aware, was mostly intended to see how you would deal with a certain situation, and you failed badly. And didn’t I tell you to learn more about your team-mates?”

Baneth was angered. “I did! I read all their records, know all their specialities, and more!”

“Anyone can read official records, Baneth. I told you to read about them. A small amount of effort would have informed you that Kincaid is ranked in the top five unarmed combat masters in the entire Fleet. He is responsible for training many of the elite in inter-species fighting techniques. He has even developed special techniques for use by and against taurforms such as myself. We are very privileged to have him assigned to the Pegasus. I fully expected you to lose, Lieutenant. I wanted to know if you could deal with that. Turns out that you can’t. Perhaps you don’t belong on the Alpha team after all?”

Baneth just quietly seethed.

“Get back in line, Baneth. Watch the rest of us train. When you realise that you still have some things to learn, I’ll let you have another turn.”



A few days later, Midnight was in the queue for the replicators in the mess hall when shi heard a familiar voice behind him.

“So how is the new recruit doing?”

Midnight turned to see Sparks also queued up behind him. “What drags you away from the engine room?” shi enquired.

“Aside from hunger? Curiosity, of course! Come on, give!”

“I’ll tell you at the table,” Midnight told his fellow chakat, unwilling to discuss Baneth amidst the crowd.

They collected their food and found an empty table in a far corner where they could talk in semi-privacy.

Midnight took a swig of hir tea first before saying, “So far she’s not as good as I’d hoped, but not as bad as I feared. I’ve succeeded in keeping her mind off Rastivok though.”

“How’d you do that?” Sparks mumbled through a mouthful of tuna roll.

“By getting her to hate my guts,” Midnight admitted. “Rakshani really don’t like to be shown up, and I made her look like a fool in front of the entire team. However, she has a streak of arrogance a mile wide, and if she’s going to integrate into this ship’s Security force, she’s got to learn how to work with a team that doesn’t consist of Rakshani Marines.”

“You set awfully high standards though, Midnight. Mightn’t you be pushing a bit too hard so soon?”

“If she’s going to fill the role for which she is intended, I expect nothing less than her utter best. She has the potential – she sure made Kincaid work hard to beat her, so she certainly has fighting skills. Now if I can get her to use her head a bit more, we might just end up with a hell of a good new addition to the Security team. Now if your curiosity is satisfied for the moment, my stomachs are demanding attention.”



Over the next few weeks, Baneth showed that while she might be hot-headed, she was not stupid. She carefully studied her opponents’ techniques before taking them on. She also really studied up on the people in her team, gaining a fuller understanding of how they had earned a place on the elite Alpha team in the process. Her anger with Midnight segued into respect, especially when she realised that the chakat pushed himself harder than anyone on the team. She finally got to lay hands on hir, although only to practice fighting against a taurform rather than a sparring match. She quickly realised that if she ever got one, shi would be difficult to defeat. Her respect for chakats as a species went up a few notches because of hir.

Aside from boring Security duties, there was little to do besides train and hone their skills. Midnight used the main holodeck occasionally to set up simulations for training Alpha and Bravo teams when shi could, but all hoped for some real action.

The Pegasus had many duties. Being the flagship of the First Fleet, its captain, Admiral Kline, often had to attend matters of protocol which involved security details. However, most of the time they were on patrol, trying to deal with interstellar problems, the worst of which were pirates.

The problem with outer space is that it’s unimaginably vast. Pirates frequently succeeded simply because they had a huge amount of choice as to where they would attack merchants, knowing that Federation patrol ships would be unlikely to be near enough to give them trouble. The problem had grown considerably since the introduction of the gravity bomb, a device which when activated, caused such a large disruption in the local gravity field that it would collapse the warp bubble of a starship, usually resulting in the disablement of the warp engines due to the severe feedback. A timer on a bomb smuggled onto a freighter meant that the



pirates could practically choose a time and place to make the victim drop into normal space where they would be waiting within easy striking distance. The Stellar Federation tried to make it harder for the pirates by randomizing the time and position of their patrols, but the pirates were still at an advantage.

However, sometimes the Federation got lucky.



“Captain! I just picked up a big gravity spike.”

Admiral Boyce Kline looked towards the Caitian navigator. “Analysis, Mr Murawrr?” he asked.

“98.7% match to the signature of a typical gravity bomb,” he announced, tail twitching in excitement.

“Helmsman! Get those coordinates and make best speed for them!” Kline hit the button that signalled Red Alert throughout the ship. “All hands to stations. Probable pirate encounter. Prepare for battle.” He switched to a private line. “Kline to Midnight.”

“Midnight here,” came the prompt reply.

“Fortune seems to be smiling upon us this day, Commander. We seem to be within minutes of an ongoing pirate incursion. Get your teams ready for a possible boarding. I want prisoners, Midnight, and the higher up the better.”

“We’ll get them for you, sir. Midnight out.”

Boyce anxiously counted the seconds until they came into sensor range of the ships.

Commander Rosepetal, Kline’s Caitian First Officer, had manned the science station and was using the most sensitive instruments to gather data as fast as possible. She said, “Sensors show three ships – one is a heavy freighter, the other two smaller and faster. Now picking up at least two smaller craft, possibly fighters.”

Kline nodded and opened the comm again. “Fighters prepare for launch. Boarding teams to follow as soon as the area is clear.”

In visual range!” announced Murawrr.

“On main screen!” Boyce ordered.

The scene was still very distant, but the bridge crew could see generally what was happening. One of the pirate ships was already pulling away, apparently having spotted the approaching Federation ship. Within moments, it jumped into warp, abandoning its fellow pirate ship.

“I hope that you got a lock on that ship?” Boyce asked.

“Yes sir, I got a solid lock,” Murawrr confirmed. “As long as we don’t dawdle here, we can catch them,” he added confidently.

They could now see the other ship clearly. In order to prevent their victims from sending a nasty surprise by Matter Transporter, the pirate ship had a M-T disruptor field about it. However, that worked both ways, so they couldn’t beam themselves onto the freighter. Instead they were crudely

docked to the ship by a pair of boarding tubes. This had prevented them from making a quick exit, so instead they had to stand and fight.

They reached the ships and dropped out of warp. "All fighters and boarding craft launch!" ordered the Admiral.

There was a flurry of activity as several small craft launched from the hangar deck. The fighters immediately set off in pursuit of the pirate's attack ships, clearing a safe lane for the boarding craft. As soon as they were clear, the Pegasus jumped back into warp, hot on the tail of the fleeing pirate ship.

The pirates' attack craft, while very dangerous to civilian ships, were hopelessly outclassed by the Stellar Federation fighters, and the boarding craft docked with the freighter at several airlocks without incident.

Midnight tapped his comm. "Hagooth, you there?"

After a brief pause, he answered, "Am here, Commander. Pirates defending boarding tube are. In a moment finished."

"Wait for Squads Three and Four to join you, then board that ship as fast as you can!"

"Piece of pie, Commander," came Hagooth's confident reply. "Hagooth out."

"OK, people, sensors show that portable M-T disruptors being used, so we can't use our shuttles' Transporter to jump ahead. On the other hand, they betray the pirates' positions, so we'll aim for them. There are sure to be others though, so remember the drill. Squad One will secure the parts of the ship as we make our way to the bridge. Squad Two will head for the cargo holds where the other disruptor is. Querl and I will take point. Baneth, you will give us cover fire if necessary, but your main task is to protect Senji. All weapons set to heavy stun. We want to bring these bastards to justice, and perhaps answer some questions, so no corpses!"

Baneth acknowledged the order without hesitation, but was puzzled as to why the ferret was not dressed in heavy armour like everyone else. The little morph just grinned and winked at the Rakshani towering over him. He was clad in a snug-fitting one-piece suit with a hood that was not yet pulled on. It did not seem particularly capable of defending him against either projectile or energy weapons. She supposed that she'd find out in due time.

Querl and Midnight stepped through the airlock, their weapons held up and ready to fire. Again Baneth was puzzled when, side-by-side, they linked their partially exposed tails. They proceeded down the corridor like that, turning around the corner of a T-intersection in synch. Midnight signalled two of the squad members to guard the opposite direction. Baneth would have sent several people to check it out, but apparently the chakat seemed to know something that she didn't. The freighter was a warren of corridors accessing various storage compartments, and at the next intersection, without any indication that Baneth could perceive, the two simultaneously aimed at a blind corner. A moment later, two pirates dressed in light armour charged out, only to be struck immediately by the waiting phaser beams

before they could even begin to aim. The Rakshani was very impressed. Somehow the duo was detecting concealed enemies with uncanny accuracy.

This time Midnight sent half a squad down one corridor, indicating four more targets. The rest resumed their march towards their objective. Once, Querl stopped before a corner, reset his weapon to maximum, and fired through the corner. The high-intensity beam cut through the wall like a hot knife through butter, and a small explosion came from the corridor around the corner. Proceeding forward, Baneth saw that there had been a tripod-mounted beamer waiting in ambush for them. Such weapons had built-in sensor distorters to prevent them from being targeted, yet Querl's beam had struck it squarely in the power pack, causing the explosion. Two pirates were there on the floor, groaning in pain. Midnight calmly stunned them both to ensure that they would not recover to be a threat.

Another intersection came up, and again the two aimed blindly. Two people, a human and a cat morph, burst out, but neither chakat nor skunktaur fired. The two threw themselves to the floor as two more armour-clad figures followed close behind, only to be shot promptly. Baneth had been on the verge of shooting the first two men before she realised that they had to be freighter crew-members being used in a failed diversion. Somehow, Querl and Midnight not only were detecting hidden threats, but sorting friend from foe.

This time though, an alarm went off in Baneth's head. Something was wrong. As the taurs passed, one of the supposedly stunned pirates stirred, and his weapon came to bear on Midnight. Baneth switched instantly to high-energy beam and shot him, and he collapsed with a smoking hole in his chest.

Midnight's attention had been focused forward, but upon hearing the phaser fire behind him, he looked back, saw the dead pirate and Baneth's phaser still pointed at him, and asked, "What just happened here?"

"One pirate was not stunned, sir. He was about to shoot you in the back," Baneth replied.

Midnight frowned. "That kind of armour is insufficient to protect him from the effects of a heavy stun shot. How could he still be moving?" It was obvious that the chakat was a little sceptical and suspected the Rakshani of getting too keyed-up.

"I saw him move too, Commander," Senji said.

Baneth explained. "Look closely and you can see that this one is a cyborg. I've seen it once before. He has a special energy-dispersing net built in, and your stun beam barely tickled him. He was just faking being stunned to catch you by surprise. However, the dispersed energy makes a slight glow around the person. I glimpsed it when you shot him, and my senses went on alert. The moment he moved, I was onto him. Only a high-energy beam is effective against that kind of defence, so it had to be a kill shot."

Midnight nodded. "Very good," was his terse reply, then he resumed their advance.

Close to their goal, Senji suddenly announced, "This is it, Commander."

They stopped and Midnight asked, "Where?"

Peering at the scanner in his left hand, he pointed with his right. "There!"

Midnight set his weapon to cut through the wall carefully, removing a large chunk of panelling, and revealing a plethora of pipes and cables. Baneth realised that this had to be the main duct for all of the control cables, ventilation, and fluid supplies for the ship. While it had plenty of room to secure all of those, it was never intended for anyone to actually go inside of it because it was far too small.

"I'm up!" Senji said with his customary grin. He handed the scanner to the bemused Rakshani, then pulled his hood over his head, leaving just his mask of black fur visible around his eyes. Suddenly the suit became very hard to focus on, and the ferret morph seemed to blend in with the background.

"A stealth suit!" Baneth realised. "So that's what one looks like."

The ferret almost seemed to flow into the cramped conduit, and he quickly vanished from sight. Baneth looked at Midnight queringly.

Midnight smiled. "He told you that he was a ninja when you met him. Now you can see the truth."

"What's he going to do?" Baneth asked as they moved off again.

Midnight explained, "You already know that because the penalties for piracy are so harsh, many pirates will do just about anything rather than be captured. That puts the crew of this ship in danger because they are bargaining chips. Pirates can and have shot hostages to demonstrate the lengths that they are prepared to go to secure their own freedom. We're not going to give them that opportunity. Senji will infiltrate the bridge where the pirates have holed up with several of the freighter's crew. He will be able to place every person, friend or foe, and when we make our move, he will also attack them from the direction that they least expect, or protecting anyone who most needs it."

"But won't they have jammers preventing us from scanning them? Any data Senji tries to send us will either get blocked or garbled," Baneth objected.

Midnight grinned. "Normally you'd be correct, but we are using a method that can't be so easily jammed. Senji will literally be our eyes."

Baneth frowned in thought. "Has that anything to do with the way that you and Querl have been picking off hidden targets seemingly without effort?"

"Good, you figured it out. Yes it does. It is a little known fact that skunktaurs can share their Talent with other skunktaurs, and with chakats too. Querl and I formed a gestalt of our Talents which virtually enabled us to see around corners, and incidentally not be deceived by pushing out innocent civilians as a diversion. The only catch is that we need to be in physical contact for it to work properly, hence why we entwine our bare tails. It leaves them a bit vulnerable though, so we appreciate someone reliable at our backs. Anyway, as soon as Senji gets into a suitable position,

we'll be able to see through his eyes. A willing partner is much better for this purpose. We'll also get the mental disposition of everyone in there and try to anticipate their reactions."

Their group reached the bridge main door without further incident.

"Now what?" Baneth asked.

"We wait for Senji to get into position," Midnight replied. "Right now though, we can already tell that there are six pirates in there with four crew. Since we're the law here, we have to give them a chance to surrender." Shi activated a nearby internal comm. "Anyone on the bridge, this is Lieutenant Commander Midnight of Stellar Navy Security. You are ordered to release your hostages unharmed and surrender."

Baneth wasn't sure if there would be an answer, but then again, Marines weren't usually involved with negotiations. It was only moments before an answer did come.

"I've got a better idea, Fleet. You all go back to your ship, and we won't carve up the captain and his crew. Better decide quickly, or we might just start practicing on one just to prove that we're serious."

"I'd say that was a 'no'," Baneth commented.

Midnight gave her a grim smile. "Yeah, but not unexpected. With penalties ranging as far as execution or mind-wipe, the pirates will try everything to make us back off. They know that we value the lives of the crew more, so they think that they're in a strong bargaining position. We're going to disillusion them."

The chakat indicated to a couple of squad members to bring up a piece of equipment that they had been lugging around. Magnetically clamping it to the floor in front of the door, they activated it and focused it on the centre of the secured airlock. It was a portable presser beam, designed to knock down any door in a controlled manner.

Midnight's eyes suddenly seemed to focus elsewhere. "Senji is ready... the captain is being held by what appears to be the leader... another standing nearby covering him... two pirates using the other three crewmembers as a shield between them and the door... the final two are on each side of the door where they can't be hit from out here."

Querl, whose eyes were also strangely focused, said, "I can shoot one of them through the wall, but the other is standing in front of critical ship systems."

"Senji is sure that he can get the leader and the cover man before they can react. That leaves the difficult ones," Midnight continued.

"We need to get those three crewmembers out of the line of fire," Baneth said. "If we can time it right, I could knock them down out of the way, and then snap a shot back at the man at the door."

"You'd need to know exactly where they are and act without a moment's hesitation. Very risky," Midnight assessed.

"Maybe if I could see what you're seeing, it would improve the odds?" suggested Baneth.

Midnight gave her a keen look. "You could, but you lack Senji's training. It requires an open mind and complete trust. Do you think that you can put aside your personal feelings and submit to us encroaching on your mind in the ultimate intimacy?"

"If it can be done, I will do it!" declared Baneth.

Midnight nodded in satisfaction. "Very well, lift your visor. Querl, let's try to link her."

The skunktaur took off his armoured gauntlet and touched the Rakshani's cheek. She immediately felt his presence, with Midnight closely coupled to him. At first she mentally flinched from the contact, then she steadied herself and let the skunktaur delve deeper into her being. She had no Talent and no control, so it was a bit frightening, but it was also fascinating. She who had been so aloof and superior was now becoming part of the unity – no more; no less. She shoved aside the last of her overweening pride and suddenly she was part of the gestalt, and her senses exploded.

Baneth staggered a bit, then started to get a hold of herself again. She was looking at the closed airlock to the bridge still, but although she could not see through it, she nevertheless could perceive quite clearly the people and objects beyond it. She was seeing what Senji was relaying to Querl and Midnight, adjusted by their perception of their relative positions. She was both awed and thrilled.

"I can see them!" she said excitedly. "I can place them exactly. Commander, I can do this. Let me lead the charge."

Midnight nodded his approval. "OK, we'll do that. We need to coordinate our strikes exactly so that there's the very least chance for the pirates to harm the crew. On my signal, activate the presser, aiming for this point." Shi indicated it to the presser's operator. "Senji will shoot the leader, Querl will get the first door man, and Baneth will be through the door during the chaos. Everyone ready?"

"One moment, Commander, I'm going to take a running start." Baneth lowered her visor as she walked back several paces, then nodded.

Midnight said, "I'll be coming through the moment that you've dealt with the second door man. Okay, on the count of three. One... two..."

Baneth took off.

"Three!"

The presser beam slammed into the door, wrenching it out of its frame and hurling it to the side of the bridge that Midnight had indicated was clear of people. Baneth was just a fraction behind, her mind's eye fixed on the crew being used as shields. Well before her actual eyes saw them, she was hurtling through the air towards them. She body-slammed two of them, and her tail knocked the third to the floor. The fully-armoured Rakshani probably injured them, but that was better than being killed in the crossfire, or deliberately coldly murdered. That same armour was now shielding them from the fire of the second door man. Baneth had already started aiming for him even as she was flying towards the crew. She 'knew' exactly where

he was, and a single shot took him out. Midnight had already started his charge through the airlock, knowing full well that Shi would be targeted by the two pirates who had been using the crew as shields. Shi had two advantages though – firstly his armour was the best in the Federation, and reinforced with a force-field. Shi took two glancing shots and one directly over his upper heart, but the force-field dissipated the energy beams spectacularly but harmlessly. The high-intensity beams took a terrible toll on the suit's power pack though, and more direct hits could cause it to fail. Midnight never intended to give them that chance. His second advantage was natural – chakats could leap to extraordinary lengths, and while the pirates continued to fire at normal height, Shi leapt upwards and the beams passed harmlessly under him. Even as Shi sailed gracefully through the air, Shi snapped off a shot at one of them, and landed forelegs first on the other's head. Shi then shot the pirate to ensure that he was stunned and out of action.

Querl yelled "Clear!" from the airlock doorway.

Baneth climbed to her feet, took off her helmet and solicitously checked out the crew members whom she had knocked over. Senji shimmered into view and helped the Rakshani get the crew to their feet. Baneth saw that the leader of the group and his cover man were equally incapacitated by the little ferret's shots, and she gained a new respect for her team-mate's efficient skills.

Taking off his helmet also, Midnight approached the captain of the ship, a greying black cat morph, who was just as disoriented as the rest by the fast and furious action.

"Sir, I am Lieutenant Commander Midnight of Stellar Navy Security. I apologise for any damage or injuries incurred due to our actions."

The captain looked incredulous. "Commander, we all were certain that we'd be dead very soon. Anything is an improvement over that."

"I think that tiger broke my arm," interjected one of the crew whom Baneth had bowled over, "but the other is going to be hoisting a drink in your honour. I've never been so glad to see the Navy in all my life!"

"I'm a Rakshani, not a tiger, sir," Baneth corrected, "But you're welcome anyway."

"How are the rest of my crew doing, Commander?" the captain asked with great concern.

"Let's both get an update, shall we?" Midnight answered. Activating his wrist comm, she said, "Squad One, report!"

"Squad One leader here. All secure. No further action."

"Very good, Squad One. Stand by for further orders. Squad Two, report!" Midnight ordered.

"Squad Two leader," came the reply. "We have the last two pirates barricaded in one of the cargo holds. We'll have them dealt with in less than five minutes, sir. All else has been secured and no casualties."

"Very good, Squad Two. Report when concluded. Midnight out." Shi faced the captain. "Your ship will very soon be clear, and it appears that

none of your crew has been seriously harmed. You've come out of this amazingly well."

"Don't I know it!" the old cat said fervently. "What's happening with that ship that's docked to us?"

"Two squads are working on that rat's nest right now. As soon as we've cleaned out the garbage here, we'll join them." Shi activated his comm again. "Midnight to Hagooth – progress report, please."

After a short delay, Hagooth's voice came back. "Much resistance there is. Fighting to their deaths they are. Is good."

"Squad One will be reinforcing you very soon. Squad Two will be about ten minutes later," Shi advised.

"Take time, Commander. All under control is."

"Understood. Midnight out." Shi then ordered Squad One to regroup at the boarding tube and put themselves at Hagooth's disposal.

The captain was looking a bit puzzled. "That Hagooth person seems rather blasé for someone in such danger."

Midnight grinned. "Hagooth is a combat specialist who rarely gets the opportunity to put his skills to the test. He's enjoying himself at the moment."

"You make it sound like it's a game to him. I'm not sure that I could trust my life to someone like that."

"You're half right. In a way it is a game to him, but one where you get a higher score for inflicting the least amount of injury or damage to achieve the goal. The squad members like having him calling the shots as their chances of a safe and successful mission are much better. However, we'd better go help out anyway."

"Good luck, Commander," the captain said, echoed by the crew.

While Midnight and the captain had been talking, Querl had found and deactivated the M-T disruptor. Other squad members attached Transporter markers to the unconscious pirates, and one by one they were beamed over to the shuttles' holding cells. Although they should be unconscious for hours, Midnight couldn't be sure when the Pegasus would return, and therefore Shi needed to ensure that the pirates could be of no further threat. Shi noted that they all appeared to be Voxxans. The alien species had often been nicknamed 'humans in fox suits', they were so alike. Unfortunately they also shared a similar criminal element. Every species in the Federation had its pirates though, so their nature wasn't really significant. Shi just hoped that their capture would lead to more significant inroads into the piracy problem.

"Okay, let's move out!" Midnight ordered when everyone was finished.

As they headed for the pirate ship, Baneth said, "Better change out your power pack, Commander. You took a couple of strong hits back there."

Midnight replied, "I intend to do so, and I suggest that you do the same."

"Me?" Baneth checked her power gauge and was surprised to see that was reading only about 30%.



“The guy by the door must have been trigger-happy because he shot you square in the back as you leaped past him, but you didn’t even notice it because you were so focused on your goal. You did get a couple of lesser hits while you were protecting the crew, but it was that big blast that drained your power.”

Not for the first time, Baneth blessed the efficacy of her armour.

When they reached the docking tube to the pirate ship, Midnight called Hagooth again. “We’re here. Where do you need us?”

He replied, “With Squad Leader Three to rendezvous. Your Talents needed are.”

“Acknowledged,” Midnight replied, then looked at Baneth. “Ready to clean out the scum? We don’t have any innocent bystanders to worry about now.”

Baneth grinned back. “I’m ready. Let’s show them that you don’t mess with Fed Sec!”



An hour and a half later, the Pegasus returned with the disabled pirate ship in tow. All prisoners were transferred to detention cells aboard the starship, and the Security teams stood down. Before Baneth could head for the prep room to divest her armour, Midnight said to her, “Report to my office in forty minutes.”

“Aye sir,” Baneth said, wondering what it was about.

She barely had time to undress, stow her armour, set the power packs to recharge, then freshen up before heading to Midnight’s office. In spite of the tight timing, it seemed that the chakat had managed to do the same and still had time to start on hir reports.

“Second Lieutenant Baneth reporting as ordered, sir!” she said crisply as she saluted.

Midnight returned the salute and said, “At ease. Take a seat, Baneth.”

The Rakshani found a chair suitable for her frame amongst the collection that Midnight kept in hir office, and made herself comfortable.

Midnight waited for her to be seated, then said, “As of now, you are being taken out of Alpha Team and you will be joining Bravo team as of start of shift tomorrow.”

Baneth was shocked, then outraged. “What have I done to deserve being kicked out of the Alpha Team and sent to the second-stringers?” she demanded.

Midnight held up hir hands. “Whoa! Not so fast! It isn’t what you’re thinking. For starters, Bravo Team is not a bunch of second-stringers; they are all very competent young people, rising stars in their fields. It’s true that I surround myself with the experts, but that doesn’t mean that I staff Bravo Team with also-rans. I can’t be on duty 24 hours a day, and nor can any of the other Alpha Team members. So when I’m off duty, I need to know that my very best alternatives are there to do the job, and that’s Bravo Team.”

"I see," Baneth said, only slightly mollified, "but that still means that I didn't rate it as one of Alpha's experts."

Midnight smiled. "On the contrary, you exceeded my expectations."

Baneth blinked in confusion. "Then... why?"

"Think about it for a moment. Each Alpha Team member has a special skill, the tops in their field. You, on the other hand, while proven to be an excellent Marine, have no particular unique skill, but I had you learning all that you could from everyone in the past few weeks. I needed you to know who and what you would be working with before being shifted to your permanent assignment. Baneth, you do have something that the others either lack or are not quite suitable. You are not merely going to be joining that team, you are going to be their commanding officer, which means that in the Security division, you will be second only to me on this ship."

Baneth gaped, and then finally managed to speak. "Then... it's really a promotion?"

Midnight grinned. "Yes, and you certainly earned it."

"But what about all the others who have seniority?"

"No one here gets promoted merely for being here longer. While I'm in charge, only the truly competent get that privilege. You came here freshly promoted to Second Lieutenant and full of pride. You were young and arrogant, and I thought that Command might have made a mistake in assigning you to here, but your profile indicated that you had great potential as a leader, if only I could get you to focus on your job, keep your mind off Rastivok, and learn. So I pushed you hard, and you responded well, even if it was just to show me up. You have learned, and this pirate encounter was the perfect test for you. You demonstrated your competence, your ability to improvise, suggest courses of action, act independently and, best of all, you successfully joined our gestalt, something that cannot be accomplished without complete trust, openness, and willingness to cooperate. You are ready to take on this responsibility now. As I said, you've earned it."

"Thank you, sir," Baneth said sincerely. "I must admit that I feel a bit overwhelmed by this sudden change in my status."

"I'd be surprised if you weren't, but I'm also sure that you can handle it. I suggest that you take the rest of your duty period getting to know more about your new team."

Baneth grinned. "Now I fully understand what you mean by getting to know them. No surprises this time." Her expression turned sly. "So, have I earned that one-on-one sparring match with you yet, sir?"

Midnight threw his head back laughing. "I suppose you have, Baneth. I'll schedule a bout soon. Now let's go take a break. We've both earned that today."

As she got up, Baneth said, "There's another thing that you said that you were correct about, sir."

"What's that?" Midnight asked curiously.

"You are a sneaky bitch," Baneth confirmed.

"And don't you forget it!" Midnight replied with a wink.



Sparks nuzzled Midnight and gave hir a lick-kiss on the cheek. “Congratulations on your promotion to Commander Third, by the way. I hope you liked my reward for you as much.”

“Hell, yeah!” Midnight replied. “I like that kind of reward a lot.”

“That really felt wonderful. See? It’s much better when you come to me before you get all stressed out.”

“I know,” Midnight admitted. “Don’t keep nagging me about it. Now that I have Baneth looking after Bravo Team, I don’t have to oversee both teams constantly, and I have more time for myself.”

“So everything worked out with Baneth then?”

“Oh yes, she has already made a difference to Bravo team. She did manage to surprise me though.”

“How so?”

“Remember that I told you that Rakshani try to prove their worth to potential mates by trying to better them?”

“Yeah. So she’s been chasing Rastivok?” Sparks conjectured.

“Of course, but that isn’t what surprised me. Apparently she was very impressed with the way that I handled her, and she propositioned me!”

Sparks giggled. “How did you handle that?”

“Let’s just say that it’s a good thing that I have plenty of experience with Zhane.”

Sparks rolled on the bed, laughing hir head off.

Midnight rolled hir eyes. “The things that I do to keep my team happy,” shi murmured before tickle-attacking the cheeky engineer.

## What a Dog Needs by Kris Schnee

You're probably wondering why I broke in. The reason is, the dog in cage forty-two is my idiot brother.

Let me talk before you sound an alarm. Cullen was a good cop at first, and the family was always talking about him. You know the name? Yeah, he was in the papers when that dealer Jumia shot him in the heart. Jumia became known as a "social activist political prisoner" and Cullen got to have his body put on ice and his blood drained out for antifreeze. He woke up on a heart/lung machine with a jungle of flowers and me weeping beside him. Those machines still cause strokes. He didn't have much time.

He was an idiot. He could've left the country, gone to sea for one of those cyborg jobs they do now in the colonies. Instead he took the city's offer to make him a cop dog. Put his brain in a big half-retriever, half-wolf body like you've got in the cage there. He woke up again and we were all there, the whole force, giving him presents and trying to get him adjusted. Fellow idiot Sargent Garm got him a squeaky toy cop as a joke. I got him a disabled-interface computer that he could bark and paw at to (barely) talk instead of playing Lassie games. Of course he couldn't type, since a dog doesn't need a man's hands.

Everybody got to love Cullen the K-9, hero mutt. I never formally partnered with him, since I didn't have the K-9 training. That, and I hated what he'd become. He was all smiles and tail-wagging and never complained when people scratched his ears and said "nice doggy." I'd never seen him so happy. In a way he had it good, with fan mail and a stupid movie offer and free room and board. Yeah, he lived at the police station with the normal dogs, just with a better bed and no obvious cage. It was more efficient to live there than in his old place; a dog doesn't need a man's house.

He worked mostly with Garm – best human nose on the force for trouble. Together they were real heroes, catching a bank robber and helping out with the terror investigation. They got medals. Both let the fame go to their heads. Ever seen a dog slurp whiskey? Garm chased women while Cullen cleaned out the booze, and then they switched off. In Cullen's case he tried it while drunk, and realized he'd be guilty of some kind of bestial rape no matter who he was after, human or dog. The second time, the husband fixed the problem for him. Cullen took that pretty well. After all, a dog doesn't need a man's balls.

Garm and Cullen both stuck to drinking after that, and then one day Garm lost an arm. No heroic firefight, just a stupid accident with a high roof and a power cord. He could've saved up for a better one from the colonies, but he told everyone it was the force's job to buy him one. Since he hadn't lost the arm on duty, the police only gave him a desk job. He hated that. It didn't let him move around. Cullen kept him company at the station at night. Garm beat him in return, threw him against a wall. Cullen

cursed Garm out and bit him. Garm grabbed Cullen's speaking-computer and smashed it, yelling, "A dog doesn't need a man's voice!"

After that, Cullen made himself useless. Wouldn't chase crooks. He just lay there expecting us to feed him, like some fuzzy tapeworm. Physically there wasn't much wrong with him. When the chief made me talk to him, he wouldn't talk back even with a borrowed machine. I asked if he was happy getting to act like a dumb mutt, and he just gave a big fangy grin, like I was the only one in on his joke. I think I got it: if he was just a mutt and people blamed it on his injuries, he wouldn't have to worry about anything. Not fame, not money, not women, not his reputation in the force.

I told the chief and all the doctors what I thought, but they didn't believe me. It had to be brain damage, they said, and they could make him useful again. How? The latest upgrade: a positronic brain, some domestic cyborg gadget. They'd rip out everything that was left of Cullen the man, and put in a computer that would follow orders and behave itself. A dog doesn't need a man's brain.

So, you've caught me. Why do you think I'm here out of uniform? To save him from having his brain ripped out? No, he wouldn't want that. He gave up everything, one piece at a time. I'm here for myself and for my friends and family, to finish off the beast and not have an undead monster replace my brother. A dog doesn't need a man's name, and by my own, I'm never going to be a dog myself.

## Moonfur by Paul Lucas

The tales we tell are the very coin of life. For what lives on for us in this world except our stories?

A half-dozen horses galloped noisily to a stop outside my Randy Dryad Inn just as I was chasing out the last of my regulars for the night. A heartbeat later six burly soldiers shoved a rag-clad prisoner ahead of them through the door.

The filthy, near-naked man crashed to the floorboards, hands and feet bound fast by heavy chains. Even through his heavy brows and shaggy hair, I could see raw hatred gleam in his eyes. He spat at the soldiers and was rewarded with a vicious backhand across the jaw.

My Orc bouncer, Bloodgouge, rose from his stool beside the door. I calmed him with an emphatic scowl. The soldiers wore the badges of Baron Vahl's troops. The last thing my poor, suffering business needed was to annoy the local landholder.

Bloodgouge returned to his stool, crossing his tree-trunk arms and licking his two-inch tusks. The soldiers kept a wary eye on him as they dragged their prisoner with them toward the bar.

"Wench!" the leader, a spectacularly hairy bear of a man, shouted at me. "Fetch the proprietor! Me and my men wish to celebrate our good fortune!"

"I'm the owner of this Inn," I said. "And my name is Shakara, not 'wench.'"

"A woman, the innkeeper?"

I canted my chin toward Bloodgouge, who was now very conspicuously polishing his fifty-pound war-axe with a greasy rag. "If you have any complaints, take them up with my legal advocate there. But I assure you – sergeant, is it? – that my ale is as frothy and my beds as soft as in any inn owned by a man."

The sergeant laughed. "Ha! Well said, wen...My Lady Innkeeper. Please fetch a round of drinks for me and my men here." He threw three silver crowns on the bar, a generous sum for a party twice his size. "We'll need rooms and stables space for our horses, too."

I snatched up the coins and began pouring drinks. I sent Tully, a young cousin of mine, to tend their horses and make sure their rooms were in proper order.

The soldiers commandeered a large table in the middle of the room, reserving the chair farthest from the door for their prisoner. "I still think we should have left the Wild Man outside," the youngest of them said.

"And who is going to stay out all night and guard him?" the sergeant rumbled. "You, Scrum? I didn't think so."

So," I said to the sergeant as I set his drink down. "What's the occasion?"

He swung his mug in the prisoner's direction. "He is, My Lady Innkeeper. The Baron is offering a bounty of ten gold crowns for him. Ten!

He'll keep us in hay and ale until spring!" The others sounded a ragged cheer.

"Who is he?"

The sergeant laughed. "Why, the Wild Man of Barracca Woods. You've heard of him?"

"The Wild Man?"

"The very one, my lady. He's been at large for many years, destroying traps, attacking hunters. Why, some say he even runs with the wolves of the forest, and they accept him as one of their own."

One of the soldiers piped in. "Aye, I've heard he ruts with them, too! Humps their tails like a great big dog himself!"

The others laughed. The prisoner's eyes burned with cold murder.

"I wonder what drove him to such crimes," I said.

The prisoner's rasping baritone cut off the sergeant's reply. "My only crime, barkeep, was loving someone I should not have."

The soldier nearest him raised a fist to strike him, but I spoke out. "No, please, wait." I regarded the prisoner. "Do you have a story to tell, Wild Man?"

He looked me over for many long moments, then nodded hesitantly. "Perhaps."

"I would like to hear it."

The sergeant rumbled. "I am not sure..."

"Please, sergeant," I said. "I collect stories. Whenever I hear an interesting tale I write it down in a book I have. Once a month or so I'll pull it out and read stories from it to the crowd that gathers here. It is my biggest draw. If you let me listen to the Wild Man's story, the next round will be on the house."

The sergeant rubbed his broad expanse of beard. "Well, all right. He'll probably be summarily beheaded when we reach the Baron's castle, so I guess we best listen while we can."

I poured a new round of drinks, plus an extra mug for the prisoner. "To keep your lips moist enough to tell the story well," I said before any of the soldiers could protest.

The Wild Man nodded in thanks and downed several gulps before beginning. "Many years ago I was a very stupid young man named Muruk," he rasped. "I was a huntsman and a tanner and my new wife had just given birth to our first child. My tale begins during a mid-winter hunt..."



I waded through shin-deep snow, gripping my bow in numbed hands. My every breath exploded in icy mists as I spat vehement curses at the wolf I was hunting. Where was it getting the energy to continue on mile after mile?

Doggedly I shuffled after the tracks left in the newly fallen snow. The trail took on a puzzling aspect. The prints would distort and elongate into almost human proportions, as if the creature somehow grew larger for short

stretches. I thought it caused by the shifting snow. I should have known instantly what it was, but I was too tired and desperate to think clearly.

My family sorely needed the three-copper bounty a wolf's tale would bring. My wife, Lika, discovered to our greatest sorrow that she could not produce enough milk for our newborn daughter, Melina. What should have been a steady stream from Lika's bosom was at most a shallow trickle. The midwives and the town healer were at a loss to explain or cure it.

Our daughter cried constantly, day and night. We tried many substitutes for milk, but Melina could keep none of them down. Finally, we were forced to drain our measly savings into buying milk from our neighbor and his goats, but as winter approached our coppers dwindled to almost nothing and the goatherd, an odious man with a frosty ember for a heart, charged us ever-increasing prices. Lika yelled at me constantly to do something. I was forced to spend the dead of winter hunting for game already scarce, hoping to earn enough from furs and wolf bounties to see my daughter through the winter.

That was before this wolf had killed one of the goats upon which my daughter so depended. Lika sobbed wildly, and the goatherd raised his price even higher. I set off after the creature as soon as it was light, hoping to claim its tail and give my daughter a few more days of life.

Finally, the trail led to a burrow under a hollow log in a small copse of trees. The beast must have been incredibly desperate to travel so far for food. None of the tracks leading out of the den looked fresh, so I knew I had at last cornered the beast. But the footprints leading to the opening were once again distorted, and I would have sworn a creature walking on two legs made them.

I laid down the bow and pulled out my hunting knife. Slowly, cautiously, with my weapon before me, I squatted down and shuffled into the opening in the massive, half-buried log, letting my eyes adjust to the gloom within.

The occupant must have scented my approach, for when I spotted her she was desperately clawing on the opposite wall of the small space, trying to dig a new exit. In one arm she crooked something small and shadowy to her chest. As she turned and looked at me, I at last realized why her tracks were so strange.

She was not a wolf at all, but a Wolfling, a Faerie creature. Legends said that her race was created long ago by the Father Trees, those immortal guardians of all living things, as a mixture of elven and wolf blood. Their kind could transform between the form of a true wolf and wolf-like human. It was the latter she wore. She was slighter than me and would barely touch my shoulder if she stood erect. Her wide face was reminiscent of a young wolf, with curt jowls and high-arching, triangular ears. But she also had very human features; a short, almost nose-like snout and large, very expressive eyes, the color of a clear daytime sky. Her body was definitely human in form, with hands and legs and most other parts in the expected places, except covered with a coat of unbroken gray fur. A small tuft of a tail peeked out from her backside.



Her arms bore a much tinier version of herself, a cub, not much bigger than my fist. It mewled softly.

The Wolfling clung tightly to her child as she abandoned her hopeless digging and curled up against the far wall, terror in her eyes. She knew she had no chance against a much larger opponent such as myself in such a small space. She shielded the youngling with her body, expecting death at any moment.

I crouched, knife in hand, suddenly tormented as to what to do. Wolfling fur could be sold to a wizard for far more than a mere three copper bounty, and much of the folklore described them as little better than vicious beasts. Humans and Wolfings steadfastly avoided each other in the woods whenever possible, attacking each other when not. Plunging the knife into her was only expected, even by her, it seemed.

But the Wolfling's expressions seemed so human, and her heart-tugging efforts to protect her cub only added to my hesitation. I felt like a murderer.

But Melina was dying...

I noticed she was gaunt and half-starved. The winter had proven particularly harsh, and game was almost nowhere to be found. She had not gotten much of the goat's meat before the animal's owner had chased her off. But there was one part of her that did not lack for fat.

At any other time of my life, I would have looked at her and saw only what any man would see when assessing such things. But at that moment, my mind leapt at only one thought.

A new mother, her breasts were full to feed her pup.

My eyes grew wide. Full enough, perhaps, for two children.

"Can, um, can you understand me?" I asked.

She glared at me with cold suspicion.

"This is going to sound very odd, but I need your help. Really. I could hurt you..."

She hugged her cub closer.

"But I won't!" I added hastily. Seasons, I was no good with words. How could I convince her? "I swear, I won't hurt you. I'll spare you and your child, even give you food, more food than you could ever get hunting by yourself. I can give you better shelter than this, too, a place where you can always be warm. But I need you to do something for me in return." I began fumbling with my belt.

Her eyes widened in horror.

I winced. Stupid, stupid, stupid! "No! Nothing like that! I promise!" I conspicuously put away my knife and pulled out the supply of dried meat I had store away in my belt pouch. I tossed the small bundle to her.

She uncoiled slightly as the food landed beside her. Her eyes flickered back and forth between the food and myself several times before she snatched the dried meat up and gobbled it down. She licked her fingers greedily, not wanting to miss a single morsel. The few bites from the goat must have been her only food in days. Finally, the Wolfling spoke for the

first time. Her voice was surprisingly deep for one so small, with a slight rasp. "What hunter want?"

"I need you to come to my home with me. No, please, listen. I have a baby also, not much older than yours. But there is no milk for her, and she is growing very sick. You, um, you could feed her."

She sneered. "A cub? You lie, try to trick me?"

"Her name is Melina. She's so tiny and so beautiful." I blinked back stinging moisture as my own words struck me. "She'll die unless we can figure out some way to feed her. No tricks. I swear on my daughter's life you won't be harmed. Please, please, help my little girl."

The Wolfling stared hard at me and I found myself transfixed by the vast depths of her eyes. Something very ancient, yet very innocent, flickered there. Something that spoke of a feral world of immense antiquity that humankind had long forgotten. A world the Wolfling and her people were still an integral part of, even as that world and its magic were a part of them.

To this day I'm not sure what spurred her decision. I would like to think it was as simple as the promise of food and warmth, but in truth I think in the moment our eyes locked she looked into the depths of my soul and for some reason approved of whatever was squatting in the darkness there.

She gave her own child a long and loving look before replying. "Yes. I will feed hunter cub. But you trick me, I run away."

"Fair enough." I backed out of the den. The Wolfling hesitantly followed, blinking into the afternoon glare. She never looked at me directly, but I knew she paid wary attention to every move I made. When I started the long hike back to the village, she shuffled along quietly after me.

We spoke only once during the trek. "My name's Muruk," I offered.

She did not even lift her eyes. "My pack, before they drove me away, called me She Who Has Soft Fur the Color of the Rising Moon."

"Er, that's quite a mouthful. How about if I just call you Moonfur?"

She shrugged. We were quiet the rest of the way.



Lika hated Moonfur.

She yelled and screamed for hours after the Wolfling first entered our home, hissing vehemently when I fed Moonfur our freshest meat. When I told her why I had brought the Wolfling to our cottage, she threw anything she could lift at me and swore to slit my throat if I dared let our only child suckle from a Faerie thing like Moonfur.

I yelled, too, until my throat grew hoarse. Moonfur was Melina's only chance! Couldn't Lika even try to see that?

During a momentary lull in our private war, our voices too raspy to go on, Melina cried from her crib. It was only a tiny wheezing sound, yet as terrible to a parent as any scream of agony. Looking at our pale and sickly child, Lika's mouth contorted at the horrible realization that we really did need Moonfur if our daughter was to live. My wife threw herself on the

bed, burying herself in its folds and sobbing tortuously—but quietly—after that. It was the closest to acquiescence I could hope for.

I lifted Melina from her crib and brought her to Moonfur. The Wolfling had warily watched my wife and I fight even as she wolfed down as much deer meat as her stomach could hold. She was never threatened directly, however, so she had resisted the temptation to bolt. With a slightly distended belly she nursed her own child as I handed Melina down to where she was sitting in a corner.

She took my little daughter in the crook of her arm. Melina had not more than a thimble-full of food in the past few days, and I prayed she was still strong enough to suckle.

“Hunter not lie,” was all Moonfur said as she brought the tiny lips to her nipple. When Melina began to suckle, I laughed out loud with joy. Moonfur smiled broadly, falling instantly in love with my daughter’s face. A midwife once told me that a mother to one child is a mother to all children. Apparently that applied even to Wolflings.

I turned to Lika to share my joy, only to see my wife glowering pure hatred at Moonfur.



The first few days were the hardest as the weather turned vicious. We were all cooped up together in the cottage.

Most of the time Lika ignored Moonfur as if the Wolfling were an oversized dustball that refused to be swept up. She went about her chores with an intense single-mindedness, sweeping and mending and scrubbing like a general assaulting an invading army of filth. She held Melina as much as she could, and would occasionally try to nurse our daughter herself, only to realize whatever kept her from fulfilling her maternal duty was still in force. She would bury her head in the sheets for hours afterward, trying to drown out the sounds of Moonfur’s nursing.

Moonfur, for her part, kept quiet and out of the way, adopting the corner farthest from our bed as ‘her’ corner. Lika did not protest when Moonfur gathered some old cloth and spare hay to make a crude nest for herself. She quietly ate the food given her and always, always, kept a wary eye on Lika when my wife wasn’t asleep or crying in the bedsheets.

Moonfur’s own child stayed with her at all times. The tiny Wolfling had all the cutest features of puppies and human babies combined, and I absently began calling him Little Fur. Moonfur seemed pleased at that.

As Lika chose to ignore Moonfur, I became the target of all my wife’s ire. She yelled at me and complained constantly for every wrong I had ever done to her, real or imagined. She refused to perform her more intimate duties as a wife, even in the dark with Moonfur fast asleep. She would just roll over and cocoon the coverings around her, an armor against my advances.

Weeks passed and the weather cleared steadily. Game started becoming easier to find, so we did not lack for food, even with three adults to feed.

But another problem became apparent, one Lika constantly wheedled me about. Melina would need nursing for months to come, but we couldn't keep Moonfur hidden from the other villagers if we tried. The town was too small, and the goodwives too nosy and gossipy for their own good. Even though we lived at the very edge of the village, more than a hundred paces off into the forest, we were still too close for people to not at least suspect another person living in our household.

Oddly, It was the ever-quiet Moonfur who provided the answer. After listening to Lika and I argue for the third time that day, Moonfur spoke more than a few words for the first time in weeks. "I know answer," she said. "Hunters raise wolf-dogs, yes? Wolf-dogs and hunters make one pack, yes?"

Lika shook her head. "What kind of nonsense—"

"Wait," I said. "You mean dogs? Do we keep dogs as pets, is that what you're asking?"

"Pets?" Moonfur rolled the strange word around on her tongue.

I explained and she nodded vigorously. "I be 'pet' wolf-dog for you. Watch."

She fell forward onto the floor. Between heartbeats as she fell, her form changed from a wolf-like human to a true wolf. It was like seeing ice melt over a fire, with the substance of her body splashing into a form of a large wolf. She looked up at us, tail wagging and tongue panting out of her mouth in satisfaction.

Lika gasped in shock and drew warding symbols in the air. It was the first time we had seen Moonfur transform in front of us.

I smacked myself for not thinking of the solution myself. I could claim that I had found an abandoned cub on one of my winter hunts, and had raised it myself. Now, if we used extra food or supplies, the others would just assume it was for our new "pet" wolf. If they heard someone inside our cottage while we were away or heard us talking to someone who was not supposed to be there, they would assume it was our new family dog.

Even Lika saw the logic in it. Reluctantly.

A few days later, after carefully coaching Moonfur, I went out into the village with Moonfur in wolf-form, making a big show of purchasing some extra hay for my new "dog's" sleeping nest. Of course everyone who was out on that mild spring day came over to see her. Moonfur was nervous with so many humans around, especially by the ones who reached out to pet her, so she hovered close to me. Some of the other hunters grunted in jealousy, commenting on how intelligent and handsome she looked. One even tried to buy her outright from me.

As soon as Moonfur (I unconsciously kept calling her that; no one thought twice of it) realized the humans weren't going to hurt her, she relaxed and began to enjoy their affectionate pats and scratches. Within an hour she was playing "keep-away" with a group of village children, who squealed with delight whenever she outsmarted them and got the ball, which was often.

I smiled as I watched Moonfur play and bark in delight. It was a side of her I hadn't seen before.

Several of the goodwives stopped and told me of their relief that Lika had recovered from her nursing affliction. They had heard Melina's loud and lusty cries these past weeks, a sure sign she was being properly fed. They had also heard Lika arguing with me a lot, especially over Moonfur. They all agreed it was too bad my wife didn't like such a wonderful and intelligent pet.

I kept my mouth shut.

Moonfur changed back to her almost-human form as soon as we were back in the cottage. That night Moonfur talked, really talked, while we ate dinner. She was very excited about meeting the villagers. "They like me!" she exulted. "I play with children, and we run and run, but they not clever like me! I get ball a lot. Tall boy called Smurgen tried to hold ball high where I no jump. But I nip leg, he yelps and drops ball. I get ball, children chase. Fun!"

"You bit a boy?" Lika exclaimed in horror.

"Boy not hurt. Just little ouch-pain, make him drop ball."

"But—"

"The boy wasn't hurt," I emphasized. "In fact, everyone really liked her. She made quite an impression on everyone today."

Lika's frown deepened. "So they will have a few kind words on their lips when they lynch us for hiding a Faerie creature in our home."

"It won't come to that. By Autumn Melina will be eating solid food. Moonfur can leave after that."

The Wolfling shifted uncomfortably at my words. Would she actually be sad to go? We did have more food here than she could ever get on her own.

Or was it something more?

"In fact," I said, "I think Moonfur might be able to help us out in a different way, if she wants. I mean, it would only be natural that a hunter would take his new dog out hunting with him."

Moonfur brightened instantly at the suggestion.

Lika hated it. "Absolutely not! You would have to parade her around the village every day if you did that! What if she slips up? What if they begin to suspect?"

"She did good in the village today. Everyone thinks she's just a dog. Besides, we'd spend most of the day far from here, hunting. We can bring in a lot more kills—and a lot more hides to tan and sell – with two hunters on the job. Think of the extra money that would bring!"

"I good hunter!" Moonfur put in. "I help!"

"No!" Lika snapped. "What if Melina gets hungry while you two are away? And what am I supposed to do with her flea-ridden brat while she's not here?"

Moonfur snarled low at the insult to her own child. "Little Fur stay quiet, like he did in den when I hunt! He not bother you! And I feed Melina before I go, after I get back! She not go hungry!"

“No!” Lika yelled. “Listen, I’m not going to have—”

I shot to my feet, stabbing a finger at my wife. “No, you listen, Lika! This is my house, and my decision! You’re my wife, and you’re going to live with it whether you like it or not! I don’t like to invoke my authority as your husband, but you leave me no choice!”

Lika gulped down the words on her lips, snaking a smoldering glance at Moonfur. “It is true,” she said very quietly, “That you don’t often invoke your authority over me, husband. Only when it comes to this Faerie bitch, it seems.”

Lika stopped yelling so much after that. But her frigid silence disturbed me far more than a dragon wing’s worth of screaming.

By summer, things had settled into a routine. Moonfur and I hunted practically every day. My skills and weapons, combined with her more-than-human senses and agility, made us an unparalleled hunting team. Game was plentiful in those warm months, and hardly a week went by when we didn’t haul home dozens of pelts and carcasses.

The children grew, Little Fur more swiftly than Melina. Thanks to his Wolfling nature, he was already toddling and eating meat off the table. Melina was just beginning to crawl a bit. She was small for her age, due to the malnutrition in the early weeks of her life.

Lika, for her part, looked after the children while we were gone. Melina received the dragon’s share of her attention, while Little Fur was tended to only if he absolutely needed it. We always knew the days that he did, for Lika met us at the door at night to thrust the small Wolfling into his mother’s arms with a scowl of contempt.

That was as much as my wife communicated with anybody. She rarely said a word to me for weeks on end, despite all the money and prosperity Moonfur and I were bringing into her life. Our larders were overflowing, and the copper crowns turned to silver ones when I managed to sell a large lot of hides to a caravan passing by on the Tragarian Road two days’ hike to the south.

One night mid-season Lika and I lay in bed, backs to each other, as had become our custom. I couldn’t sleep, and shook her awake. “A family’s wealth is measured by its children,” I said. “With so much prosperity, isn’t it expected that we have another child?”

“Why?” she snapped. “So Moonfur can suckle that one too, and you’d have an excuse to keep her around forever?” She turned over and curled the covers around her.

The next day her cold answer preoccupied me, so much so that I missed an easy shot at a rabbit Moonfur had flushed out of the underbrush. Moonfur shifted from wolf to humanoid form to scold me. “You no see that? Was good shot!” Then she saw the bow drooping in my hand and the dour mood pursing my lips. She lay a concerned hand on mine. “What wrong?”

“Oh, it’s just Lika, Moonfur. Sometimes her sniping really gets to me.”

She nodded. "It sad when mate no longer loves you. Hunter lonely, yes? My mate die just after Little Fur start living in belly, killed by big male of pack. I flee, not wanting him to kill me, too, for having cub that not his. I lonely a long time, too."

"How did you handle it?"

Her sad frown melted into an impish grin. She leaned forward and nipped my nose, then bounded away into the forest. "I play!"

I stood there, stunned for a second, before I took off after her, laughing.

It was a game of tag we often played, when prey was scarce or we just needed to work off some excess energy. I would "hunt" her, then she would "hunt" me, leading each other on convoluted chases that were far more challenging than any animal track.

For all my skill, Moonfur was much better at the game than I. Last winter she had been half-starved, weak, and shivering from the cold, making her easy prey for me to follow. Now she was well-fed, alert, at the top of her form. She would transform between Wolfling and wolf as the terrain demanded. Often all I could do was just keep up with her.

But I got the feeling that Moonfur often let me catch her, to assuage any injury to my ego. Just as at that moment I could tell she wasn't really trying to challenge me as much as distract me from my woes.

I caught up to her in the middle of a broad, sunlit field overgrown with heather and wildflowers. One thing I can do with my long legs is run faster than her in her Wolfling form, which she still wore, and I chased her down with a final, flying leap that caught her across her waist. We tumbled and rolled, a gaggle of limbs, laughing the whole way. She ended up under me, and I propped myself up on my arms to look down at her.

"Hunter feel better now?" she gasped.

I nodded, wheezing for air. "Yeah. Yeah, I really do. Thanks. I guess really needed that."

We segued into silence, neither one of us wanting to move just yet. Our eyes locked, and a tingling warmth passed between us.

Moonfur lifted her head and caressed my cheek with her tongue. Not as a dog licks, but as a woman kisses.

An overpowering wave of desire crested high within me. My hands explored her frantically, her body quivering and her throat whimpering in pleasure with each new territory they found. A few scant heartbeats later my clothing lay scattered around us as if caught in a windstorm, as she eagerly welcomed me into her yielding warmth.

Our intimacy lasted hours, both of us howling our ecstasy into the countryside.

From that day forward our daily hunting trips became longer and longer while we brought home less and less game. We became completely preoccupied with pleasuring each other while out in the mountainous forests, with no one save the rustling trees and warbling birds to disturb our lovemaking.

I know Lika suspected, but she said nothing. The only real trouble back at the cottage, in fact, arose from Moonfur, who began acting much more assertive, almost aggressive. She began taunting Lika, occasionally even outrightly defying my wife. Lika endured it all in stony silence.

Mostly those were good days. By the end of the season, just as the trees were turning deep rusts and a tiny hint of winter's chill nipped the air, I realized how deeply I cared for Moonfur. After one of our deep-woods liaisons, I told her so. She just snuggled close, rumbled contentedly, and lick-kissed me in response. No words were necessary for her to tell me how she felt. I could easily imagine running away with Moonfur into the depths of the forest, where no human or Wolfling could ever find us, and raising our children in peace and contentment. Melina would definitely have a better mother in Moonfur than in the frigid and spiteful Lika.

If only winter hadn't been approaching, if only I had time to set up a cabin somewhere, I might have done just that.



When we arrived home, Lika looked smug. As Moonfur changed into her Wolfling form, my wife announced, "Melina took solid food for the first time today with no trouble. I've never seen her eat so much! We can finally get rid of Moonfur!"

"Now, just wait a moment, Lika..."

She spun toward me, her face purpling. "No, you wait, husband! You think I haven't noticed what's been going on with you and that Faerie creature? Do you think I'm blind and stupid? I've put up with it. Seasons, I've put up with so much since you've brought that thing into my home, but it stops now! Either she goes today, right now, or I'm going to the townsfolk and tell them what has really been happening here these past months!"

"You wouldn't!" I yelled. Melina began crying at our raised voices. Little Fur, who had been mewling happily, became as still as a stone. Moonfur watched intently from beside the door.

Lika ignored her daughter's cries. "I would! And I'm going to!" Tears flowed. "I'm sick of putting up with that—that animal whore of yours! She stole my child, my house, and now my husband! You stupid, selfish bastard! Don't you know what I've been through all these months? Or has that Wolfling's furry teats blinded you to everything?" She spat in my face, turning toward the door. "I'm through with it, all of it! I don't care what happens anymore! I'm going to tell the others right now!"

I moved in front of her. "You'll do no such thing! This is still my house and you're still my wife!"

Lika hissed like a cornered cat and pulled one of my tanning knives from the folds of her shift. She must have known it would come to this. She stabbed at me with all her strength, the knife thunking into my right side just below the ribs. I gasped, feeling the alien coldness of the metal



slide into my body, sparking an inferno of pain. I staggered back, hand over the wound, trying to stem the torrent of blood.

Lika laughed gleefully. She raised the weapon for another blow. A hideous growl exploded through the cottage, followed by a flash of claws and three streaks of crimson arcing across the room. I looked up to see Lika's face torn across its breadth by three parallel gashes. Moonfur stood between my wife and me, finger claws dripping red, snarling at her rival with hellish fury.

"You stupid Faerie bitch! What have you done to me?" Lika screeched, half-blinded with blood, trying to keep the frightened treble out of her voice. "Step aside! Let me finish off that adulterer of a husband!"

"He not your Mate!" Moonfur snapped. "He give food and shelter and love and all you give him is screams and hate and now knife in belly! You stop being Mate moons ago! He my Mate now! You hurt Mate again I rip throat!" The Wolfling spasmed her clawed hands for emphasis.

For a moment—just a brief heartbeat—Lika contemplated attacking Moonfur. Instead, she threw the knife at the Wolfling to cover her half-stumbling dash for the door, wiping the blood flowing from her face with a messy sleeve. Moonfur easily batted the weapon aside. As soon as Lika was gone, Moonfur turned her attention to me, whimpering with concern.

I all but collapsed in her arms. She lowered me to the bed and without preliminaries lifted my shirt to sniff the wound. She began licking it, slowly and carefully, to clean it. I'll be damned if it didn't ease the harshest edge off the pain.

It also cleared my head, and I realized what Lika must already be doing. I pushed Moonfur's head back. She looked at me, puzzled. "Moonfur, listen. We have to get out of here. Lika will bring the other villagers."

"I fight!" she said defiantly. "I slash and bite, and they leave us alone!"

"Do you think you can win against axes and scythes and arrows? Against two dozen armed and angry hunters?"

Her ears tapered back in apprehension. She knew the answer to that.

"Get the children." We had to take Melina as well as Little Fur. The superstitious townsfolk would put her to death for suckling at the teat of a Faerie Demon. With no small difficulty I stood, trying not to wince at the pain. Moonfur reached out to steady me. "I'll—gah—I'll be fine. Really. But we have to go. Now."

We barely made it out of the cottage in time. In the village square, I saw Lika yelling at a small crowd and pointing in our direction. Some of the villagers spotted us. Within minutes they were giving chase, screaming for our blood.

We ran into the forest, Moonfur burdened with two children, I with my wound. Luckily those first few who ran after us knew little of forest craft, and we lost them easily. But soon the villagers would organize themselves, and come after us with their best hunters and trained dogs.

We weren't even a mile away when we heard the first bayings of hunting hounds. Our only saving grace was that night was approaching, and our pursuers would be as blind as we.

We used every trick we could think of to throw them off; running up and across streams, laying false trails, switchbacks, and more, but in the end it seemed hopeless. We rested for a few seconds on a log beside a lazy, moonlit brook, the distant baying of the dogs getting steadily closer. I was physically spent, blood still leaking from my wound. "Leave—leave me here," I wheezed. "I'll hold them off. Just give me a stick, or something."

Moonfur jiggled Melina in her arms, keeping my daughter calm and quiet. Little Fur clung to his mother's hips. Moonfur looked wistfully at the children, then at me. A great sadness slowly spread through her.

She affectionately nuzzled Melina, then Little Fur, before she brought them to me. Bewildered, I took them as she handed them down. Then she nuzzled close to my cheek, as we often did when intimate. She breathed deeply of my scent, touching each of the children. "You are my Mate," she said, the words heavy in her throat. "Give them good life."

With one last smile, she transformed into wolf-form and bounded off into the darkening forest, back the way we came.

Through my pain and exhaustion, I finally realized what she was doing. "Moonfur, no!" I called into the night, but it was too late. She was gone.

Minutes later, the baying of the dogs reached a crescendo, then dwindled into the distance. They had caught her scent.

Towards dawn, I slowly, carefully, made my way through the mountains. I had dressed my wound as best I could. I carried Melina in one arm, Little Fur in the other. I had no idea how I was going to care for them, how I was even going to feed them the coming day, but I knew I would find a way, somehow.

For her.

A familiar, mournful howl, far away, suddenly echoed through the countryside. It was cut abruptly short. I stumbled, careful not to hurt the children, as the forest around me blurred with tears.



The soldiers around the table all sat stunned as the Wild Man's words guttered to a stop. Then they all broke up into guffaws, laughing and chiding the prisoner. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, disgusted with the men. Did they lack hearts, to be so unmoved by the prisoner's tale?

"You sure can tell one, for an old yip!"

"Did you really expect us to believe that load of dragon scat?"

"See! I told you he buggered a wolf!"

I spotted Bloodgouge gesturing for my attention. A tilt of my bouncer's massive chin and an arcing of his brows told me a potentially very unpleasant something was gathering outside. He wanted to know if he should take care of it.

I already had an inkling of what was out there. I looked at the prisoner, and just briefly, our eyes met. His small, almost imperceptible smirk confirmed my suspicions. I mouthed a “no” at my bouncer, who nodded and returned to polishing his now-immaculate axe.

“Wait a moment,” the sergeant said to the prisoner. “If what you say is true, then what happened to those children?”

The Wild Man grinned wickedly. He tilted his head back and loosed a throaty howl.

The soldiers stood as one, shocked and outraged. But before they could move further, the front door banged open and dark shapes smashed through my shuttered windows. A torrent of wolves poured into the room from every egress, all large, shaggy and powerful, bared fangs flashing in the lamplight.

To their credit, the soldiers tried to fight back. However, as soon as the sergeant drew his sword the largest male clamped onto his forearm, crunching bone and flesh alike in vise-like jaws. The sergeant screamed. The other wolves launched themselves onto the other soldiers, slashing, biting, raking, snapping. It was over in a beat of a dragon’s wing.

I retreated slowly and cautiously to the bar. The wolves ignored me, thank the Seasons. One did snarl at Bloodgouge, unsure of which side the massive Orc was on. My bouncer gave the creature a broad wink. It sat back on its haunches and canted its head with a perplexed whine.

The guards’ bodies lay sprawled across the room, bloody and broken. The Wild Man fished the key for his fetters from the sergeant’s corpse and was soon free. The two largest wolves approached him and he swept them up in his arms, hugging them fiercely. In the midst of that embrace, they transformed, their flesh flowing like melting snow. In the Wild Man’s right arm was a broad and powerful Wolfling male, with fur the color of a full moon. In his left stood a naked woman, fully human, but with the gray eyes of a wolf. The woman and the male Wolfling held hands even as they embraced Muruk.

In that moment I realized two things. Melina had indeed been affected by suckling at Moonfur’s breast all those months. And the dozen wolves surrounding them were much more than pets or companions. They were the Wild Man’s Wolfling grandchildren, born to Little Fur and Melina. His pack, in every sense of the word, come to rescue its patriarch.

The wolves filed out through the door, the adult Melina and Little Fur helping Muruk out last. In the doorway, the Wild Man turned toward me, a broad smile cracking his face into a hundred laugh-lines. “By the way, thanks for the drink, barkeep.”

“M-my pleasure,” I stuttered.

With that they were gone, melting into the wilderness like a shadow against a starless night.

When Baron Vahl heard of what happened to his men, he lifted the bounty on the Wild Man’s head for fear of more murders. Muruk and his pack were never seen by mortal eyes again.

No, that's not quite true.

I wrote down everything I remembered of Muruk's tale in my book. Whenever I told the story of Moonfur at my monthly readings at the Inn, I would find a freshly-killed deer carcass outside my door the next morning. A gift, from those who could appreciate the story best.

Howls would fill the night for days afterward, and they were strangely comforting.

## **The Gazing Ball by Brian L. Miller**

*March 1925, Annapolis, Maryland, United States*

The calls and echoes of the moving men whirled around the interior of the empty mansion. Swirls of people, toting a long succession of boxes, crates, and trunks, as well as beautiful oaken furniture on the backs of the swarthy laborers, snaked their way into the Victorian edifice. In the midst of it all, the purring of a powerful automobile engine as it pulled up the drive, through the tall, wrought-iron gates, weaving around several items left in the gravel of the circular drive. The Rolls Royce Phantom II, shining brightly in the early morning sun, glided to a graceful halt close to the front of the house. Before the engine could even wind down, the side door of the passenger compartment flew open, disgorging a young girl into the unseasonably warm March morning.

“Come on, Father!” she squealed in delight, blue eyes wide at all the frenetic activity. “We must make sure they’ve gotten everything here!” Her blonde hair curled down onto the collar of her velvet coat, hands bundled into a muffler, allowing that it was still a bit chilly for all the sunshine

A distinguished looking man, tall and dignified in a long black frock coat and cane, was busily helping a grown version of the young girl out of the vehicle. “Just a moment, Annelia! You’re mother and I do not have all the energy of a girl of eight, you know!” He smiled at his wife, for neither of them was old, only in their early thirties. But their daughter’s enthusiasm was boundless and made them look slow in comparison.

“Oh, Father!” Annelia sighed, in mock exasperation. “We’ve been in the auto for HOURS now, and I want to see our new home! After all, you and Mother have already been here!” She twirled, her crinoline skirts with the multitude of petticoats and underdresses rustling. “I want to see it ALL!”

The driver of the Rolls, a gentleman by the name of Tebbits, smiled at the young girl. “Miss Annelia, you gonna be livin’ here all your life, child. Don’t be in such a hurry!” His soft brown face broke into a wide smile, letting the girl know he was teasing, as was his usual way.

“Indeed, dearest, listen to the wise old Tebbits,” her mother added, her voice soft as she walked over and took her daughter by the hand. “After all, he’s like us, so OLD..” The three adults laughed at the expression on the small girl’s face, a combination of amusement and consternation. “Come, let’s go inside, I am still a little shaken by the trip.”

As the three entered the house, leaving the chauffeur to garage the car, Annelia’s father was approached by the head of the moving team. “Senator Phillpott, sir? We’ve got almost everything here in the house, just gonna take a while to get set up. Do you need us to start anywheres in particular?”

Annelia tugged at her mother’s hand, leaving her father, the new Senator from Vermont, to deal with the details of setting up all the things that surround our lives. The two ladies, one young, one older, strolled throughout the house, examining the five bedrooms, the grand dining room, the parlor, and finally, the morning room, which held a set of French

doors, leading to the expansive backyard. Annelia looked up at her mother. "May I go and see the gardens, Mother?" she asked, in a quiet and almost shy voice.

"In a moment dear, I believe that Father has something to show you out there." Mrs. Phillpott smiled at her daughter, a sense of weariness surrounding her. "I shall go and get him, and leave you two to explore for a short while, how would that be?"

"Oh, thank you Mother!" The slender blond child threw her arms around her mother's waist, hugging warmly. "I love this house, and you and Father! This is the most special place ever!" Annelia waited, her eyes scanning over the outside, as her mother quietly departed. It wasn't long before she heard the footsteps she knew so well, her father in his measured march coming to where she was.

"Ah, Annelia! Here you are! I'm sorry the moving and such has taken so long!" He smiled, taking her hand. "I promised you I'd have a surprise for you in the garden, and so I do! Let's go see!" His handlebar mustache quivered as he smiled at the eager young face of his daughter.

"Oh, Daddy, whatever is it?"

"No, no, mustn't be impatient, little one!" Walking briskly in the morning sun, he led his daughter to a hedged area, with a trellis as its doorway. "Close your eyes, Annelia," he instructed. When she did so, he gently led her inside, stopping just inside the sunlit garden. "This is all for you, little lamb."

Annelia opened her eyes, first a little, then very wide, a beautiful smile lighting her up brighter than the morning sky. "Oh, Father, a faerie garden!" She glanced all around, before her eyes fell back upon the pedestal in the center, topped with a dazzling silver orb. "And a gazing ball, just like you promised me!" She turned to her beloved father throwing her arms around him. "Oh, thank you! Oh Father, you've made it even MORE wonderful!"

The Senator tousled her hair, smiling at his exuberant daughter. "It is all for you, little lamb, just the way you wanted it." His eyes softened with love as the youngster stepped over to the pedestal, her eyes looking into themselves as she beheld the gazing ball, the one thing she'd always wanted as a gift. The sky itself seemed to brighten inside as she looked, lost in the shifting reflection. At long last, she glanced up, her face a mask of wonderment. "OH, let's go get Mother and show her!"

Her father had trouble keeping up with the enthusiastic child as she scampered toward her new home.



*July 1925*

Annelia was up early for a summer's day. Louisa, the housekeeper, had given her a nice breakfast to take to her "faerie ring", smiling as the happy young lady thanked her, even in Spanish, making Louisa smile all the broader. "Usted es agradable, poca sol!" ("You are welcome, little sunshine!") she replied, barely heard as the youngster dashed through the

kitchen door to the garden. Louisa sighed softly, thinking of the poor lady upstairs, Annelia's mother, taking more and more to bed. "La voluntad de Dios." ("The will of God.")

Annelia looked around as she skipped down to her private garden, noting the chirring of the cicadas, heralding another hot summer day. She hoped it was not too exhausting for her mother. Mother seemed so tired lately, it must be the heat. Pressing through the vines and leaves on the trellis, Annelia stepped into her faerie ring and ran her bare feet through the lush grass. The only other person who ever came in here without asking the child first was Tebbits, who kept the grass short but not too short, so she could run her feet through it, giggling at the tickly sensations. Carefully setting the tray with her muffin and apple on it on the grass, Annelia ambled over to the beautiful ball that she found so fascinating. She could watch it for hours, if the sky was right.

This morning, she focused her blue eyes on the argent sphere, expecting to see herself looking back. But for once, she was wrong. A pair of brown eyes was gazing back, intently. From a face that looked... unhuman!

With a gasp, Annelia stumbled back a step, thinking she must have imagined it. Carefully, she crept back up, and glanced again. No, the scene hadn't changed. Whatever it was that was looking back seemed... almost like an animal, like.. she thought hard. Like a fox! That was it! It looked like a fox! She glanced around, thinking that maybe an animal had crept into the garden, and was watching over her. But Annelia could see nothing, even as the strange reflection tilted its head and seemed to be peering around too.

"What in the world are you?" she whispered to herself. But the youngster was surprised to hear a quick answer, from.. from within the gazing ball!

"I would ask the same thing!" the reflection replied, the pointed ears quivering. In unison, as if of a single mind, two voices within and without asked, "How did you get into my gazing ball?" The absurdity of what was happening bewitched Annelia, and she began to giggle, triggering the same from the fox-like image in her gazing ball. "Well, it looks as if maybe my faerie garden IS magic," she said, touching a delicate finger to the surface of the orb. "I'm Annelia Phillpott." After all, her mother ALWAYS told her it is best to be polite.

The image responded, "I'm Arahmss D'ahshann. This is... amazing, like I am talking to a magical creature!" He smiled, putting one very dark and furred finger to touch where Annelia's was on the outside.

"Aramis, like the Three Musketeers!" She smiled, looking into his brown eyes. "That is a wonderful name."

"You say it differently, but that is okay. Da says different folks have different ways. Where... where are you, anyway?" The vulpine lad inquired, his liquid brown eyes smiling.

"In Annapolis. My father is a Senator!" Annelia declared very proudly. "What about you?"

“Ah -now -pole ees? I’ve never heard of it. I live at the edge of Voxxa City. Do you think it’s near there? And what’s a Senator?” Annelia saw something flash up behind Aramis’ head, and realized what it was; a furry tail. “You’ve got a tail!”

Aramis’ pointed nose and fuzzy cheeks seemed to darken. “Of course! All Voxxans have tails!” He seemed rather put off by the hurried question.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to be rude! It’s just that... no one here is like you!” Annelia seemed excited to be talking to a magical creature.

“Well, I can say that’s true with me too! You don’t have fur, nor a muzzle, nor even a tail!” He seemed to giggle. “I guess you’re a magical creature out of my storybooks then!”

As Annelia contemplated this, a voice called out for her. Her father echoed across the gardens. “Annelia! Breakfast, little lamb!” She turned her gaze back to the unusual friend she had made, on the other side of her silvery ball. “I’ve got to go... I... I hope I see you again, Aramis.”

“And I, you, Annelia. I don’t get to talk to magical girls often!” Giggling, Annelia ran for the house, deciding to keep her new friend a secret for now. After all, who would believe someone was talking through a gazing ball?



*April 1926*

“Aramis, are you there?” Annelia leaned against the gazing ball, hoping her magical friend was within hearing. It didn’t always work, but the two spent a lot of time in their respective gardens, and could often get the other’s attention.

“I’m here, Annelia. How are you?” Aramis’ now-familiar fox face peered out at her. “MiFa, you’re all dressed today! Why all the pretties?” He smiled, indicating his appreciation of her, even if different.

“Today is my birthday, and I’m having a party!” She smiled. “I’ll be nine today!”

“Tcha’naia, Annelia! I didn’t know it was your birthday!” He mock pouted. “I would have dressed up too, even though Da wouldn’t have understood.” He giggled.

Annelia joined him, the happiness of her special day spreading through both of them. “You still haven’t told your parents, either?”

“No. Mamas, she’d understand I think, but Da... He’s too rooted in the good Voxx to understand magic like this.” He sighed. “He wouldn’t be mad, or anything like that, just ... disappointed in me.”

“Hummph! Well, he can go to the devil then!” Annelia stuck out her tongue at the thought. “Because I think you are as real as anyone else, Aramis!”

“Tcha, he’s not so bad, really. But I do not wish to spoil your special day, Annelia. You look like a princess!” He bowed, the sweep of his tail flashing up. “May all your birthdays be filled with joy.”



“Oh, Aramis!” She giggled, and blushed slightly at the sweetness of his words. “I hope to be there for your birthday too!” She turned back once more as she started back to the house. “When is it?”

“I’ll tell you, don’t worry.” Aramis smiled. “Be well and happy Annelia.” The ball faded back to the reflection of the morning sky as Annelia strolled toward the house, slowly, so as not to dirty her special outfit.



*September 1928*

The sobbing girl sat, curled in the garden, the silent rain falling and wetting her, all but ignored. The familiar voice of her faraway friend echoed from the gazing ball. “Annelia? What is wrong? Why are you so distressed?” She did not glance up, but could almost feel his look of concern, the depth of his deep brown eyes as he asked.

“It’s...It’s Mother... she’s...” the tears came with great force, the sobs wracking Annelia’s body.

Softly. “She’s died, hasn’t she, Annelia?” Aramis’ voice was barely above a whisper, although it seemed all the really had to do was think and the other could almost understand.

“Yy... yes. She’s... been so sick....” Annelia glanced upward at the gazing ball, seeing the eyes of her friend. “Oh, I loved her so, Aramis!” Hard sobs wracked the child’s body as the soft patter of the rain continued to strike the concealing leaves of the garden glade.

“Oh, Annelia.... I.. I wish I could help, somehow.” His paw laid against the ball on his end. “I wish...I could hold you and let you cry, and make sure you were okay.” A tear glistened in the darkish fur of his upper muzzle.

“Aramis.... You.. always know... what to say..” Annelia smiled a tiny bit, through the pain of her heart. “I wish you were here too. But.. \*sniffle\* you are, always, when I need you, aren’t you?” She placed her hand on the cool glass, wishing for just an instant that they were both real, that he wasn’t a creature of magic. All this time, and she still wasn’t sure.

“I will always be, if you need me Annelia.” His voice held a strong timbre of warmth and caring. “I wish it could be different for you.”

“It...will be.. Aramis...I just.. need to... “ Her hand wiped her eyes. “I just need to cry and wish, Father says. He was crying too, I’ve never...seen him cry..” Her head went back down on her crossed arms, the tears flowing like the grey rain again.

The gazing ball reflected only the sky, but Annelia knew that Aramis was not far, if she needed him.



*March 1930*

Snow still lingered on the ground, but Annelia was possessed of the impatience only adolescence can bring. She pulled the mitten from her hand, touching the silver sphere gently. “Aramis, where are you? It’s been weeks....” She whispered.

“Annelia? Are you there?” The young teen saw the expansive brown eyes and soft fuzzy muzzle of her distant friend.

“Aramis, where on EARTH have you been?” The relief she felt through her soul came out as an exasperated huff.

“Not on Earth, on Voxxa!” The fox lad chuckled. “Uhm, I’m sorry, Annelia, I didn’t mean to ignore you or anything...” The tone of his voice, and the look of... abashment on his face did not please Annelia one bit.

“All right, what is it? Did I do something wrong or something?” She knelt down a bit, bringing her eyes level with his, as they did when they wished to speak quietly, or share secrets.

“No, it’s just...well....”

“Is she nice, Aramis?”

“How... how..... “ the bewilderment was quite plain in his voice and face.

“Because, it’s probably the only thing you’d be so chattered about. And I guess I could understand, being a girl myself and all.” The wry grin wasn’t wasted; his face fur got darker and even his eartips blushed.

“Tcha, Annelia, she’s.. she’s just so....” His eyes softened, realizing what he was babbling.

“I’ll bet, considering how 23-skidoo you’re acting!” Annelia tried to take the hard line with her friend, but couldn’t help smiling. “She must be something to put up with the likes of you!” She burst into giggles at his shocked expression, but stopped quickly, whispering, “Does... does this mean I won’t see you again?”

“Why would you think that? She’s a nice vixen, but... but you’re my special magical friend!” He placed his paw against the globe, under where Annelia’s hand was. “I could never have a better friend than you, Annelia.”

“Nor I, you, silly fuzzy thing Aramis.” Thinking quickly, she offered, “How about if we promise to meet here at least once a week? That way, you can spend more time with your.. uhm, vixen, and should I meet someone nice..”

“Deal!” Aramis smiled out at her, his teeth white against darker fur. “See you next week, Annelia!”



*October 1933*

A tear coursed down Annelia’s cheek, as she listened to the sad news her friend had to share. “Oh, Aramis. I know you loved your father. I’m so sorry.”

“It could not be helped.” The tightness in the fox teen’s voice was overwhelmingly evident. “One doesn’t recover from lung fever, and he knew for almost an ahn that he was ill.”

“It doesn’t seem like that long ago that you were comforting me, over Mother. My wonderful friend, who knew just what to say. I wish I was there for you, Aramis, my magical fox.” Annelia’s long golden hair sparkled almost as bright as the tear trails on her cheeks as she looked at the

reflection in the orb, the stranger being whom she'd come to know so well.  
"Aramis?"

"Yes, Annelia?"

"I'll cry for him. And for you." The tears flowed like early winter rain from her eyes, reflected by his own, now freely expressed, in the ball.

"Oh, Annelia, he's gone..." The sound of their grief echoed between two worlds.



*May 1935*

"So, you're serious about this one, Annelia?" The deep resonant voice echoed from inside the gazing ball. Aramis looked a bit askance at his human friend.

"Yes, I am!" The beautiful young woman whirled around, the glisten of the sun peeking through the overgrown garden ceiling sparkled on the silvery threads in her taffeta dress. "Darrien says he loves me, and as soon as he graduates college, we'll be married!"

"You know, I'll have a den full of kits before you get married, Annelia!" The fox chuckled at her. "Are you sure that this is the right one? After all, two others have already asked you, and you were almost sure then, too."

"Oh, Aramis, you worry so! Of course this is the right one, after all, he's going to college and Father likes him too, not like the others!" Her voice rolled out like a torrent, the joy in her heart bubbling through every phrase.

"Well, if you are sure," he replied. "I wish I could be there for your ceremony. After all, you are my best friend, Annelia." His quiet statement caused the exuberant young lady to pause.

"Aramis, I wish you could be here too. I've never had or wanted a better companion or friend than you." She turned, and placed her hand over where his paw image was. "You are so kind, and wonderful, even if it is still hard to believe, after all these years."

"Hard to believe, but easy too, as long as it is you, Annelia, magical girl." His eyes softened. "After you are married, will you be leaving?"

"I... I don't know. It depends on Darrien's work, one would suppose." A soft look crossed her face. "I... hope not, since it would mean possibly..."

"It's alright, Annelia. No matter what." The fox gave a soft smile. "I must go for now. I hope it all works out for you, with your new mate."

"Thank you, Aramis," she whispered. "For everything."

The silence in the little glade of a garden echoed with her soft footsteps as Annelia left, heart happy but with a lingering little doubt.



*November 1935*

"Well, I didn't want to be the one to say I told you to consider carefully, Annelia!" Aramis considered what he was saying very carefully.

“Arrrrghh! And to catch him with... with that... floozy!” Annelia was angry enough to melt the tiny swirls of snow that blew in through the openings in the faerie garden. “All the time leading me to believe how much he LOVED me!” Her arms crossed across her chest, over the fluffy velvet coat that the coolness of the late fall required.

“Perhaps it was just a brief moment he was...”

“NOT if you saw the way I found him!” Tears cooled her cheeks. “With her, and they... they...” She sniffed back the pain, letting her anger resurge to take its place. “Oooh, if I never get another proposal, it will be none too soon!” Annelia flumped down at the base of the gazing ball pedestal, close enough to hear her friend, but not easy to see the gentle reproach in his liquid brown eyes.

“Annelia, don’t say that. There is surely someone out there who is worthy of you.” His deep baritone vibrated her, making an uncommon warmth on the chill day.

“Oh? And what do you know of it? You are not “mated” as you say?” The moment she spoke it, Annelia felt shame. “Oh, Aramis, I... oh, damn!” Even though she never swore as a routine, sometimes even the calmest of reserve is broken. “That was inexcusably rude of me.”

His voice softened, above a whisper by a bare bit. “No, you are correct. I also have not found a “wife”, as you put it, who would be everything I expect. I have no right to tell you anything like that...”

“You have every right!” Annelia turned, kneeling, grabbing his eyes with hers in an intense stare. “You are my friend and as such, can tell me anything, no matter what!” Her cheeks once again glistened. “Father told me that a true friend has the unpleasant chore of the truth.”

Aramis smiled back, running a finger along what Annelia supposed was her image in his magical garden; to her, it ran along the inner side of the silver ball. “I have oft said your father is a wise being. What does he say of this?”

“I... I didn’t tell him. He has so many other matters on his mind. So many things that a Senator must consider, that I am sure he doesn’t have time for the romantic notions of a foolish child.”

“Not a child anymore, Annelia. You are 18 ahn and an adult. Your father would respect that, as my mamas did.” He tilted his head, the odd muzzled face expressive. “And don’t let this make you bitter about life. Your heart is too full of living, magical girl.”

Annelia chuckled at his age-old expression for her. “I’ll try, even if SOME men are rats, they can’t ALL be!”



*December 1941*

Annelia hurried from the kitchen door, startling Tebbits as she practically flew across the lawn to her garden. “Oh, please be near, Aramis, even if it isn’t our regular time!” Her hands nervously fluttered around the

scarf she'd hurriedly slipped around her neck. The cold of the air was naught compared to the chill in her soul.

For several long minutes, Annelia paced, calling her friend's name every so often. Finally, as she turned to go, she heard his voice, like a comforting touch. "Annelia? It's Aramis! I heard you calling, are you there?"

"Oh, Aramis, thank God you're there!" Annelia practically hugged the ball. "I'm so scared!"

"What is wrong? Your father, something happened to him?" The note of intense fervor of his voice showed his deep concern.

"No, something worse, if you can imagine. Our... our country is at war!" The frightened young woman whispered it, as if it was hard for her to believe.

"War? I.. from what you told me, you're people had settled all that, just after you were born!" Aramis seemed incredulous. "What did your council, your Senate, do?"

"It wasn't us! We were attacked, one of our ports bombed!" She seemed near tears. "Oh, Aramis, why do they do this? Why must we make war?" She bit her lip, her long blonde hair fluffing a around her as she shook.

"I cannot say, Annelia. My people are no better, I suppose, with our Great House Clans and fighting among themselves. I only hope that it isn't long for you, nor bad. Can't your father do something, he and your council? Perhaps diplomacy..."

"They have tried, Father says. We have been trying to settle this, but now, we... we have no choice." Annelia turned back toward the house. "I must go back. Father should be returning soon, and... I am sure he'll need me." Her gaze returned, to meet his. "I pray that we'll be able to stay in touch, Aramis."

"I will be here, as much as I can, if you need me, Annelia. Forever."



*September 1945*

The sounds of explosions filled the ears as Annelia ran through the tall grass to her garden. Never had she been filled with such relief, such happiness! She wanted to share it with her dearest friend, the magical fox called Aramis.

"Aramis, are you there? I hope so!" Her smile, bright and cheery, turned a little darker when she saw his expression. "Aramis... what... what is it?"

"I am all alone now, Annelia." The very tone and tenor of his voice told her the truth.

"Your mamas, Aramis? Oh god, why now? Here I am, so happy, because our war is ended! And you in such pain, with such a loss..."

"It isn't all that, Annelia. I was expecting it, this time anyway." He managed a small smile. "So, your people are at peace again? That does help lighten my heart on such a somber day." His ears rose slightly, a sign of his mood.

“Oh, dear Aramis, how I wish I could be there. Just once, to be there, to make things better.” Her smile, while not as broad, was for a different reason altogether now.

The barest whisper from the other side emerged. “You DO make things better. Sometimes, I don’t know how I would continue on, without knowing of my magical girl.” His ears turned dark at his admission.

“Annelia! Where are you!” Her father’s voice, ringing outside, was plain to both.

“I had better go, but I’ll return soon, Aramis. Like you, I’ll be here when you need me. No matter what, if in my power.”

And as his image faded away, she saw a small but very evident to her eyes, smile on his foxy face.



*July 1949*

“So what will you do now, Annelia? Now that your father..” For an hour now, the two adults had talked through the gazing ball, Aramis the fox, Annelia the human, both now orphaned.

“Father told me before he died that I was well provided for, so I have the house, and money, and such, but...” Annelia folded her rather short skirt under her legs as she contemplated.

“But what, magical girl? You have that tone in your voice again...” Aramis’ ears went fully up, knowing that his mischievous friend had something on her mind.

“But Father had so many things that he wanted to accomplish and didn’t. And now his seat in the Senate is quite open....”

“Annelia! You couldn’t! I thought you said your people didn’t let woman on your council!”

“Well, not exactly true, but it is hard.” Annelia smiled at his shocked expression. “After all, I can try, who would fault me?”

“Now I know you have gone rather mad with the sun!” The look on the fox’s face was priceless. “Well, if you must follow your madness, you must, I guess. The price of being a magical creature....” His gentle teasing reinforced her all the more.

“Hummph, so that’s it, hmmn? I often wonder if your students don’t consider you a bit loony sometimes too, you old throw rug!” Her smile tempered her words as their hands met, separated only by the glass of the gazing ball. “Wish me luck?”

“Of course, all the best, magical Senator girl.” His chuckle infected them both.



*February 1952*

“You wouldn’t believe it!” Aramis’ voice was almost as high as when they had first “met” through the gazing ball. “They actually managed to get

a spaceship to our outer world!" He was wildly gesticulating, ears, paws, and tail all in an animated blur.

"That is fantastic, Aramis! Your people managed to go into space!" Annelia sat in the metal chair she'd taken to leaving in her garden. "I wish we could do that here!"

"Perhaps they can! You say you have many scientists working on things like that!" His muzzle dipped up and down, nodding rapidly.

"Yes, but if it weren't for the Communists..." she sighed.

"Oh, yes, your other council rivals." He smiled. "Don't worry, when you finally become Senator, you can do something about that!"

"Oh, I hope so! In the meantime, you **MUST** let me see pictures of the spaceship!" His enthusiasm infected her as well, with visions of the people of Earth going into space...



*November 1956*

"You did it, Annelia! Tcha'naia! So, now a Senator Phillpott, is it?" Aramis looked out, his spectacles causing a funny distortion of light on the ball.

"Yes, indeed! Now I can **FINALLY** help further those things Father was interested in, as well as research into space flight!" She smiled, the light silver streaks in her blonde hair catching the light. "And all before I am forty!"

"Oh, yes, so old a vix you are, magical girl!" Aramis smiled and flickered his tail. "But worked so hard you have to make it all come true. Your father and mother would be proud, even if, well..."

Annelia gave a sad smile. "Even if I did it all alone, as I have." She glanced down at her left hand, where her mother's wedding ring sat. "Father would understand. Mother would have been disappointed though."

"The same here, I would think." Aramis let out a small snort. "Although I know Da would have been a bit frustrated with me. After all, most teachers my age are well married and have kits of their own. I just never..."

"I know. Nor I. Perhaps someday, he'll come along, or she, in your case, old fuzz." The distant sound of bells caught her ears. "Oh dear, the telephone. I'll see you soon, Aramis!"



*July 1969*

"...and then he stepped out onto the moon and said "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for Mankind!" Annelia was leaning close to the gazing ball, telling the story of the previous evening's excitement to her distant friend.

"So you're people have finally gone into space as well! Wonderful!" The plump middle aged fox in the ball was almost humming with happiness. "You don't have all that much to go to catch up with us. Our scientists

think they have the workings of the jump drives far enough along to test a trip to another star system. You should be there soon too!”

Annelia nodded, watching the sparkle off his glasses. “Yes, and I hope I have had some small influence to get us there.”

“As the head of your committee in your council? I should think so!” Aramis smiled, ears wriggling. “After all, you are a magical Senator girl!”

“Oh, Aramis, still so silly after all these years.” Her subtly lined face wreathed in a smile. “I don’t know if it would all be possible without you to back me and support me, even if no one else knows.”

“Annelia, I’d be there no matter what. Now, tell me more about this landing you saw on your ‘television’...”



*April 1974*

Annelia settled into the chair in her garden. It had taken her a bit to convince the nurse to let her out here alone, but she had given in when Annelia settled on making sure she had a call button rigged so that someone could be there quickly. The older woman knew that the young nurse meant well, but she had wanted to make her “weekly meeting” and couldn’t explain THAT to the youngster.

With a soft touch, long practiced, Annelia touched the gazing ball. “Aramis? Old fuzz, are you there?”

His graying muzzle and still deep brown eyes, looking larger through his thicker glasses swam into view. “Annelia, where have you been? It’s been several misses in a row for you!”

“I am sorry, my friend. I have been ill, my heart...”

“OhMiKhail! Are you alright, then?” He leaned forward, as if he could determine her entire condition through the glass.

“For now, it seems. They implanted something that helps my heart do its job. I should be good for another 50 years or 50,000 miles my doctor tells me.” She smiled at him, pretending not to see the intense concern on his face.

“That is not funny Annelia! I have told you that you are too thin for your own good!” He wagged a finger at her.

“No, I am just not plump, like certain magical foxes I know...” She grinned back. “After all, neither of us is getting any younger, Aramis.” She sighed. “As much as I wish we could.”

“Now, now...” his reflection seemed to be chastising her. “After all, look at all the things you’ve now seen and done. As have I, even our first flight to another star.” His ears perked up. “And you are fine, so say your medica, with many years to go.”

“Yes, I hope so.” She glanced into his eyes, her won revealing her feelings. “It scared me, Aramis. I still have so much to do, and to think I could have..”

“But you didn’t. Now, rest and recover, and let us talk of more pleasant things.”





*January 1986*

"It was horrible, Aramis. Such a loss." Pushing her grayish hair back off of her glasses, Annelia shook her head. "And we were making such good progress, too."

"Every program has setbacks, Annelia, and I won't see you punish yourself over it, no matter." The elder fox stroked one finger down his formerly black, now mostly silver muzzle. "After all, you weren't at the controls." He pressed the thick bifocals a little higher on his face, making his eyes huge.

"Yes, old fox, but my committee approved that design, and the Teacher in Space program. Which, I might add, I had you in mind when I voted." She tried to look cross, but ended up simply looking tired. "Oh, Aramis, I feel so old."

"Now, now, magical girl. You're still tooling along, just as I am, with much to do and accomplish. Don't give up before the race is finished." He smiled at her, one ear wiggling. "After all, I am still older than you."

"Keep that up and you won't be." Annelia sighed, bringing up the briefcase which had become her constant companion. "Well, I'll need to begin reviewing the paperwork. Where in heaven do I go from here?"

"Forward, magical girl. Always forward. With me, every step of the way."



*June 1994*

"I told you that would happen if you didn't take care, Aramis!" Annelia had her chair turned away, so that he couldn't see her tears. "You damn near died this time!"

"Annelia, I'm old and set in my ways." His voice was gruff, and a bit fogged as Aramis spoke through the distraction of a tube set along his muzzle. "Besides.."

"Besides NOTHING, old fool! You almost died because you don't want to take better care of yourself." She turned, to see his rather abashed look. "I tried to tell you, but you-won't-listen!"

"I'm sorry, Annelia. I'll try, I give you my word." He shyly smiled. "After all, I can't disappoint you, or my magical girl might suddenly go 'poof' like a bubble of soap."

"Well, I'd never do that to you, but..." she touched his paw through the glass. "I don't see too much enjoyment, if you aren't around, old fuzz."

"So I feel too, Annelia." His eyes softened "I'll stay as long as I can. My word."



*December 1999*

"Well, I have lived until the turn of our new millennium, Aramis. Eighty three years, and I get to watch our whole civilization advance to the next

century.” Annelia, bundled in a heavy coat, stood this time, talking to her oldest friend.

“Quite an accomplishment, magical girl.” The plump old silvery fox smiled out from behind his thick lenses and the curved sphere of the gazing ball. “Perhaps you can make it to the next century too.”

“Oh, I don’t believe so, old fuzz. After all, I am quite old by our people’s standards.” She placed one gloved hand on her hip. “Besides, I think I’d be half plastic parts by then. Would I really be me?”

“Your heart is still yours, even if it has a helper,” Aramis chuckled. “Even as my eyes are still mine, even if they need a LOT of help..” Both smiled as he took off the lenses, the very thickness a marvel.

“Yet you still come to see me, every week. Or more, sometimes.” Her glove slid off easily, as she touched her gazing ball with slender, aged, but still firm fingers. “Such a friend one doesn’t deserve. So special....”

A ringing noise erupted from her pocket. “Blasted pocket phones, sometimes I wish they’d never been conceived of.” She fished it out. “Yes? Very well, momentarily.” She slid it back into her pocket. “Ahh, the life of a senior Senator....”

“I take it, then, you must go?” His smile seemed a little forced.

“Yes. For now, only, though. I shall return shortly.” She touched his paw through the glass. “I assure you, I have no endurance for long drawn out parties and affairs anymore. Good night, dear Aramis.”

“Welcome to your new millennium, Annelia. May it be as happy as the last.”



*March 2005*

Annelia slowly made her way to the garden, a rather pleased look on her lined face. Not only had she accomplished what had to be the major coup of her Senatorial life, but she’d also managed to duck her “companion”, the nosy little watch nurse that made it hard to speak with Aramis lately.

“Aramis, I’m here, are you about?” She sat heavily in the webchair that was now kept out here.

“Annelia, you sound inordinately pleased with yourself today.” Aramis’ now more slender but still silvery face swam into view. “So, tell me, before you burst.”

“I did it, Aramis! I convinced them to join the planetary government! We have united the world, and hopefully put an end to war here!” She smiled, the brilliant sunny smile of her youth, now contained within an 88 year old body.

“Wonderful! Your father would be most proud of you!” The old fox clapped paws merrily. “All these years have now been worth it, haven’t they, Annelia?”

“Yes, old friend. And I am to be one of the appointees to the World Senate, to represent us. Oh, if I were twenty years younger and had a good hip, I’d dance!”

“Just like the old days. I could watch you for hours, dancing.” Annelia blushed, unable to suppress a smile of pleasure.

“Oh, you! And is this why you’ve been my friend for eighty years now?” She shifted her walking stick. “Or just my winning personality?”

“Simple fear, magical girl!” He laughed heartily. “After all, who knows what kind of witchery you could work through my gazing ball!” His ears wiggled in amusement. “Or perhaps, just sheer curiosity. To see where it all led, and what it all meant. Or other reasons.”

“And has your curiosity been satisfied?” Annelia leaned forward, touching the chill surface of the sphere.

“Not completely. But someday. Now, you go and get on with all those committee papers, and let me grade my student files. I’ll see you soon.”



*May 2009*

“Have you heard, old friend!” Annelia leaned on her cane a little heavier. “We’ve made contact with a race of spacefarers.”

“Indeed?” His look of surprise was increased a moment later when she dropped a tremendous bombshell of information.

“They are an explorer ship.. from the planet of Voxxa.”

For a moment, Annelia thought she’d killed her best friend. He dropped out of site, only to come woozily back a moment or so later. “Yes, I said Voxxa. Your world. You...you’re real, a real person, from space!”

“And you, my magical girl are also real! AhKhai! I...I cannot believe it...our news has not yet revealed..” His eyes were misty. “But we’ve found each other’s worlds. Like.. a miracle.”

“Indeed. Although it might be a while before we can open full transport and trade, from what my advisory committee tells me. Perhaps as much as a decade.” She sighed, her wispy hair blowing in the late spring chill breeze. “But nonetheless, we are now in contact with your world, and you with ours.” Annelia typed a few bits into her portable computer. “It would appear that the World Senate is to meet the visitors in a few days. I hope that I am invited, to see what you’d look like without the ball in the way.” She smiled at him. “At least when you were younger, old one.”

“Ah, indeed. Perhaps... someday, it won’t be meeting them, but... me.” His ears bent down a little. “One can hope, anyway.”

“Yes, dear Aramis, one can hope.”



*April 2012*

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you.” Annelia’s voice still held the strength it once did as she sang in her garden. Her companion slash nurse knew the elderly Senator liked her garden, and did her best to set her up out here when she could, since the Senator didn’t walk too well anymore. She’d recently heard a lot of conversation as if the old lady was talking to someone, but there was never anything there. Could she be

cracking up? The bioscans all came back normal, and she showed no other signs.... Oh well, leave her be and let her live out her life as she wanted, and simply do the job she was hired to do.

Inside the garden, Annelia had, of all things, a balloon in her hands, tying it slowly around the pedestal. "Happy 100th ahn birthday, old friend!" she whispered, her eyes bent on the task.

"And you call me silly, old magical alien girl!" His chuckle was a bit labored. "Besides, people hit a centa'ahn every day."

"Not among humans, we don't. And I have mine coming up in five years, so we still have something to look forward to, until the trade route agreements are worked out. There!" She stepped gingerly back, grasping the handle of her cane, whooshing the wisps of gray hair out of her eyes. "Fit for a party!"

"You always did go in for extravagance." His gruffness covered a slight choking sound of emotion. "Such a thing."

"Oh, pish-tosh on you, big old moth eaten fox! You like it and you know it. Now, to you, dear friend!" She lifted a sparkling glass of champagne to him, seeing his image do likewise. "To many more good years ahead."

"And to yours, as well, Annelia!" They sipped, their eyes holding each other. Finally, Aramis set his aside.

"Is there any news on the trade representation in your council, Annelia?" His voice sounded youthful again, almost boyish. Annelia shook her head.

"Still bogged down by this and that. Has the Voxxan government managed to come up with a working passenger transport yet?"

"Almost. They figure another two to three ahn they should have a decent enough ship to make a passenger run to your Earth." He sighed. "I am hopeful that it has facility for the aged on there. AND that I last another two to three.."

"Ach! Didn't we agree years ago to never talk like that?" She shook her finger at him. "Besides, I am almost as old as you, and have applied for the first working transport, via Senatorial seniority." Her eyes shone. "I'll see you if just for a moment in real life, my old friend and companion."

"I hope, dear magical girl, that is worth the wait." He lifted his glass again. "To the future."



*April 2017*

"Well, you've made it a century, old girl. But how much longer?" Annelia moved slower now, even with the bioreplacement hips she sported for the past three years. But today, today was hers alone. She was on the century mark, and even though her Earth Senate compatriots wished her to attend a party in her honor, she declined, preferring to stay at home, quietly. Her cane left little dents in the spongy damp grass as she made her way through the carefully trimmed opening of her arboreal hideaway.

“Ahh, there you are, Annelia! I have waited for you today, knowing it was your century day!” The almost blind fox on the other side of the ball spoke with a bit of a shaky voice. “I hope you laid in a good wine, this only happens once in a lifetime!”

“You old fool, ANY birthday only happens once in a lifetime!” She chuckled warmly, touching his image in the ball. “But I appreciate the sentiment. And yes, I had Edwina bring out a good bottle with an autocork the other day. It’s been waiting for us.”

“I’m glad you have someone there to take care of you, especially since you fell and broke that hip.” He pulled a glass into view, sparkling and bubbly. The grey furred fox waited while his human friend got her glass prepared, the wine unsealing itself at her touch. “Here’s to you, Annelia, my friend for so many long ahn!”

“And to you, my silly fox!” They lifted a toast, slowly drinking in the bubbly liquid as the weight of years seemed to fall away for a brief moment. “Ah.... Very nice. It makes me want to turn a hundred every day...”

“No you don’t. Only once a year, magical girl.” His soft voice made her smile wider.

“Must it be? I think we should celebrate every day, since I have no idea how much longer I’ll be able to.” She clapped a hand on her hip. “Even with some of your Voxxan medical advances, we’re still not immortal.”

“Well, not immortal, but I do hope we’ve helped your people a bit with our technology.” He tipped his glass again. “What’s the point in being worlds allied if we can’t share?”

“True. I just wish that we could get more transports back and forth. Especially passenger travel.” She sighed. “I guess I was a bit too hopeful when I thought it would only be a year or two.”

“Don’t lose hope, Annelia. Soon, we’re promised.”

“Yes, Aramis. Always soon.” She toasted him again. “I only hope we have a little bit of ‘soon’ left to us.”



*July 2025*

The frail old woman sat by the gazing ball, her slender body wrapped in a shawl to keep warm as she waited. The tears had come and gone, and now she was simply resigned.

“Annelia? Are you in the garden?” The raspy voice of her fox friend from another world came through to her.

“Yes, Aramis. I am here. For good, it seems.” She lay her hand on the surface of the globe.

“The council turned down your request, did they?”

“Yes. I am... too old for space travel, they said.” She sighed. “If I was only a girl now, instead of a hundred years ago.”

Aramis’ voice strengthened as he spoke. “But then I would never have met you. And such a loss I am not prepared to accept.” He broke into a spasm of coughing.

“Please, Aramis, don’t over exert yourself. I don’t like seeing you suffer.” She laid her hand upon the ball, resting her head back. “I so wanted to see you, just once. So many things. “ A soft yawn escaped her. “So many things we have spoken of, but... but one I regret never saying. For all my life. Aramis.....I...” Softly, her voice trailed off, her head resting on her chest, she left her hand on the gazing ball.



*July 2025 (next day)*

Inside the house, Edwina, Annelia’s companion of late, was softly weeping, the black gown she wore hot in the summer morning air. The television was on in the background as she prepared to leave, to head for the ceremony.

“This is News Break.”

“Earth Senate Representative Annelia Phillpott died at her home in Annapolis Maryland North America yesterday evening. The beloved Senator, at the age of 108, passed away peacefully in her garden. A World Day Of Mourning was declared by the Senate president. Tonight’s late feature will show a retrospective of her life and accomplishments.”

“In other news.....”



The sparkling light of the sun surrounded Annelia, waking her. With a soft cry she stood, unhindered, for the first time in years. Her hair sparkled and she twirled, free again!

“As beautiful as ever when you dance, Annelia.” The voice she had long heard through her glass was now by her ears. The young woman whirled and ....

“Yes, Annelia. It’s me. Aramis.” He stood, the handsome young fox she’d known in her youth. With no other thought, they were in each other’s arms.

“Oh, Aramis, I always wanted to tell you.....” She looked up into the big brown eyes, seeing the reflection of her unspoken thought. “I love you, Aramis. And always have.”

“And I love you, my dear magical Annelia. And nothing can now tear us apart.” He nodded at the garden around them. “Welcome home, my love. To Paradise.”

### Three Blind Mice by Chris Goodwin

The King in his chamber had become bored with his toys. Three mice he had as concubines: blind pale things, born into such servitude and knowing nothing else but their master and his castle walls. He found them understandably quite ignorant, if droll.

He sometimes would remind them, "The sky above is the air that we breathe and it is full of such monstrous and dreadful things. Creatures that could swallow up mice like yourselves whole in one bite!" And they would shudder and bristle and squirm amongst themselves as though mice newly born, blind and wormy.

"No! Keep us and save us, Lord and Master!" They would wail and lick at his knuckles.

In truth the sky was always clear of danger, and in truth the "King" was but a Baron, though he kept the three siblings and saved them just the same. They never set paw outside the thick stone walls of his keep, and the Baron saw to their upbringing personally. His transgressions were never understood by them as such, simply the cruel and loving way of their world.

"Lo! To me, my pets!" He proclaimed one day, having planned something new for them. Recently, he began to tire of their endlessly soft minds.

"I have a surprise for you." Quickly from their corners they scrambled and splayed about his feet, ears up, jingling fanciful masks which hid their deformities. He shushed them with pats on the head.

"Oh Lord and Master, is it cake?" Asked the sister, licking her lips. He sounded jolly and jolly usually meant food and kind words; the King could be so wonderfully sweet at times. Her brothers both sniffed the air.

"No, he has brought us something else. Something strange," said one, the youngest by mere minutes.

"It is true, I can smell it in the hall." With that the three mice swayed and wavered as vipers, turning their noses this way and that.

The Baron chuckled, "Indeed, it is very strange, my pets. From the furthest and most dangerous reaches of my empire I have brought you all a gift." They reached for each other and clasped hands, giggling and grinning. The Baron clapped his hands twice to signal the servants.

They entered with guards leading a shackled and glum bull elephant. Captured as a prisoner of war by the Baron's own men, he was promptly rendered mute and would soon be castrated. This was preparation for his delivery as a eunuch to the true Emperor in tribute, along with the plundered treasures of his conquered homeland by the ever spreading empire. However, before that fate the Baron planned to use the bull for his own pleasure; specifically to open the minds of his hapless charges.

"Stand it here in the center of the room," he ordered and dismissed the servants. The guards remained, but he did not fear the prisoner. The bull was helpless: his legs were chained and his hands locked securely behind his back. Besides, the Baron had prior promised him his freedom if he

cooperated, and the guards were easily summoned if he rebelled. Freedom meant a return home and a search for family.

Taking a seat, the Baron steepled his fingertips, "Well now, here it is... can you tell me what you think it is?"

The mice hesitated at first, hearing the low breath of the bull and sniffing its odd musk. The rattling chains also made them uneasy. Though with their master's prompting they approached the prisoner cautiously, hands outstretched, each finding a different part of the elephant's body.

"Oh!" exclaimed the sister, sliding her paws along the bull's tusk. She tapped at the ivory, "Well, I feel a curious spear, so smooth and curved." She blushed inside her ears and lashed her tail about. Turning, she managed a smile at where she knew the Baron to be, "Lord and Master, is this to go where I think it does? I am reminded of the other toys you have given us." The heft of the tusk alarmed her imagination.

"Nonsense!" stated her elder brother, who had found the prisoner's broad back, gnarled and thick with leathery skin, "I feel no spear but clearly a wall, as wide as I can reach and just as high." It reminded him of the padded pit they were sometimes placed into when they misbehaved. It reminded him of this, but he did not say this aloud.

"Brother, sister, you both are mistaken," said the youngest, "This is not a spear, nor a wall, but a whip!" He had grasped the elephant's tail and now held it as a crop, swishing the brush tip in the air. The mouse's fur bristled visibly and he shuddered with both memory and anticipation.

The Baron was quite amused by their fumbling around the captive in this way. At his suggestion and instruction, they soon found the shape of the whole beast and learned the proper names for each part. He even had them reach into the bull's mouth and feel the wet stump of his cut tongue, still swollen and healing.

The night passed slowly with much effort for all involved. Seeing the elephant with his mice did please the Baron greatly and hearing his mice with the elephant pleased him even more. Quickly, the bull soon realized that the mice lived in an endless web of lies. Though unshackled, they clearly felt themselves as bound and as captive as he was. They just could not see it for themselves and under the leering, ever watchful eyes of the Baron, the bull had no way to tell them the truth - except for one.

When lovingly coupled, elephants can forego the usual word of mouth and whisper affections through the trunk in a rustling language meant only for the ears of those so mated. It is not the trumpeting blast that shakes the trees; in fact it barely carries beyond the curling snout. It is private and known among the elephants as the Lover's Voice. It is known to certain outsiders as well, but not to the Baron. Though he presented himself to his mice as the all-knowing, worldly King of all Things, he had no inkling of the Lover's Voice. The bull had hardly thought to use it (being far from home and his proper mate) because it was a profoundly intimate and almost sacred thing. True enough his tongue was cut out, but in order to perform, he made himself think of his mate. Passion is passion, and so then the



Voice came easily. He found himself murmuring despite himself, low and raspy and rich through his trunk. Only the mouse in his arms heard him, though she seemed at first not to. The bull coiled his trunk about her neck tightly and spoke directly into her ear. He changed nothing else since the Baron was watching. The Baron watched and chased his own release with a wicked grin.

"I am speaking to you, small one, as my people do with those we love and trust." The bull said this into her ear, urgent and heated. She heard his rustling speech over her own cries. "I am forced as you are forced, and I am truly sorry. This man would kill us all if he knew, for he is cruel and petty. I have listened to how he talks to you and your brothers and he lies. He is no king. The sun does not hate you because of your eyes. The sky is not full of demons waiting to eat you..."

He told her more, he told her about the world outside, about his home and his family. He told her truths to counter the lies he had heard the Baron saying. And when he ran out of truths, he filled her mind with other things; with poetry and distraction. The bull was able to speak with the mice, each in turn that long night, and he knew that they heard him.

"I hope you enjoyed your last night as a free man," cackled the Baron, some time near dawn, spent and finished. And though he roared and struggled, the bull could not overcome the guards that swarmed him and carried him away to his fate. The Baron then gathered his playthings about him in bed and slept soundly, looking forward to traveling to see the Emperor, triumphant with his army and generals and glory.

Wordlessly, and as one, the mice strangled him in his sleep; six blind hands at his throat. They were found the next day shortly after the murder was discovered. They had not gotten far from the keep. The three of them were in the grasses by the moat: naked, maskless, in the sun and in a circle feeling each other's empty eyes. Laughing.

## Friendly Stars by William Eakins

Out in the quiet depths of hostile space, the behemoth scout-ship 'Ecclesiastes' was falling apart.

A triumvirate of accidents had taken the one-thousand person crew down to a mere two-hundred, and it's command structure was downed to only one commissioned officer, who also doubled as the cook. He was a skilled cook, and could run the pantry with an iron spatula, but woe, he was not necessarily a very good captain. He was known as Captain MacDougal.

"Our hull integrity is currently at thirty-six percent, and our reactors may be leaking, sir." Yulgurin, the newly promoted chief-engineer, said from behind his console. "Either that, or our coolant system is on the fritz again, captain."

"Thank you chief, I know you will do your best to see that we don't have glowing piss for the rest of our trip." From a makeshift command center, which had been the gallery before the bridge had been struck by a large asteroid, the captain sat at his high backed command chair. He held a hot cup of coffee in his hand. It was the largest mug they had on the ship. The rest of the senior crew sat along the long table while they ate their breakfast.

It was fried potatoes, pressed-meat, and synthetic eggs. Again.

"At current power consumption, the ship should be able to make it to allied space just before we run out of food, or supplies." The chief said, while looking up from a schematic of the ship. A large cup of faux-milk in hand, he gestured towards the port side window, cracked but safe if only for the dura-quick-seal which had been spackled across it when the cracks developed. And, most likely, the glass would not survive even the pressures of a singularity. "That is, of course, taking into account that we have almost no trans-light capability, and our resources are a good five-hundred percent more than a crew our size actually needs. Sir."

Always a pessimist, thought the second-lieutenant, Jee-Chung. A pacificer from the liberated Asio-Australian territories, he was in charge of linguistics as well as security on board the ship. Originally, it had just been linguistics. A necessary position that was mostly for show. Everyone knew there was no other sentient life in the galaxy. Well, except for the Uplifts back home.

Jee-Chung took a long draught of his bitter ale and considered the rate of speed they would have to reach in order for any real progress to be made. The math gave him a migraine. Thankfully, the ale helped. It may have tasted like a graduation-room's floor, mind you, but it did help soothe the aches.

"Then, it should only take twenty years, if we are able to slingshot." Sling-shots, the dangerous but sound maneuver of approaching a star at high speed, skimming the corona, and projecting oneself off at a very high speed. Prior to the advent of trans-warp, it had been how Alpha-Centari had been colonized. Not much there, but it was colonized. Like Detroit.

The ale fizzed in the air like it was about to explode. It wasn't really that dangerous, though it did seem to get rather angry when it's container was moved any real distance, and if the fumes were inhaled directly one could see the sound spectrum. It was still a drink, and could be used to take the tarnish off of the hull when they did maintenance. "The remedial star-charts show that we will have to go around the wide Weasel Nebula, but we should be alright if we refill ourselves at every sixth star. Maybe we can find a few colonizable planets while we are at it, captain."

Jee-Chung did not really like the ale, but it did help the crew when their five-day rations were over. Anything that improved morale in a nearly winless situation was always worth doing, even if it could earn the commanding crew a court-marshal when they made home-systems. Finishing off his drink, he looked down at the new plotted star charts with a weary sigh, and hoped none of them were going through gamma-burst mode. That would be a real winner of a way to finish this trip.

"Our repairs are underway enough for us to begin moving our ship out of the asteroid cluster, if we have your permission, captain." Yulgurin gave a quiet glance at the dark haired commanding officer, and he shook his head after finishing off his milk. He didn't sign up for this, and he really did want to go home. He didn't want to be in charge of the blasted ship, and worse, he was only five years away from an honorable retirement!

Then again, he might be given a commission if he survived this.

"Do it." Captain MacDougal stated.



In an entirely different set of circumstances, on-board the Flagship Praetoria, a short, if cute, alien stood beneath a blast of hot, luxuriating water and let itself go, arms wide and fingers against the tiled wall panels, and it's beak opened to let the steamy kiss of aqua spill across smooth scale and high ridged ears. Water was a blessing, hot water was a miracle, and the scents thrown in helped it relax underneath the stress of the day, as though birthing to a new creature and shucking off loose scale and caked sweat. It had been a very, very long shift – a triple! – and he basked in the chance to relax. A weary brain, sore butt, and kinked tail told him to take it easier.

He planned on it. By the Eye of K'Thani, he would do so!

"Ensign." A console beeped at the it's side, and it looked up as the face of his commanding officer peered at him through the two-way communication screen. Holding it's tongue, there was only a cheerful smile while the commanding officer looked in - though the screen would only show from the hip up. Water coursed and it was a broken moment of rest. It would have to do though. "Hate to cut your break short, but you are needed on the bridge."

It, a Xeckt actually, gave a deep breath and nod - while signaling consent to the order and quickly started to wash off the soap, from it's belly and groin - cleansing off the cleaning powder and feeling nice and tingly, but in a rather pleasant way. With the soap off, a quick jerk of the panel and a

holding of the nostrils later, the room flash-fried and the water steamed off, leaving it warm, but comfortable. Stepping out of the chamber a moment later, a quick walk to it towards the clothing shelf, past the framed picture of its six-person breeding-family.

As it was only an ensign, the gold-edged rim-bodied uniform was taken up and slid into, while the tabs and cap was set atop its head. A look in the mirror gave the green-scaled lizard a moment to wipe away a bit of water near its left eye. That done, the bright-blue com-strip was applied to the rim of the left ear – as was proper – and the creature turned, smartly walking out and towards the bridge.

The bridge was teal toned, though most of the equipment was given to a harmless black or light beige trim, which could match well to most any environ. Clicking his heels once, the ensign made its way towards its lieutenant, whom acknowledged its presence with a dip of her beak. Settling back against the stiff chair, she ran her finger-claws along the screen edge and enhanced the log from earlier in the long shift. The sensor replayed the anomalous signature as a wave over and over again. The placement was on the rim of explored territories.

“Good evening, Ensign Xeck-Jhal’Kara. Forgive me for interrupting your rest period.” She stated when it sat down to wait for her questioning. It paid attention to the edge of her beak, which helped him focus on her words. He had never been good with focusing on anything except what was directly in front of him. He may have been poor as a ground soldier but was excellent as a sensor-jockey. She also had a rather pretty smile, which made it feel better about an interrupted break period. Of course, her smile was also a grimace, and was friendly too. Sometimes.

“What may I do for you, Zu-Rol’Kana?” It, asked with hands coming to rest folded in the smooth clothed lap. She turned and gestured to the screen once more and enlarged the log print and playback to make up the entirety of the screen. His log was enhanced, his personal note of ‘Anomalous signature - possibly artificial’ highlighted. It was also rather strange for anything to occur in that region of space.

“You found this signature on the edge of known-space. I am curious about it - it fails to match any natural phenomena.” She lifted the anomaly up and requested a second scan of the data and target spot to make sure it was what it was recorded as. “Any clue what it could be, Ensign?”

Eyes closed, and thoughts settled and quiet, it reached and took up the ear piece he had been using which translated signals into sound. He focused upon it and let it turn over and over into his head, picking apart the sound and re-a-ranging it on a different lobe. He thought about it this way and that way, up and down and inside out, then cracked one eye open with a break of his thought-trance.

“Commander. Do we have any ships currently in that quadrant?”

“No, Ensign. We do not. I will alert the captain that we may have found a species-changing event. Let’s not keep our hopes up, and don’t tell the crew. This is classified information until confirmation is made of the object.

But, good work. I am glad I chose you to be a part of my crew. Now, go and rest. You've earned it, report back in twelve hours.

He rose with a salute, and turned sharply to go to the lift that lead to sleeping quarters. Were he not so tired, he would have taken the stairwell down.

“And, ensign Xeckt-Jhal’Kara, rest well. You look pale.”



Xeckt-Jhal’Kara sat at its desk. Eleven hours had passed and ten of these hours had been at sleep, a much earned and desired sleep. A long desk held many of it’s personal artifacts, and sorting through them to the snores of it’s room-mate, the scaled K’Thani looked through the many personal objects, from the graduation pendant to it’s birth-Xeckt’s hand-imprint. The console played a soothing melody of synthesized rhythm which had been given to it by a close friend, a planetary-geography teacher of a rare, but stunning dark-scale - the rhythms were certainly far from a masterpiece of sound, but it was a kind and personal gift and doubly-cherished.

A personal letter lay in front of him and he looked up, a hand touching the script that was displayed for him to be enjoyed, and it had been read at least sixteen times over the long course of the outwards journey. His group waited for him, the mating group desired his company and longed for his return, as the ocean longed for the rain.

The Mating-group, the Xal-Zu-Xan-Zer-Xeckt. It was the Xeckt. The brooder, the one whom took in the eggs and held them, nurtured the growing progeny and provided them with a warm, safe place to grow to a very full size. Despite being small, even for a Xeckt, it was healthy enough to give life and oh, how the mating group longed for it to return, that it may complete the cycle.

It stroked it’s face and pulled it’s hand away, stifling the loneliness and finding the strength inside that was inherent to it’s gender. It adjusted clothing and sorted books, changed the bulb and dusted down the personal images which were each given a kiss before being dimmed. Lastly, the Mize-plant was given a watering and a leaf pulled off, pruned, and then quietly chewed upon. Mentholated, it gave the mind clarity for a few moments. It was always helpful at times like this.

“To my beloved group - know this - I am on a mission of importance and a long patrol - my safety is likely but I will not tempt that which guides. Know my love, and eagerness to engage in the ancient rites and my place within the whole.” It dictated, while looking at its reflection and reaching up to rub at a blemished green scale. It plucked it down and off of his brow, then continued. “If I should fail to return, may this never happen, I have hopes that you will find one to replace me- perhaps my youngest sibling, a Xeckt who is coming into it’s prime any day now. I do hope that I am able to return, and love you all immensely. I will see you when I return, or when I awaken in the great warmth of the Eye.”

It tapped its chin.

"Oh, and I want the birthing chamber to be a sharp purple with high acoustics, so I can trance while I birth. With love, Xeck-Jhal'Kura."



The Ecclesiastes was confused as it perused enigmas of it's own.

"Captain MacDougal, we have found the signatures but they have moved." The ensign looked up at his captain, whom sat with legs crossed and head tucked down, observing a data-report that was being transmitted real time from several parts of the ship. Repairs were going well, and several decks had been permanently sealed off. They would be able to habitate them after the third set of retaining walls were sealed and shut. Dictating a report manually, MacDougal gazed up at the viewing screen as it displayed empty space - a beautiful view, indeed worthy of all the praises the bards throughout the centuries had stated, but by god (gods?) it was bloody-fucking boring. "Permission to follow?"

"Of course. But, be on guard, Ensign Sanodel, we don't want to run aground on any asteroids. Again." So gesturing to the pilot, MacDonald glanced back to his report and let himself drift in his dictation of the weeks events and planned work. His hand-picked staff did well and were rather efficient. He was very happy with that. He looked back up and did a double take. Something didn't look quite right. Squinting, he stared at the screen then at his pad and took a closer view of the little event.

Blue was a relatively common color, especially given stars. Blue was a common for planets, as hydrogen had a love interest with planetary bodies. It also was a very, very common color for ship output.

"Alert the crew, and have all senior officers report to the command galley. We have just made contact. Prepare weapon caches and batteries. Put as much speed as we can. And, enhance that image."

"Why would someone put a hole in the middle of their ship?" He asked himself, and took a deep swallow of his coffee. It was bitter. Too bitter.



"Captain. We have something gaining on us according to sensors. It should arrive at near location within an hour, maybe two. And, unless I'm misreading this, it's a completely unknown type." Captain MacDougal held a new cup of coffee in hand and his old mug being carried away. The new stuff was fresh and strong, bitter, but just the right consistency where it's a relaxing feeling.

The captain blinked blearily at the ensign who spoke and made a face - then put his cup down and slid the lid over the top. The image that was enhanced was different than the one they had been following - no, this one was far different. Enhanced again and again, it showed a ship. An alien ship. Far more alien than the ones they had been chasing. A big, ugly yellow and teal colored vessel, it had large print along the front, and if one squinted as Captain MacDougal did, it might have made for a wicked tribal tattoo.

“Why did they paint it a bright ‘hit me’ yellow and teal?” He asked himself. Oh, but the ship was reflective, glimmering like a mirror under a stream of water and starlight painting it a rather beautiful, but terribly gaudy shade. Pushing the screen back, the captain pulled himself up and edged towards the combat station. Weapons were online, but slow at the moment.. It was a careful gesture, as the wrong movement could trigger a very costly war that they had no hope of winning with their ship so damn crippled.

“Shall I send a hail frequency to them, sir?”

Jee-Chung lifted a hand suddenly.

“Sir, four more ships are on an intercept course with our flight pattern - it appears the signature we have been following may have been a decoy. They are armed and are sending frequencies at us. I believe they are trying to hail us.”

“Open a channel.”



“Sir! Raiders have appeared off our six, and are intercepting the enigma. They are weapons-ready and appear to be attempting to go into a high-strength pattern. They match known criminals of the Xula-Nan Consortium. The lead ship is hailing them. We can patch through.”

Praetoria was a Warship. A big warship, the flagship of the fleet and was given to the most battle-tested crew and sophisticated weaponry. The captain sat and looked at the screen which displayed known data about the enigma, as well as the four heavily-armed raiders that were attempting an intercept. Each was equipped with a highly dangerous ion-cannon and could cut a ship in half if they all focused. This wasn’t what they needed to encounter. Worse, the ships were all of the very notorious pirate-raider, Zer-Per’Kerio.

When the screens flickered properly, they showed the face of the alien, as well as the voice of Zer-Per’Kerio. The alien was flat faced, a little on the ugly side, and had hair growing out of the top of its head and along the upper lip. It lacked a beak or snout, The face really looked like it had been smooshed down and wasn’t that pretty, but held a coarse, mammalian charm to it. The eyes. They were large eyes. Friendly eyes.

“Why would the Eye make something so... plain looking?” The captain asked himself, then listened to the voice of Zer-Per’Kerio.

“You are in Consortium space. Surrender, or be fired upon. You have one minute to decide.” The sharp hiss was of the frontier accent, and was rather rough on the ears, unlike inner-world smoothness. The alien replied in a rather garbled throat-grunting manner, and it was quickly being translated by the computer systems. It would take over a minute to get even a rudimentary understanding of the language, alas.

“Hail the enigma.” The captain drew up from the lounging spot and sat straight, a sharp angle that sent the short tail a-cracking against the soft seat behind. There was a nervous tension in the air, and it scented of troubled

thoughts. The captain pushed the serving drink aside and leaned forward, to listen. "Prepare and send over universal symbols for danger, indicate the four ships. A symbol for peace, indicating us."

"They are responding, Captain." The communications officer replied, while gesturing to the screen. The alien captain looked on, surprise in their eyes.



Jee-Chung sat upright and looked at the strange images transferred onto the screen, and grabbed at a pencil and a reel of paper. While archaic, in the heat of emergencies power could fail and a backup system could be used. He quickly transferred the images down and began to work on figuring them out. It looked rather familiar.

The Captain gave a rather friendly smile and was careful not to show teeth, one never knew how an alien might take having sharp incisors born at them. Despite the smile, forced and strained, he gave a jerk of his head at the screen and sighed. This was way out of his league. Oh, how he craved to return back to spatula and that funny little hat.

"Festive little buggers, captain." Jee-Chung stated, while continuing to figure at the symbols. The captain gave a bark of a laugh and began to tap through the controls and brought the weapon systems into manual fire mode. The general order was to hold fire until the order was given or they were fired upon.

The alien being spoke and the voice was as melody of rich sounds, much as though listening to the speech of birds. It was comfortable, and soothing. Hell, it was happy!

"Is our ship almost ready to translate that, Jee?" MacDougal said while sipping at his drink. He did not wish to be rude but this was making him pretty damn thirsty, after all. Jee-Chung gave a nod of consent and listened to the language again and the translation that followed, before he spoke.

"Burning-Gas, of star -unknown-, hostile target -unknown- approach -unknown- murder/thief/raider. Warning/Danger."

"It appears we have a partial translation." MacDougal stated, while looking at his commanding officer who finished off his coffee in a single, long gulp. "It appears someone may be pirates, or we are being called pirates. I'm not sure and we may not be able to get any further translation until we possess a linguistics database or, at least fifteen minutes with a further conversation. That's a low estimate, too."

The ship gave a sudden lurch, barely noticeable except that the gravity fluxuated for a half moment. The lurch sent the ship slowly rocking and the temperature of the ship began to slowly climb, making sweat break out on MacDougal's upper lip. Apparently, the four ships ahead had begun to open fire with focused laser beams. It would have hurt in anything unshielded, but this only made the temperature of the hull rise.

"Stun the attacking ships." The captain stated, calmly. "Show them we do not take assault kindly."



“Aye captain. Banks six, One, and Three are returning fire now, four is warming up.”



“They have taken an unshielded direct-hit from a fully-charged forward-shot, captain, and barely show a response.” The tactical officer of the Praetoria reported, while the screen he looked at showed all sorts of wonderfully odd information. He sorted the information into quick filing sections and got to the meat of what was important - what the hell was that ship made out of? An alloy they hadn’t discovered? Carbon at it’s highest compression couldn’t even handle the force of the forward cannons! And then, even better, the energy of the shots began to have far less of an effect as a small field was put into place, deflecting half of the energy off harmlessly. This was an amazing ship.

“Fire upon the bandits, and ask the alien ship for assistance in taking down this threat. We would greatly appreciate and are willing to assist them in any way possible.” The head-officer drummed on her seat edge and stood, straightening out her garb to give a more dignified look as one would expect of the noble families. Indeed, an outdated concept with the representative governance, it was still due respect and it did hold a legacy behind it.

“We have confirmation, they will fire. Or, they want to remove our clothing. Their language is rather difficult to make out.” They watched then, as the other pirate ships began to fire upon the great enigma.

“Fire!”



For a moment, the batteries of the Ecclesiastes were quiet, as the crew behind each section aimed their guns in a wounding formation and took an aim upon each ship. It was quiet, as they waited for computer confirmation and dialed down the force of the attack to simply disable the engines. It was thusly quiet, as the beam weapons drew power and unleashed it in a powerful forward spark - which ignited and sent out three heavy beams per station that tore into the engine manifolds of each ship. The release was atomic in scope and nuclear in reaction - as three ships vaporized and exploded in sudden bursts of atomic flame. The bursts were quick and short lived, and after the four hits, there was only one ship left, which was leaking and floundering as a broken winged bird.

“I said disable, not destroy!” The human captain shouted, while staring at the blooming lights that slowly diminished from view. The fourth ship spouted fire along the side which was nuclear in sequence then went out and still, the engine completely disabled with little chance of repair, as it had a large cut through the entire backside of the coil.

“I had it on mild setting, sir, I was not aware our batteries would do so much damage to them.” Came the reply of the tactical officer. Sweat came

to his brow and he wiped it off - before looking at and tracking the fourth, which began to pulse an odd signal.

"Contact the friendly vehicle, offer our apologies for this waste of life. Get two shuttles over on the double to rescue anyone left on board the pirate vessel."



Aboard the K'Thani vessel, the captain sat, and had the top officers near to her, while working at this new, dangerous situation that had developed. The enigma had destroyed several powerful warships with single bursts, and had barely shown a fluctuation of energy readings for it. If it could destroy so quickly without breaking a sweat, then they were a truly very dangerous enemy and species.

"High command is on full alert, and are preparing a defense force in the event they turn hostile. They wish us the blessings of the Eye and hope to see us safely home, without any losses." Read the junior lieutenant from the printed message. "They have sent first-contact protocols and enclosed well wishes to the crew."

"I know the protocols, it's standard reading for every officer." The four fingered hand gripped the arm of the seat and threatened to break it off, while the mood lighting automatically shifted to the reactions and scents of fear - trying to bring the moods back to peace and calm. Sometimes, the captain bloody hated her automatic systems but knew better than to argue about it. No, she adjusted her outfit and laid down her ears, and attempted a ritual of cleansing. Six deep breaths and a stretch of the ears sent her to calm before she spoke, with her softest voice.

"Put them on screen."



"We are terribly sorry for the loss of life, and will make reparations as required - we did not mean for the destruction of your ships. Please, we just want to go home. We do not wish to trigger a war." The career of a cook, made captain, and now the one who would start a war. Just what was needed - twenty years of service now only to be destroyed in fifteen minutes. A great way to end ones career.

"Murderer/thieves \*zzz\* destroyed, of amazement \*zzz\* contact of new \*zzz\*" In truth, this alien was cute, if one squinted and stared hard enough. The ears were rather expressive, lifting and bobbing as they spoke. Their eyes, small and slightly bulged, were rather glossy looking. "Captain \*zzz\* of species \*zzz\* invite over/near ship. Send welcome \*zzz\*"

"Seems they want to invite us over, captain. Protocol suggests that we should take a party of five - at least three of which should be senior officers." A secondary officer stated - while the facility was left

"I know. Jee, I know. You are with me as the head of linguistics, and I need three volunteers. We will go lightly armed." He stood, Captain MacDougal walking towards the lifts that would take them to their only

transport shuttle left - which had thankfully been put in the wrong bay. "We leave now."

Five of them made their way down the lift and towards the shuttle.



Jhal'Kura stood beside his commanding officer, and the six other representatives who waited for the bay to pressurize for their guests. Initial scans proved them to be O2 breathers, though far drier than they preferred, and were mammalian, which shocked several of the science officers on board. Mammals rarely grew greater than ones foot and were rather slow - so for one to build such a great ship was amazing and startling.

They walked up the ramp way, each clad in a full white outfit which looked halfway between armor and uniform. Their helmets were off, and they stood unarmed as a sign of trust. The most striking thing about them, was their size - one stooped to walk at all. They were a quarter-size taller than the slender hosts of the ship.

The door was cycled and pressures were equalized, and the unscaled aliens stepped aboard the K'Thani ship, the first aliens ever met by the other. It was quiet, for a moment, before the tallest of the group stepped forward and offered a hand - palm up and the stubby digits splayed.

"Welcome aboard the Flagship of the K'Thani people. We come in peace." The captain of the Flagship spoke - and then taking the gesture he mimicked it, the fingers pointing up and palm exposed. The tendril also mimicked this gesture. There was a moment of confusion as the hand was then grasped and given a gentle squeeze. The grip was tough, but nothing was broken even if the hand felt a slight bit bruised.

The aliens conversed amongst themselves before one spoke, slowly, into a translator device which relayed the language out: "Greet us/we/people seek \*zzzz\* peace/harmony/clanship with/by/through you/people." He squinted, looking flustered and tapped the top of the machine a few times as he considered it's application. He had a rather handsome complexion to his epidermis, Jhal'Kara thought. "We/Us /people/persons desire/request/beg mercy/help/assistance for repair/undamaging. Ask/give whatever/anything desired/wanted."

"We are the K'Thani, of the Home-Star Anaar, Flagship of the Fleet. We welcome you in honor and friendship. Please, let us commence an age of peace between our species." The ears rose high and arched up in a kindly display. The aliens did not seem to respond too much to this while the machine translated the words.

"We/people accept."



Onboard the great K'Thani ship, the Captain MacDougal and his were escorted through the halls towards a lift, where they squeezed in and were taken to a wide galley - with a roof that they did not have to squeeze through in order to enjoy. The room was great, a large atrium looking

chamber which gave off a heavy roll of humidity. Several great plants grew, resembling a tree if nothing else. Great foliage covered up towards the ceiling as artificial light burned down from above - and gave a spectacular mix of blue and yellow that could resemble stars if one squinted.

The foliage cleared away into a large open area, which was quiet and given to a long table of wood, which resembled a root coming from the ground. A rather pretty thing, the party sat - and the doctors began to try and compare notes about what was edible and what compounds could were poisonous. As they talked, Captain MacDougal gave his counterpart a long look. Was it male? Was it female? It didn't seem to have any recognizable sexual traits and he was not about to ask.

Food was provided, the human crew with their rations and the K'Thani with their own prepared meal which, for it's contents did smell delicious and almost salad like. The ration bars were nutritious but tasted like cardboard, even with the supplement pastes that were supposed to be fruit like. They failed, horribly, and were more like glue. The counterparts were a blend of what looked like meats, and plants. They seemed to be omnivorous, the captain guessed.

"We/People lost/stranded/floundering in large/great/infinite space. We/People struck/hit/damaged by asteroids/planetary bodies, then infected/sickened/made ill by plague/disease/virus, then dosed/given radiation poisoning/sickness. We/People are lucky/blessed to survive/live. Surprised/Shocked/Amazed to find/locate/come across an alien/stranger/newcomer. We/People are explorers/pathfinders/seekers. I/Personal am named/called/designated Captain/Leader MacDougal." Captain MacDougal said, the translator doing it's damndest to process the throat-based language.

The Flagship Captain listened with a patient nod, and ate slowly, chewing with mouth closed and the vegetation crunching inside of that strong maw. The vegetables were sweeter than normal, and hit a hungry spot in a nervous belly. It's long tongue flicking out across the fork, the K'Thani ate with a smile.

"I understand. Do you know how far it is for your species to make it to your home system?" The four eyes of this alien gazed up at the pale skinned mammal, and a faint smile drew along that beak. It clicked, the leathery flesh harder than the rest of that smooth flesh. "May we be of any assistance in this endeavor?"

The alien Captain MacDougal chewed on his ration-bar with a grunt, then gave a mild sigh. The texture was missing beyond a gamey crunch, and the aliens' food did look rather tasty - excepting for the fact he knew not if it had anything toxic in its makeup.

"I/Self would/do want/desire your/peoples assistance/help." He replied. "Our/peoples ship / vessel is damaged / hurt rather severely / marjory/catastrophically. We/peoples lack/do not have/are denied trans-light / faster-than-light / beyond-light / fastfastfast speed/ locomotion. The

trip/journey/march will take / be / last twenty / four-by-five years / rotations/planetary-revolutions to complete/finish/climax.”

“Twenty years.” Xeck Jhal’kara murmured, unable but to overhear the conversation between the superior officers. Twenty years away from home and blood and kith. That was a shame, a sad thing. That was a lifetime. “Captain. I know it is not my place to say and offer deep apologies, should I offend - but what is right is to help them return to their home.”

“I know this.” Came the reply, while chewing about a piece of vegetable. “Command has stated we are to escort them to an outpost so that we may begin formal first-contact negotiations with them.”

“We/People will follow/go.” Said Captain MacDougal, rather suprising them. “You/K’thani might/should desire/want to make sure/ensure your/K’thani translator does not/refuses conversation/voice.”

And with that, Captain MacDougal smiled. After a moment, so did the K’Thani.

## Conflict's Reason by Jason Gillespie

"I cannot believe we are letting those damn foxes on my ship."

Captain Belavar's muttered snarl did not go unnoticed by the stout man standing at his side. A slightly amused smirk graced his heavy-set lips, and his eyes turned to regard the military man. "Nor can I, my good Captain. But we are no longer at war. This is the time for peace. New relations must be built."

"Well," Belavar whispered as he watched the massive inner hatch creak open. Beyond lay the small Næeme transport vessel. He had seen a few this close before, but never ones that remained intact this long. Instinct told him to cry out the command to fire. But like all proper military men, he knew how to obey orders.

And right now his orders were to play host to a pair of diplomats, Human and Næeme. "Well, I'd be more comfortable if they were built somewhere else."

Captain Nidrus Belavar had been in the Earth Alliance Force since he was old enough to enlist. It was a tradition in his family running back seven generations. Though he was not the first in his family to reach so high a rank – his great grandfather had been a Colonel back in the days when humanity still thought itself alone in the universe – but he would always be the first to welcome an alien being on board his vessel.

"Captain," Governor Cornelius Scotus smiled faintly. His pudgy face was almost cherubic apart from the careful calculations hidden behind his eyes. "It is traditional for the conquered people to show respect to the conquerors. They have come to you because we won the war. Remember that."

He took a deep breath and straightened his silver dress uniform. "I remember." His eyes fixed upon the transport now fully visible. Hover fields engaged to draw them safely into the inner loading bay. It was the only suitable place for the Næeme ship to dock within the Yama. The remaining docks were either too small for the transport, or were filled with their own ships, still armed for war.

The transport was sleek and a royal blue in hue. Like the foxes the Næeme resembled, the ship tapered in the bow like a snout, while its main engines sat atop the stern like two triangular ears. When the ship had passed through the inner hatch, landing gear extended from the base and crunched solidly on the deck. Belavar felt the tremor race up his legs. So too did the squad of men that were standing in formation on either side of the bay. But only the Governor stumbled and with a sharp retort had to right himself.

"Poise, Governor," Belavar advised with a touch of schadenfreude as he watched the older diplomat straighten his bandolier.

"Touché." Scotus smiled sheepishly. He lifted his eyes to the boarding ramp lowering from the underside of the vessel. "Remember now, this is a time for civility. And respect"

"Respect?"

“Yes. They lost the war but they are still a proud people. There is no need to injure that pride. Now put on a welcoming smile.” So speaking, Cornelius Scotus did. It was warm and assuring, full of grandfatherly admiration. He must have practised very hard on it.

Belavar lifted his eyes to the ship and saw the first signs of their guests. Two pairs of narrow legs clad in white greaves began their descent. Attached to these legs were red and black tailed torsos adorned in white kilts. The kilts were trimmed with silver, while their tails swayed back and forth to the precise rhythm of their step. And finally, the upper body and head became visible. They wore ceremonial white breastplate over a silver shirt with cuffs extending to just above their wrists. They carried before them long spears so delicate that they seemed made of ivory.

But their faces were the most strange for they bore narrow snouts, triangular ears that reclined at the back of their head, and eyes that glimmered in the warm radiance of the loading bay. Belavar had seen a few of these Næme when they had been captured, and so was prepared for their appearance. The diplomat had never seen them in the flesh before and drew in his breath.

The first two to descend the ramp were merely escorts. Following them were two distinct individuals. The Næme could loosely be termed marsupials, as the females had a pouch from which the young would be reared. Thus, it was quite difficult for a Human to tell the difference between the sexes amongst the fox-like aliens. But Belavar knew immediately in his gut that the one on the right was a man, and the one at his left was a woman.

The man was dressed in military uniform like the two guards. His kilt and breastplate were blue, though the shirt and trim were all silver. An emblem of rank adorned the front of his kilt as well as both his shoulders. Belavar had some difficulty keeping straight the titles amongst the Næme, but the only time he had seen the inverted harp symbol had been in a briefing.

The woman could be described as elegant. She took each step with a refined grace that impressed Belavar on some primal level. She bore a green gown that billowed around her feet like a fan. The high collar framed her neck, while a spider web woven of thin silver rested between her ears. Belavar found himself staring in surprise, and he almost did not notice the second pair of guards that followed them down the ramp.

“Look alive, Captain,” Scotus whispered under his breath, snapping Belavar from his trance. He smiled ingratiatingly as the six Næme walked toward them between the two lines of Human soldiers. Over the intercom a processional sounded, full of valedictory brass and a solid bass beat. Its garishness did not appear to upset any of their guests.

The two guards reached within six feet of them before stopping and turning to the side. They faced each other, the spears held vertically an inch off the ground in their hands. So close, Belavar could see the small, black vestigial claws.

Between the guards stepped the man and woman. The man's slit green eyes gravitated toward Belavar. The Captain stood at his tallest and held the welcoming smile upon his face. Surprisingly, he saw no animosity in those eyes, but much pride.

The woman's eyes were a vibrant blue, and though she regarded them both quickly she never made contact with either of them. She seemed to be waiting for something. Belavar wondered whether he was expected to speak.

He was relieved when the Næme male spoke first. His tones were rough, and he rolled his r's with his longer tongue, but he still spoke Terran. "On behalf of the Næme Federation, I seek permission to come aboard. I am Quængia Vissarion a Skripka, commander of Federation Forces in this system. I am honoured to present Træbuna Saleen of the House Bythnia." Here, he gestured with an open hand toward the female.

At last, her eyes settled on Belavar, and then upon Scotus. Her voice was rough like Vissarion's, but with a lighter, velvety texture. "I welcome you and all Humans to Hæstaria. After today, this system will be under Earth Alliance jurisdiction. For today, we will both share in calling him home."

Scotus bowed his head a short distance. "I am Governor Cornelius Scotus, and on behalf of the Earth Alliance, I offer both my gratitude, and my respect. This is Captain Nidrus Belavar, commander of the Yama."

Although the words burned his tongue, he knew this part of the protocol. "I welcome you both aboard the Yama."

"Our gratitude is yours, Captain Nidrus," Saleen replied, her blue eyes finding his. The Næme eye was more like a beast's than a Human's. They had no cornea, only a colourful iris and slit black pupil in the centre. Belavar had surmised this would give them less expressive capability. He was wrong.

"It is our pleasure to host you this day, Træbuna," Scotus's smile was so wide it nearly split his face in half. "If you will follow us, we have a conference chamber already prepared for us to discuss matters in Hæstaria."

So that they could tell the Humans what to expect when they took over the system, Belavar translated to himself. He knew some of the affairs in the system already as he'd spent the last five years of his life making forays on the Næme defenses of the outer planets. Of the two life-giving planets closer to the star, he knew only that they were populated by indigenous races currently at war with each other. Humans had not won Hæstaria; the Næme had gladly given it away.

"I would be pleased to accompany you, Governor," Saleen said, her muzzle dipping an inch, her blue eyes gazing full into the diplomat's face. "We have much to discuss."

Scotus gestured with one hand toward the small hover craft emblazoned with 'Yama' atop the Earth Alliance insignia. "This vehicle will convey us in comfort to the conference chamber. If you would join me up front."



Saleen wagged her tail once in reply, and then glided on soft paws toward the cushioned seats. No allowances were made for her tail, but she nevertheless slipped into the foremost seat without discomfort. Scotus followed her and sat next to her. Belavar nodded to Vissarion who regarded him with cool green eyes. The two military men took the seats behind the diplomats, while the four Næme guards and all the human soldiers remained behind.

The hovercraft, which followed a fixed course through the Yama, could seat six men comfortably, but the Næme were longer in leg on average than Humans. Vissarion looked quite uncomfortable with his knees bent up against the seat before him. Still, he offered no complaint, but with a halting, almost hopeful voice, said, "If you will pardon me, I consider it a great honour to meet you face to face at last, Captain Nidrus. You have been a cagey and worthy opponent these many years."

Belavar was surprised by this, and politely nodded his head, taking another look at the Næme. Though the hardness he had come to expect in his fellow commanders was there limning the alien's green eyes, there was also something warm too. His black ears stood erect, the red fur of his face bright. A half smile seemed to play at the edges of his muzzle.

Though they had been enemies, Belavar suddenly felt a great deal of respect for this alien. They were both consummate soldiers and leaders of their people. "Thank you, Quængia Vissarion. You have frustrated my plans for this system for many years."

"But not forever," Vissarion replied, a bit of distance in his voice. "I am glad it is you who will work to restore peace to Hæstaria. I would have no other do it."

Belavar felt quite uncomfortable. He was not sure how he was supposed to react to this magnanimous gesture. Was it all a ruse, or a thinly veiled insult? He doubted it, as this Næme was a commoner by birth and a soldier by profession – he had no House whose honour he needed to defend. Only his father's name did he carry with him, a reminder of where he had come from.

No, what Belavar was seeing was genuine admiration coming from his one time adversary. He was not sure how he should take it.

"Thank you again. I do hope that you have your own well-earned duties to attend."

Vissarion cast a veiled glance to Saleen who was conversing in soft tones with Governor Scotus. "There are other worlds in this vast universe that I can defend. I do hope that your Alliance will allow Næme to return to visit this place. I have made many acquaintances amongst the indigenous peoples that I do not wish to lose forever."

Belavar shrugged, and felt some measure of relief at seeing the double doors to the conference chamber ahead of them. The hover slowed. "I cannot say what will happen, Quængia. We will do as we are ordered. We are soldiers."

"True." And at that, the pride filled his vulpine face again.

The hover craft came to a measured stop a short distance from the double doors. They opened inward as Scotus climbed out of his seat. "The room has been arranged according to your wishes, Træbuna. You will find everything you requested."

Saleen inclined her head slightly, ears erect and facing forward. "That is good. Thank you, Governor." Saleen climbed from her seat with the same grace in which she took it. Belavar could not help but notice the way that Vissarion's eyes followed the sway of the female's tail. He idly wondered how the Næeme courted one another, but quickly put such distractions behind him. This conference was as much for him as it was for the Governor. Scotus may have to govern Hæstaria, but it would be Captain Belavar who maintained the peace.

Yama's conference chamber was lined with wall screens on three sides, and at present they displayed forests and mountains that were, according to the registry, from Earth. A diamond shaped table sat in the middle of the room with a holographic projector in its center. There were four chairs around the table, two of which were modified for the aliens. The backs were sloped forward to accommodate their posture, while the seats were more triangular so that they framed the legs and tail.

Saleen and Vissarion wasted no time in taking their places. "Is there anything I can interest you in at this time, Træbuna? A libation perhaps? Some small morsel?" Cornelius Scotus was, if anything, a polite host aboard Belavar's ship.

"No, but thank you," Saleen replied, a pleasant churr underlying her words. "Would you join us, Governor? I would like to begin."

Belavar took his seat promptly, feeling a sudden urgency in her words. Scotus made one last diplomatic remark before taking his seat, and then he touched the central button on the console before him. The holographic projectors sprang to life, and immediately a display of seven planets orbiting a yellow star came into view above the table.

Saleen craned her muzzle up to the image and waved one hand as if she herself were springing the cosmos into being. "Hæstaria, our name for this system of planets. The sun, Hæstar, and its seven planets. One circles too close to the sun and is a scorched, barren rock. Four are gas giants composed primarily of hydrogen and helium and a few trace gasses. Mining operations have begun on the second, Diæspar, but to date, only a small quantity of useful materials have been extracted. Of the satellites for each planet, a few show promise of interesting minerals, but no operations have yet begun.

"This brings us to the two remaining planets in the system." Saleen waved her hand once again, and the image zoomed in towards two planets of similar size, though one was noticeably larger. Both were fertile, with large patches of blue and green beneath widespread clouds. And the most remarkable aspect of them – one that Belavar himself had marvelled at in the many long years they had struggled to take this system from the Næeme – was that they orbited each other in their journey around the star.

“Hæstaria and his little brother, Cæraria. We have been intrigued by these planets ever since we arrived in this system many years ago. As to the origin of these worlds, we have only theories. Some suggest that Cæraria was a rogue planet caught in Hæstar’s gravitational field. Others believe that an asteroid split a larger planet into two. There is evidence for each theory, but not enough to be certain. Some core samples taken on both worlds suggest that the mineral compositions in each are different, as certain elements appear with greater frequency on Hæstaria than they do on Cæraria, and vice versa. Iridium appears in large quantities on Cæraria for instance, a very common element in asteroids. This fact alone complicates matters because it could explain both theories at once.”

With another wave of her hand, Saleen zoomed the view out until they could see both worlds rotating around each other as they revolved about the star. “Although both planets are of sufficient mass to exert tidal influences upon each other, it is Cæraria that receives the brunt of these forces. He is prone to earthquakes and tidal waves, so much so that we believe it would have been impossible for most animal life to have evolved. Yet there is life on both worlds. What is more remarkable is that both worlds bear sentient races. To our surprise, we discovered shortly after arriving in this system, that it was the same race.”

Belavar had known that both worlds were inhabited, but not that they were the same race. He pondered what that could mean.

“Again, we have many theories as to how this could have happened. There are primarily two lines of thought amongst my people. What we are certain of is that life first sprang up on Hæstaria. There is a much larger variety of organisms on Him, and what of the fossil record we have been able to map on both worlds suggests that life on Hæstaria is far older. Sadly, we have only been able to do a preliminary analysis on the fossil record, so our data is incomplete.

“Secondly, we know that at some point in time, organisms from Hæstaria were transplanted to Cæraria. Although there are fauna that exist on Cæraria that cannot be found on his older brother, many animals and plants that have taken root there have counterparts still on Hæstaria. So we believe there are two possibilities. Either another space faring race deliberately moved creatures from one planet to the other, or in the past, the indigenous people were more technologically advanced and transplanted themselves. There is evidence that they have gone through many periods of discovery followed by destruction, but in none of their recorded histories is there any indication that they once flew into space.”

Scotus narrowed his eyes. “Have you found any evidence to suggest that they could have possessed that capability?”

“We believe it is possible,” Saleen replied, lowering her blue eyes to study the Governor. “We have not been able to find proof.”

“When did this transplant take place?” Belavar asked, and was surprised at himself for doing so.

Saleen and Vissarion both turned to look at him. "We do not know, but we believe it had to be perhaps as long as half a million years ago."

"So short a time?" Scotus asked in surprise. "Would not Cæraria's fossil record be nearly nonexistent?"

"We have not had much time to study it," Saleen pointed out. "Shortly after our arrival in this system, we had become preoccupied with other affairs." If Scotus felt the barb, he did not show it. "Now, allow me to tell you of the two races and cultures that have developed on these brother worlds."

Scotus gestured for her to continue, and soon the image changed to representatives of the two people. At first glance, they appeared rather canine, with digitigrade legs, long tails, and thick dusty fur covering their hides. But when Belavar studied their faces, he was reminded of a boar judging by the way their snout turned upwards. Yet there was intelligence in the eyes, and with the corneas clearly visible, eyes that were more human than the Næme's.

The two figures were dressed quite differently. The figure on the left was clothed in several layers of cloth, obscuring nearly every part of his body. The second was clad in loose fitting garments that exposed the flesh. There were also subtle differences that Belavar could make out when seeing them side by side. The tails on the second were much shorter, while their claws and fangs were more pronounced.

"These here, the natives of Hæstaria, are the Shan," Saleen said, gesturing to the more fully clothed of the two. "Over the course of their history, many cultures have risen up and fallen. At present, they are a very religious but industrious people. When we arrived, they were on the rise technologically, and had already learned how to fly.

"Hæstaria is a world full of abundant life. The Shan are graced with very long lifespans, and so have developed complicated traditions and rituals for nearly every aspect of their life. For instance, personal territory is considered sacred amongst them, and it is a grave offence to even touch them without first being invited to do so. Nevertheless, the Shan were welcoming of us when we arrived, and were heartened to hear of their brothers living upon Cæraria."

Saleen lifted her hand towards the other figure. "Calling themselves the Phitt, these lost sons of Hæstaria have had to endure a harsher climate. Although genetically they are the same species, the Shan and the Phitt express different dominant characteristics. You can see that the claws of the Phitt are longer and deadlier, for it is a necessity on Cæraria. The tidal forces are so great that except for inland communities, farming is not possible.

"They have struggled to build civilizations that have stood for more than a few generations. When we arrived in this system only ten years ago, their culture was on the rise. Infrastructure in the centre of their landmasses where the effects of earthquakes and the extreme tidal forces was least evident had reached a point that they could support the outlying

communities. They have had steam power for a generation now, and had begun early experiments in flight.”

A small smile crossed Saleen’s muzzle. “The Phitt are a very competitive people, as their environment forces them to be. They learn very quickly, and their lifespan is nearly as long as the Shan. When we first introduced ourselves to them, they welcomed us and quickly mastered much of science and engineering we taught them. Before we introduced them to the Shan, they were already preparing polymers.”

“So,” Scotus mused thoughtfully, leaning back in his seat. “We have two very different people that are nevertheless the same race. Have you never had conflicts on your worlds between different cultures?”

Vissarion bristled visibly, his ears lifting upright in alarm. “Our people have not misjudged Hæstaria. It was not our fault that this war came to pass.”

Saleen held out one hand to still the soldier’s injured pride. Belavar kept his lips pressed tightly together. It pleased him to see the Næeme agitated, but he couldn’t help but sympathize with his fellow commander. A quick glance revealed a frowning Scotus. “My apologies, Quængia Vissarion a Skripka. I never meant to suggest that this was your fault. Tell me, what happened to lock these two planets in war?”

“For a period of a year we were in contact with both the Shan and the Phitt before we revealed their existence to each other.” Saleen lowered her hands to the table, letting the image of the two people remain fixed in the air. “We studied their rituals and traditions so that when we did bring them together, we might be able to unite them. We intended to study them at greater length first, but war was coming to Hæstaria, and you will understand that we had hoped these people would join us in repelling your forces. It was our haste that has brought this war upon them.”

Saleen said nothing more, her face lost in thought. Belavar could not help but feel irked that she would try to lay the blame for this war upon Humans. But then again, it was the Alliance’s problem now, and he could almost hear Scotus telling him that he had to learn as much as he could first before bracing either the Shan or the Phitt. And so he asked, “What happened?”

“We arranged a meeting aboard one of our ships. It was stationed between both worlds, and the event was broadcast so that the leaders amongst both the Shan and the Phitt could watch. As their representative, the Shan sent their most beloved cleric, a man of advanced years that yet held a vitality that they regarded a blessing of the gods. The Phitt selected an elder of their people who had won favour both amongst the inland communities, and in his native outlying home. We made sure that both were aware of as much of each other’s culture as possible, and then, we introduced them to each other.”

Again Saleen paused, her eyes lost in thought. Belavar began to wonder whether she’d been at this meeting. He realized with some chagrin that he was leaning forward in his seat like a little boy around a campfire.

“The Shan spread wide his arms in a gesture of welcome and greeting. It was not an invitation to touch him, but the Phitt saw it as such. What was worse was that the Phitt understood the gesture in a very different context, one we were to learn of only an hour too late. For to a Phitt, when two men of the same station face each other, and one spreads wide his arms, it is considered a challenge of ritual combat. For the Phitt have long had to hone their fighting prowess in order to survive along the jagged coasts of Cæraria.”

And then, Belavar turned his head to look at Scotus who had placed one hand over his mouth to stifle a sudden burst of laughter. “Forgive me, Træbuna,” Scotus said, a smile still writ upon his face as he fought back his mirth. Even Vissarion was gaping at the governor. “It is only a mild tremor, and old illness I contend with from time to time.”

Saleen lowered her head for a moment to allow Scotus to recover his breath. Belavar was suddenly quite eager to have these two leave, for he felt very uncomfortable, though he couldn’t say why.

“And so, after the debacle that was the meeting, the Shan declared war on the Phitt for the insult done to their leader, and the Phitt declared war on the Shan for the way the Shan’s leader had disgraced their own. We gave them the technology to reach each other’s worlds, and they have been destroying each other for the last eight years with no end in sight.” Both Saleen and Vissarion lowered their heads and ears. Their tails drooped in a gesture that even Belavar knew to be shame. “And that is the reason for this conflict.”

Scotus took a deep breath, and with a strangely subtle grin upon his lips said, “So, in other words, the Phitt hit the Shan.”

## Faded Celluloid Dreams by Will A. Sanborn

He'd noticed him shortly after entering the diner, watching people as he always did in public places, looking for suitable subjects to capture in his art. He saw him sitting there, alone in the corner of the shabby little establishment, huddled over his meal. His wings drooped wearily behind him; the human-form vampire bat stared listlessly into the empty space before him.

Watching this old exotic, a tinge of familiarity jumped out at the young man. There was a member of a golden age now gone by, lost amongst the back corners of the world. Gazing at him, the human's memories stirred within him and triggered the light of certainty. Smiling, he got up from his table. After only a moment's thought, he walked towards the all-but deserted corner of the diner, slowly approaching the bat.

The exotic barely even looked up at him as he approached, the intrusion hardly shattering the isolation he must have felt. "Bela, it's you, isn't it?" The human asked eagerly, heedless of the weary bat's wordless wish to be left alone.

There was a small flicker in the bat's eyes though, a momentary glimmer of recognition, and that was enough to spur the human on in his intrusions. Even though the bat tried to turn away, he hadn't been quick enough. That small spark of memory he'd shown had given him away.

"Bela, I knew it was you... You can't believe how exciting it is for me to meet you here, after all these years... I must tell you I'm very honored."

Sighing, the bat looked up at him with weary eyes, taking in the visage of this intruder into his lonely solitude. "Yes, it is me," he replied in a practiced old European accent which had become his own. "Not too many people recognize me these days though... I suppose you'll want to sit down with me now?"

"If I could please?" the man responded. Not even waiting for an affirmation, he quickly took the other seat to the little booth; if he noticed Bela's uneasiness, he failed to acknowledge it.

After a moment or two while the human sat there smiling at him, Bela finally broke the silence between them. "So, one of my fans has found me again after all this time?" Pausing, he added, "you don't look that old though... were you really around for all of my films? It's been quite some time." His voice grew a little more weary at that, remembering how long ago it all had been.

"Yes Bela," the human answered "I was very young at the time, but my parents still took me to the movies." It had been a long time ago, a good twenty years or more, most of his life for him. Sadly Bela hadn't fared as well as he had with the passage of time. Looking at him, the signs of age were readily apparent on his body. The dry, gray hair, the fading fur losing its luster, and the wrinkles around his eyes and on his muzzle, showed the toll time had taken on him. The drooping of his wings and the slight hunch

to his back also helped paint the picture of a weary old exotic, his time nearing its end.

Finally really noticing the signs of Bela's age, a small shiver ran through the younger man. As he looked at one of his childhood idols, a sadness washed over him in the knowledge that he soon might be gone, faded from the public eye forever. "I saw all the new exotic movies back then Bela, and they were amazing. I loved them all, the Aztec-Demon Princess, the Mummy, Frankenstein's Monster, the Werewolf, Cat Woman and the even the Gill-Man... You were my favorite though, the dark image of the vampire you portrayed, noble and deadly at the same time."

Hearing that, Bela blinked at him, his eyes watering, if only slightly. Pausing again, looking back at the human sitting in front of him, he finally answered with a simple, but heartfelt "thank-you." Stopping again, he realized he didn't know how to address this surprise visitor and fan.

Picking up on the clue, the human smiled sheepishly, blushing slightly, and then he spoke again. "Oh I'm sorry Bela, my name's Alex... I should've introduced myself earlier. I just forgot my manners at being able to meet you..." Then other thoughts dawning on him, he gasped. "Oh no, I'm not intruding on your privacy am I?" the question already apparent, but asking implicit forgiveness. "If you'd like to be alone I can respect that..."

Half-forcing a laugh, Bela looked back at him, a small fraction of his weariness lifting from his tired face. "No, that's okay Alex... Truth be told I'm alone all the time as it is. It's kind of nice to have someone to talk to, someone who remembers..." his voice trailing off, his eyes glistening with added moisture.

Unsure of how to reply, Alex finally placed one of his hands upon Bela's, feeling the soft coating of fur there. Adding the warmth of his touch to the bat's wrinkled paw, he gazed back upon the crumbling elegance of the aging star before him. "I really loved those movies Bela, getting to see the new exotics in them, eagerly watching and waiting with the rest of the crowd. It was more than just that though, more than just the newness of it all, they seemed so real... I wish they still made films like that today."

Sighing along with him, Bela echoed his sentiments. "I know Alex, for awhile there things were wonderful. The whole world watched as we exotics were unveiled before them, eager to get to know us. For a time it was so strange, constantly being in the public spotlight, but that's what we were created for and with all of my training and knowledge it became old hat to me. For several years there things couldn't have been better. Adored by the public, we all took our jobs with energy and excitement, falling into the roles chosen for us, becoming them with great joy and eagerness. I never thought it would end, I thought it would go on like that forever. How was I supposed to know that the public could get tired of us?"

Alex listened to him silently, giving Bela his full attention, nodding slightly to his words. As Bela continued, he felt tears of his own welling up in his eyes. "Looking back on it all now, it doesn't surprise me that things changed. Hollywood had its exotics for that golden age, but it grew tired



just like everything else. We weren't new anymore and things moved on without us. I used to have it all, the fame and the money... and no worries about companionship. I always had women who were interested in spending some time with me, beautiful humans, and even an exotic or two... but now it's all dried up, they've turned their backs on us. There's just no more roles for an old vampire bat anymore... especially one that can't even fly. These wings are just for effect you know."

"Sure there's still a calling for an exotic or two here and there, but people aren't interested in the dark romantic fascination of the old movies anymore. All the new films are a different sort of drama and they're all looking for younger exotics anyway... the new generation. I knew I wouldn't live as long as you or any other human, a shortcoming of the genetic code they said, but back then in the prime of my life it didn't seem to matter. Now, as the end is near, I don't know what to think... I'm just waiting for things to be over I guess."

"Please don't say that Bela," Alex whispered, choking on his reply, squeezing the bat's hand desperately.

"Shhh... it's okay," he replied, the timbre of his voice cracked by age, but still holding some of the assuring qualities of its past. "It's just how things worked out." Listening to him Alex was unsure if his words were sincere, or just spoken for his benefit, to try and ease his mind.

"At least it's good to have one person still remember me, if only for a little while... It helps me remember those wonderful days myself." As he finished, he managed to smile at Alex, and once more some of the weariness was lifted from him; at least the sentiments of those words rang true.

They spent an hour or two sitting there in the diner and just talking. Bela reminisced about the good old days he'd known, and Alex soaked it up with rapt attention, and then shared his own dreams and visions with him. They must have been a strange sight, the two of them sitting there at the small booth in the corner, but nobody paid them much attention. Even their waitress was tolerant of their loitering, having long-ago cleaned away their dishes and only having interrupted them briefly to refill their mugs with coffee.

With the afternoon drawing on, their conversation finally wound itself down. Looking at his newfound friend, Bela smiled once again. "Thank you Alex, it was certainly a pleasure talking with you. I cannot tell you how wonderful it was."

"I need to thank you as well Bela. The stories you've given me, remembrances of that golden time, I only wish I could have been there with you to have seen it all."

Bela chuckled slightly at that, nodding to his human friend. "Yes indeed, I'm sure that would have been fun... but now, I think it's time to be going. Thank you for taking the time to talk with an old exotic and help him remember the way things used to be..."

As Bela was getting up, Alex stopped him once again. "Wait Bela, can I see you again to talk about things? As I've told you I'm an artist and a photographer and if you'd let me, I'd like to take some shots of you... There's several photo essay contests I'll be entering my work in shortly, and I'd like to do one of you, to help people remember you..."

The bat thought about it silently for several moments, his face unsure, until Alex urged him on with a plaintive request. "Please Bela, it would mean a lot to me..."

"Okay Alex," Bela replied, almost with a sigh, but then considering it another moment or two, he smiled at him once again. "Yes, I think I'd like that."

Rising to his feet and reaching for his cane, Bela began walking away from the table. His gait was slowed by his age, but not without a hint of newfound determination and energy to it. Quickly leaving money to cover the bill and a tip for their waitress, Alex joined up with him, and they walked out of the small diner together. They talked some as they walked down the street, making plans for the photo shoot, and then going their separate ways. Alex turned to watch Bela as he walked away from him, a subtle aura of dignity flowing around him once again, as in days long ago past.



It was the following afternoon when they met again. Bela had come up with the wonderful suggestion of going to one of the local cemeteries to do the photo shoot. It was an older one, secluded from the busy streets that bordered it, and though it wasn't visited too frequently, its grounds were still kept in good condition. As the late-afternoon sun cast shadows upon the landscape of stone monuments, it became the perfect gothic setting for Alex's photo work. Bela's idea was brilliant, the dark romance of the setting, combined with the character of the aging, but still dignified vampire bat, would make for a powerful and moving set of images.

Alex had shown up early to scout the area for a good shooting location and Bela had arrived right on schedule, taking a cab to meet him there at the entrance to the cemetery. He'd even dug out his old costume from the movies. His debonair black suit still held up after all these years and it fit the quiet, haunting mood of the setting perfectly. As soon as the cab had driven away and was clear from the shot, Alex snapped a few quick pictures, capturing Bela's graceful elegance as he walked to meet him. He even caught one shot of him grinning at the camera, perhaps remembering the feel of the limelight once again.

"Thank you for coming Bela, and this was a great idea of yours. The sun is just about perfect now and this is just a beautiful setting for you."

Smiling at him once again, Bela replied. "I've always liked it here, especially in the later years, it's just so quiet and peaceful... Besides, what better place for a vampire right? You'd best be careful young man, lest I decide to sample the taste of your blood..."

Alex couldn't help but smile, seeing Bela effortlessly fall back into the role he remembered from his childhood. Even now it still moved him with its presence, as the bat affected the familiar and haunting accent of the character with his voice.

They set up at one end of the cemetery where the light was the best, the shadows stretching out behind them in an eerie stillness of the late afternoon. Alex had found a large monument which stood out from the rest and took several shots of Bela posing around it. Bela was amazing, falling back into the old, but not forgotten, routines of his character, displaying the dignity, sadness and dark romance of the role he'd been born to play. He seemed tired a couple of times, and Alex was worried about him, but Bela assured him he was okay; after a short rest he was ready to go again.

It wasn't until the sun was setting and Alex was getting over the excitement of having filled a couple of rolls of film with some absolutely wonderful shots that he truly noticed how bad off Bela was. He'd sat down to take another break, but it was beyond simple tiredness now. He looked very weak and his breathing was slightly labored. Something was very wrong with him.

"Bela, what's the matter, do you feel okay?" Pausing, Alex gave his friend another worried glance as he knelt down beside him. "You don't look too good. I think we should get you to a doctor or something. My car's just over there, can you walk to it?" he asked, feeling his heart pounding faster.

"No Alex... It's going to be all right" Bela replied, looking up at him, a slight smile across his muzzle, even amongst his weariness.

"But you don't look okay. I think we should take you to see someone Bela, please..."

"Shhh... I knew this was coming and I'm ready for it. I took the pills right before coming out here and I was hoping I'd last this long... I'm glad that we were able to get the pictures finished."

"What pills? What did you do?!" Alex asked frantically, his voice cracking in concern and panic.

He grabbed at Bela's arm, even then mindful of not hurting the folds of his wing attached there. He tried to pull him up to a standing position. Bela held fast though, his weight keeping him on the ground. "Bela, we've got to get you to the hospital! You can't die... no, not now," his voice trailed off in a sob as he tried to help his friend and was failing miserably.

"Shhh Alex... This is the perfect time for it. I've known my time was coming for awhile now, and I was afraid, and so lonely... Yesterday, you let me remember again, if only for a little while, and I could feel what it had been like so long ago... but now it's time for me to go."

"No Bela, please..." Alex's tears were flowing steadily now.

"I'm sorry Alex, but this is the time for it. I've been gone from the spotlight for so long, and I missed it so much. You helped me recapture some of that, but I know I can never have things that way again, and I wanted to end things on this happy note before fading away any more... I'm

sorry, but thank you for being such a good friend..." Even as he finished, his voice became more strained, his breathing more labored, and he sank a little lower towards the earth below him.

Holding out to him, Alex grabbed onto his exotic friend and pulled him against himself, as he fell to a seating position next to him. Sobbing deeply, he couldn't find the words to say to him, as he struggled to try and help his friend.

"That's it Alex, please let it end like this..." he offered, as his voice was almost gone. Bela was shedding tears of his own to join Alex's, but they seemed to offer him a peaceful release. The bat tried reaching out to put his arm around his human friend, but was too weak to keep it there for very long, his grip failing him.

"No Bela... No. Please don't go like this," Alex coughed out amongst his sobs, but already he could feel the bat's life ebbing away from him.

As he held Bela against him, he heard him offer one last message, barely more than a whisper. "Good-bye Alex, remember me..." and then his voice was silent.

With the darkness of twilight slowly creeping in on the solitude of the cemetery, Alex continued to hold Bela. Pulling him tighter against him, his body was wracked with wrenching sobs. Crying into the growing darkness, he could feel his friend's breathing slowing down.

It wasn't until much later, the full darkness of night almost upon him, when Alex had recovered enough to think clearly. His eyes still stinging slightly and his cheeks damp with drying tears, he looked down upon the body of Bela as he lay on the cool grass beside him. Seeing him there, he looked peaceful in his resting, the end of a weary journey finally reached.

Shivering slightly, Alex realized he needed to take care of his friend for one last duty. He'd need to go for help, but not so quickly that they'd rudely awaken him from his final sleep. Choking off another sob, he knew he had to do that much for him, no matter how much it pained him to do so.

He decided he should wait there a little longer. The gloom of the night bathed the surroundings in a morose setting, but he felt compelled, drawn in by the place as well. Looking down at the body of his friend, suppressing another sob, he folded Bela's arms across one another to tuck his wings around him, leaving him resting in peace.

It was when he was finally getting ready to leave that he noticed his forgotten camera. Picking it up, holding the object gingerly in his hands, new tears found their way to his eyes. His vision watering once again he cradled the camera and its precious film in his grasp. Only then did he begin to understand Bela's decision.

## **The Beast in the Rain by Sean Silva**

I placed my shaky cloven hand against the glass, watching the tiny streams of water trickle down the other side of the window like rolling teardrops. They reminded me of her; just like how everything else in this world had a strange way of resembling Becky in one way or another. Her smile, her laugh, or even the way her eyes sparkled when she woke up next to me in the morning.

But the rain... there was something so different about it. Those tiny droplets of cascading water were the only noise that still managed to haunt me, with her muffled cries for help. And I knew why.

It was because the water carried the sound of his voice too. The sound of the beast that swallowed her up and devoured her soul; and he did it on a night just like this one. That's why it wasn't going to stop raining. Not tonight anyway. Not with him out there.

I could hear his claws dancing on the rooftop, filling the lobby with a low, rumbling growl that made the hairs stand up on my nape. Then a wicked burst of light filled the horizon, flashing momentarily before the beast let out an echoing roar that snaked its way to my drooping ears. He was hungry tonight, searching for another victim.

That's when I knew I'd have to go out there. Somewhere, in that vast, dark ocean of streets and roads, I was going to have to confront the monster, whether I wanted to or not.

"Shane?"

God, I hated that name. It felt so unnatural, so... painfully human. It reminded me just how different I was every time I heard it.

I could smell Allison long before I heard her soft, feminine voice call for me. Her body actually had a pleasant scent, like a crisp blend of faint spices and a hint of vanilla that seemed to fill the entire room, even from the other end of the hall. I closed my eyes for a second, listening to the sharp clicks of her heels against the tile floor as I breathed heavily out of my snout and turned to meet her. She was gazing at me with that glowing smile, and those perfectly innocent little blue eyes of hers. No matter how much I hated to admit it, Allison sure was pretty – for a human.

"Are you okay?" she asked, taking a moment to look up at the clock on the wall before she shifted her attention back to me. "It's nearly twenty after. Is Stephenson making you work late again?"

I didn't respond. As usual, I couldn't find the words, and Allison took the opportunity to let her eyes wander. It wasn't her fault, I suppose. They all did it.

She carefully inspected my porcine body, looking it up and down like she was searching the shelves of a grocery store. It made me feel naked; and I couldn't help glancing down just to make sure I was still fully clothed. This must have been the way my ancestors felt during the auction at the county fair, like a damn slab of meat.

My spine tingled as her examination continued to draw out, and I couldn't help but wonder, "What is she really looking at? Are you sizing up my lungs? My kidneys?"

I realized that's what we were engineered for to begin with, but Christ – the notion still made me cringe. But I guess I should've been thankful that human beings, in all their superior glory, were kind enough to allow ethics to come into play somewhere during the process. My knuckles popped as I tightened my fists, digging my hoofed fingers back into my palms.

I wasn't sure how successful I was at hiding the grimace, because what I really wanted to say was, "You treated our sentence like some sort of goddamned afterthought!"

*How... human of you.*

But not Allison though, she was different than the others. When she looked at me, her face never showed that fake looking human concern I'd grown so accustomed to. She was one of the good ones; and even if I had a hard time admitting it to myself, she didn't deserve my bitterness. I just wish I knew how to control it better.

"Shane? Earth to Shane, can you hear me?" Allison questioned jokingly as she waved her hand in front of my face. I glanced over her tiny frame, tracing those long strands of blonde hair and that light Caucasian skin till it disappeared into the elegant, navy blue suit she was wearing. Eventually my eyes traveled back up to hers, and I shook my head slightly, attempting to bring my mind back up to speed. I had to force myself not to grunt. That seemed to bother them. Well, most of them anyway.

"No, I – I'm fine," I muttered before glancing back at the wet windows. "It's just... you know..."

"Waiting for the storm to pass?"

I nodded. She sounded concerned, and it made me want to respond, but the words just died in my mouth. I was never good with pleasantries.

"You want a ride?"

"No. I'll be okay."

"You sure?"

Again, I nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow, Allison."

She smiled. "Just don't stick around too late. They might think you like it here."

With that, she walked over to the door and opened it. The wind howled and screamed, echoing within the structure like the bellows of a wild animal trying to rip his way inside as Allison stood in the doorway with her umbrella in hand. It made me shudder, and the dark red hairs all over my body burned as they stood on end once more. The glass windows seemed to match my trepidation as I painstakingly watched Allison open her protective shield, preparing to rush over to her car.

Then I heard the rain let out another wicked, thundering snarl that rumbled through the tenebrous sky toward us. It was as if the beast were trying to tell me he could smell the petite human getting closer, and it made me feel like my hooves were about to fold up and curl back inside of me. I

knew something wasn't right. I could feel it, like ice water flowing through my veins as I began to look at Allison a bit differently. Only it wasn't Allison anymore – it was Becky.

I nearly gasped when I saw her porcine body standing there in the doorway, gazing back at me with those soft eyes and that pure, white Yorkshire skin. I almost called out her name, but Becky's ethereal form soon faded from my mind, leaving Allison to solely take her place at the entrance of the building. I felt like I was starting to lose it, and I had to blink my eyes several times, hoping that it would get my head back on track.

There wasn't much time to think though. The beast had already made his intentions perfectly clear, and I knew something was going to happen tonight. But did that mean it was going to involve somebody else now; like this tiny, blonde female who was standing in front of me? There was only one way to find out.

"Allison – wait."

She looked at me from the open door, her umbrella already outside and in harms way. The fabric was being assaulted by the relentless drumming of water as I stepped closer. It gave me a nervous twinge I couldn't hide. I wanted her to come back inside where it was safe, but I knew she wouldn't understand. Nobody would.

"You... you sure you don't mind," I said coyly as my throat started to tighten. The words felt like razor blades coming out, nearly causing me to choke; but Allison smiled like only she could do as she grabbed my cloven hand with those thin human digits of hers. They felt so tender, yet strangely inviting against my rough skin and coarse hair. No matter how hard I tried, the faintest hint of a smile managed to grace the edges of my mouth. It felt weird. I hadn't smiled in a long time.

"You ready?" Allison asked with a wink as her eyes met mine.

It took a while, but I eventually nodded, and we headed out the door.

I didn't even try to get under the safety of her umbrella. I just ran to the car as fast as I could, and Allison didn't have a problem keeping up with me. My hooved feet cracked against the pavement, but every few steps, the snap of my hooves were silenced with a splash. It was almost as if the rain had decided to come down harder just for me, pounding on my stocky frame like a prisoner being beaten by his captors. I didn't give it the satisfaction. I fought my way through the bombardment and entered the safety of her vehicle, slamming the door shut. Allison quickly closed her umbrella and did the same, dulling the noise outside as she sealed herself inside the car.

I could have sworn I heard the beast roar as I glanced at the roof of her vehicle. The water continued to pelt the car, and it sounded like somebody was vigorously tapping their claws across the metal. I breathed another sigh of relief and leaned back in the seat, trying to give myself a moment's peace from the cacophony outside. That's when I heard Allison began to chuckle. I shifted to the driver's side, where she was trying not to stare at me. I was

probably burning holes through her with my eyes, because she forced herself to stop giggling as she settled into her seat.

"Sorry, it's just that..." Allison started to say as she tossed her umbrella in the back.

I didn't have to ask, "What?" I did it with a simple twitch of my floppy ears, and surprisingly, Allison seemed to understand. She reached across the car and flipped the visor down on my side, exposing the mirror behind it. I hesitated, but lifted my head ever so slightly to see my reflection. She started laughing again.

I looked soggy. The hair all over my face and snout was dripping wet, and I felt like a soaker hose that was running full blast and perspiring all over the floorboard. I twitched my nose and wiped the water away from my snout as I let out a disgusted grunt. I didn't say another word as I relaxed my body against the now slightly damp seat. It was time to get this over with, and Allison seemed to figure it out on her own. She put the key into the ignition, fired the car's engine, and started driving deeper into the storm.



This was a mistake. I shouldn't have got in the car with Allison, and it seemed like everything around us was trying to tell me that.

The wipers sounded exhausted, straining to keep up with the thin layer of water that was blurring the window. I could barely see, and Allison didn't seem to be faring much better as she leaned forward, her head hovering just over the steering wheel. The vehicles that sailed by us in the opposite lane looked like nothing more than vague shadows with glowing eyes as they streaked through the night, only to be consumed by the looming darkness that trailed behind us. I tried to ignore it all by narrowing my eyes and shifting my focus toward the dark, uninviting road. Yet all it did was help me avoid the blinding sheen of the oncoming headlights.

"Ain't this somethin'?" Allison chimed in as she made a quick glance at me. "I haven't seen it rain like this in a long, long time."

I saw her look at me out of the corner of my eye, and I nearly answered with, "I have," but I remained stoic, glaring out the car's front window.

"You don't like to talk much... do you?"

The ensuing pause seemed to draw out for hours, and I'm still not sure why, but I eventually gave in with a heavy, almost painful sounding, "No." I thought it would discourage her, but it didn't work.

"Shane... is something wrong? Because you look really, really tense."

The exasperated grunt just seemed to be the natural response. I couldn't hold it back.

"Does it have something to do with the weather?"

That made me stir, and my body finally started working in unison as I shifted to look at Allison. She was persistent; I'll give her that much. "I just don't like the rain, that's all. It bothers me."



I could tell she was trying to pull together an appropriate response. Something sincere that wouldn't sound offensive. She didn't give herself enough time. "Is it an animal thing?"

I nearly laughed, but it came out like a quiet, uncomfortable sounding squeal. "No... actually – it's more of a human thing."

I noticed her grip the steering wheel a little tighter as an abrupt flood of rain started rattling against the roof of the car like a child wailing on a demonic bongo drum. It made my heart stumble. I sucked in a breath as my curly tail began to twitch inside my jeans, forcing me to shift in the seat. I needed something to concentrate on, something to take my mind away, and I couldn't help looking back at the cars that were speeding toward us from the opposite direction.

Then I saw it. A blurred message was glaring at us from the side of the road. I squinted, struggling to see the flashing mobile billboard that read, "Road Closed Ahead. Use Detour."

"It looks like we're gonna have to take the long way around," Allison said, attempting to sound upbeat with her positive tone of voice. I wasn't nearly as calm.

*Don't make me do this. Please God... don't make us go down two-forty.*

I heard a rattling inside the car, and it took me a moment to realize it was my hoof clacking against the floorboard as if the carpet wasn't even there. The nervous twinge slithered up my body, and the door handle let out a strained creak as I tightened my hand around it. I thought it was going to snap off as we came to the stop sign.

The large, yellow arrow stared at me from the middle of the intersection, telling me exactly what I feared. It was pointing me back to her accident; to the place where the rain had sprung to life and swallowed my Becky's soul. My ears flicked at the hammering clatter of the water, which was echoing inside the car and matching my quivering heartbeat.

The beast knew I was close, and he called to me with another crack of thunder that blasted the sky. It made me jump in the seat, which startled Allison and momentarily paralyzed her. My lungs began to heave and I inhaled deeply, hoarding what air I could as if I were taking my last breath before plunging into the ocean. Thankfully, no one was behind us, because it seemed to take forever for Allison to finally step on the gas pedal so the car could creep onto route two-forty. For a moment, I thought my shakes would never subside.

"Shane..." Allison muttered nervously, glancing at me from the sides of her eyes. Her voice was strained now. Fearful. And the last thing I needed was to have her frightened while she was driving the car.

"I'm sorry about that," I quickly answered as I took in a deep, soothing breath. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I could tell she wasn't pleased with my response, so she dug deeper. "Di... did something happen to you, Shane? Something you're not telling me?"

Her tone was still apprehensive, and even though I didn't want to speak, I knew I was going to have to. "Yeah. Something did happen. Something I've never told anyone."

"Well... yo – you can tell me. If you want to."

I managed a nod. Even with all the water pelting the outside of the vehicle, my mouth suddenly felt as dry as a desert; and it seemed as if the words were raking across my tongue on the way out. Everything started to hurt, but I still wanted to answer her. I needed to. "It actually happened here – on this road. And it was raining just like it is now... when I lost her."

"Her?"

I closed my eyes and nodded. "Her name was Becky. And she was my..."

I couldn't finish the thought, but it didn't matter. I had already opened the door. The events of that night flashed in my mind like a ubiquitous burst of light, making my eyes sting. I tried to hide behind my eyelids, but it only made the images seem clearer. I saw myself standing there again as they pulled her vehicle out of the water and removed her lifeless husk from the car. And then there was the rain. Oh God, that rain. It just wouldn't stop. He wouldn't let it stop.

I inhaled a ragged, painful snuffle in an attempt to stifle the pending sob. I hated it when that happened. Our instincts didn't understand the need for tears, and when anthros started to cry, the brain naturally tried to fight off the confused animal instincts like an infection, causing a jagged ache to pierce through our brains. It made my snout twitch. I had to blink back the sadness, wiping away the stray tears with my shaky hand before I was finally able to continue talking.

I was surprised how easy it came after that. I swallowed the lump in my throat, and the words just started pouring out. "She drowned. She lost control of her vehicle and it went into the canal. The one that runs along the road just up ahead. They're not exactly sure what happened but they... they think maybe she was trying to avoid something. Like an animal or... I – I don't know what. But the police said that if... if it weren't for the wet conditions that night, they think she might've..." I paused, my eyes dropping into my lap.

"My God, I... I'm so sorry."

I straightened myself up in the seat, rolling my shoulders in a failed attempt to hide the pain. It never worked. "It's fine, Allison. That happened nearly two years ago now... and I guess I... I need to learn to get over it."

"Shane – you don't get over something like that. It's no wonder you're so tense. I'd be too."

"Yeah, well – it's still no excuse to be scared of the rain. Not like it's coming after me or anything."

After less than a mile, the pitch of the tires changed. We were crossing the bridge, and the beast knew it as he greeted me with a low, cackling grumble. My heart sank into my gut, and when the vehicle came in contact with solid pavement once again, I couldn't help but glance to my right.

Our headlights caught the reflectors on the newly installed guard rail, making it stand out like a makeshift grave stone. I could see the water running parallel with the road behind it, like a long, scaly dragon chasing after the car. I shivered in my seat and turned back to the thumping wipers, which still couldn't keep up with the pouring rain. I wanted us to go faster. I wanted to get away from the beast while he was lying dormant, but a single red light glared at us in the distance, growing bigger as we approached.

The wet brakes squealed as Allison stopped the vehicle at the T-shaped intersection. My teeth were chattering. The red hairs on my neck stood on end, and the spasm in my shoulders ripped at my muscles so violently, I couldn't hold back the aching grunt. It felt as if Becky were attempting to reach out and claw me with her hoofed fingers, trying to escape from her watery prison which was no less than twenty feet away from the car. I couldn't even bear to look at the water; for fear that it might lunge forward and grab me just like it did her.

I peered through the wet front window, staring at the car that was waiting in the opposite lane across the intersection. It was difficult to tell in the heavy rain, but the driver looked like a young anthro feline, which made me relax just a little bit. I hadn't seen many of them around.

They were a newer creation, engineered toward the end of the organ harvesting fiasco, and mostly for cosmetic purposes. Swine weren't exactly considered aesthetically appealing, and humans seemed much more inclined to buy a heart or a kidney from a more glamorous looking cat or canine anthro. I cringed at the thought, but at least it took my mind off the rain for a moment.

I blinked my eyes several times, trying to see through the layer of water that blurred everything as if I had just woken up from a deep sleep. I knew it was just in my head, but God, that cat reminded me of Becky. Then again, everyone seemed to look like her on days like this. But why did it feel so different this time? And why did it feel like Becky was trying to tell me something?

That's when the light turned green.

The feline across from us didn't hesitate, but we did. I made sure of it. I reached over with my trembling hand and grabbed Allison's arm. My legs were stiff; and my hoofed feet cramped up as I pressed them into the floorboard, like I was trying to reach for an invisible brake pedal on my side of the car. It delayed us for only a second, but that was all we needed.

From our left, a blazing pair of headlights pierced through the darkness, illuminating the gold fur of the young feline as if she were caught in the rays of a giant spotlight. She was in the middle of the intersection, looking at the oncoming truck and watching its glaring beams grow brighter and bigger in her vision. It looked like she opened her mouth to scream, but it was already too late. There was nothing any of us could do to stop it.

The massive vehicle sped through its red light and careened into the side of the cat's vehicle, as if God were playing billiards with the two

automobiles. They erupted upon impact, spraying wet shrapnel in all directions that pelted the window of Allison's car even harder than the huge droplets of rain. The heavy truck barely even jumped as it drove the feline's much smaller car through the intersection.

Metal popped and crunched like agonizing screams as the two vehicles went sliding in front of ours, heading towards the canal. The truck finally came to rest, but the tires on the other vehicle squealed as it continued across the wet pavement and banged into the low guard rail. The momentum flipped the car onto its side, causing the barricade to buckle like a flimsy piece of caution tape as the vehicle rolled over the top of the metal guard rail. Then I watched as the cat's vehicle flipped once down the embankment, partially crinkling like a soda can before it plunged into the water upside down.

I quietly let out the word, "No," but the events had already been set in motion. She was in his grasp now, and the beast could smell blood as he started coming to life. His wet fangs slapped and splashed against the vehicle, pulling it under as he attempted to swallow the car whole like a snake trying to ingest an egg. I was frozen in my seat, watching the carnage unfold until Allison finally grabbed my shoulder and jarred me from my fixed trance. By then, the car was almost completely submerged.

I expected to wake up at any second. I figured this was all in my head and the beast would eventually just go away and everything would be fine. It had to be a bad dream; but as the rain continued to pour down from the clouds and time kept rolling by, I knew it wasn't a nightmare. That feline was going to die, just like my Becky did.

"Call 9-1-1," I said to Allison before stepping out of the car.

She hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to respond. I could smell the fear radiating off her body, just like mine was. "Shane – wait."

"Do it! Now!"

She muttered something back to me, but the downpour silenced her with a deafening rumble as I started running toward the sunken car. I watched the canal bounce in my vision, growing more and more imposing with each step that drew me closer to the water. I think the rain could sense what I was doing, because it started pounding on my body as I bounded over Becky's broken metal tombstone and ran within ten feet of the monster's mouth. I breathed in deep, filling my lungs with life while I sucked in some of the water that was dripping off my snout. I told myself I would never go near the beast after the accident, but now I was actually going inside – and I was doing so willingly.

I plunged into the water, hearing the distant, howling echo of movement and air bubbles as I settled into the beast's world. It was dark and murky, and it wasn't long before the headlights of the feline's car blinked at me and disappeared. I made a note to myself. She had about three minutes to live.

I swam toward the vehicle, kicking my hoofs wildly before nearly banging my snout into the car. Any available light from the surface was fading fast, wrapping everything in a shadowy, cold blanket as the vehicle

continued to plunge. It was sinking like a bowling ball, the engine pulling the car deeper into the canal. Some of the windows had to be broken, but as I quickly felt my way around the side of the vehicle and rooted with my snout, everything still seemed solid.

Bubbles flooded my vision as the car jolted to a sudden halt. I was blinded for a moment and I lost track of everything. I had to fumble around for the door, eventually clasp my cloven hand over the handle; but when I pulled on it, nothing moved. I tried again, and still – nothing. I wasn't sure if the car was too heavily damaged or if the pressure just hadn't equalized, but either way, the beast had his jaws firmly clasped around the vehicle and he wasn't going to let me inside.

She had just over two minutes left.

I moved deeper toward the cracked side window, and I could barely see the feline frantically trying to get free of her safety restraint. The animal part of her had completely taken over, and she was thrashing about in an attempt to get free of her shackles. She started biting at her seat belt and clawing at the door even as I pounded on the side of the vehicle, screaming for her to stop in a burst of air bubbles.

*"Fight your instincts, dammit!" I bellowed inside my head as I tried to punch out the glass. "Stop struggling or you're gonna die!"*

Somehow, I wanted her to hear me, but the cat just continued to panic. That's when I saw one of her claws snap off against the window. Then another; and the inside of the car began to darken a little more, clouding up with a faint red hue like someone had mixed food coloring into the canal water. I had to fight my own instincts at that moment, so I started to pray, hoping that our specially engineered lungs could buy us some more time.

I didn't want to battle the scared cat, so I moved to the rear side window. It was partially busted in, so I cranked my legs back, aiming the point of my hooves at what remained of the broken glass. Unable to brace myself, I kicked out, and nothing happened. I couldn't build up any power. I pulled myself closer and coiled up once more, pushing through the water as I gritted my teeth. It gave, but not enough. I felt like I was moving in slow motion, and I wondered how much time had passed. Ten seconds? Thirty? My screaming lungs and itchy snout told me it was closer to the latter.

*Come on, Shane, before we all drown.*

I kicked out one more time, and the window finally gave. It buckled inward, taking my leg with it as some glass dug into my calf. I whipped around and scrambled inside, pulling my porcine body through the small opening which looked like a mouth full of jagged teeth. I tried to ignore the steadily growing red hue that was tinting the water all around me, but my leg was beginning to burn and it wouldn't let me. The pressure was also starting to make my ears throb, and my lungs felt as if they were being filled with hot gravel. I thought my body was going to explode as I pushed myself inside the metal prison, and that's when I saw the infant cat strapped into her car seat. If it were possible, I would've sucked in a gasp.

The kitten was petrified. She was rigid in her upside down car seat, but her eyes seemed to be pleading with me, begging to be set free. Her cheeks were puffy and she was tensely bobbing her head. How the infant managed to hold her breath, I don't know, but her small lungs needed air fast.

My mind battled over what to do for only a second before I acted and moved for the kitten. I undid her straps and got the infant cat free, twisting her tiny frame upright before pulling the feline into my chest. I bit my bottom lip and tensed up as she sucked into me, as if my body had become a vacuum. Whatever air I had left in my lungs managed to escape as her claws dug through my clothes and pierced my hide. At least she wasn't going anywhere.

With one arm around the kitten, I pushed us out the broken window and frantically kicked for the surface. I don't know how many times I swallowed; trying to fight my body's screaming need to get oxygen that wasn't there. It burned and ripped at my insides. I felt like I was dying; and the fact that I was swimming toward the rippling lights didn't help matters. I wasn't ready to go just yet.

The gasp came out as a horrified squeal when I shot to the surface and sucked in life deep and hard. The rain tried to push me back under. It wanted to drown me, and I had to fight to keep us both afloat. The downpour was thundering in my ears like someone was pelting the water with giant rocks, but it was soon silenced by the terrified cries of the kitten when she realized she could breathe again. She wouldn't let go, digging in deeper with her claws and shocking my body as the adrenaline began to fade. I could feel the cold canal water mixing in with the warm blood and open wounds. It slowed me down just a little.

"It's okay, baby," I said, somehow managing to choke out the tired words while spitting up water. "I got ya."

I blinked my eyes to get rid of the liquid haze, trying to get my bearings so I could swim for the edge. I saw more lights, but no flashing red and blue ones like I had hoped. Blurry figures scrambled to the concrete bank as I kicked closer, but it was hard to see. I was nearly on my back just so I could keep the kitten out of the water.

A man came down to the edge and reached for us, his grubby human hands pawing for the cat that seemed to be physically attached to me. I couldn't help holding her close and secure as I stared into his eyes, searching for his reasoning. I had read all the horror stories. I knew the things humans were doing to anthro children, even now. But when the human's panicked gaze met mine and I got of whiff of his sincere scent, we understood each other; and even if it was only for that brief moment, it was enough.

"The mother's still inside," I shouted before prying the kitten away from my tender body and handing her over to the human. "Watch her claws."

The beast laughed at that, letting out a cackling rumble in the distance. The pain disappeared for a moment as I gritted my teeth and swam back toward the submerged car. I heard Allison's voice behind me, but it was too

faint to make out and I couldn't turn around. It had to have been close to three minutes already. She was running out of time. I sucked in as much air as the rain would allow before I plunged back inside the murky liquid and headed for the car.

It took me longer to find it the second time, but I eventually bumped into the dark shape and climbed through the same window. The mother wasn't struggling now. Her body was just floating there, dangling in the water. I unhooked her seat belt and she fell lifelessly into my arms, her knees banging against the steering wheel but she didn't respond. I was losing her. The beast was eating her soul right in front of me, so I swam out of the vehicle and kicked my hooved feet as hard as I could. I erupted to the surface once more, gasping for air, but she didn't do anything. She made no sound. She was dying.

Her body was heavy and motionless as I paddled for the edge. Another human jumped in to help but I didn't pay any attention to him. I needed to get out of the water if I was going to try and save her.

Allison aided another human in pulling the feline from the canal and I climbed out after them, helping them carry her toward the road even though my body was pleading for me to stop. Everything ached, but nothing more than my heart as they laid her on the ground.

The kitten started to yowl, screaming for her mommy over the panicked voices of the humans that surrounded me. I ignored them, and at least Allison realized the child needed someone to hold her. I pushed a burly human aside and fell to my knees, splashing in front of the mother while the rain pounded on my already wet shirt. I wasn't going to let him kill her without a fight.

Her muzzle was short, making it easier for me to cover the cat's mouth and nose with my own as I tried breathing life into the feline. Her chest heaved, not of her own doing, so I did it again. Nothing. I checked for a pulse. If it was there, it was too faint to feel, so I clasped my fingers together and found what I believed was the proper place to start the compressions. Her ribs popped as I attempted to start her heart, thrusting to get the muscle pumping again, but she just lay there motionless, like Becky did.

*"Please – don't you do this to me again. Not again – please!" I begged to God, or whoever would listen before breathing into her muzzle once more.*

A sudden pain shot through my head. I was crying again, but the rain cascaded down my face and erased my tears like they meant nothing. It soaked into my pores, as if the water were trying to peel off my skin and erode me away just so he could get to her. I tried to shield the feline mother from the shower of water, but the beast's saliva continued to drip all over her face. He wouldn't let her go. He was drowning her, even out here.

I sat back up and started pushing on the mother's chest again while her kitten was screaming at the top of her already strained lungs. They were horrific, deadening screams that canceled out the thundering rain in short bursts. I continued to thrust more life back into the cat, but still, she didn't

move on her own. I hoped that maybe, just maybe the bellows of her child would trigger a response in the mother. Something – anything – just please don't die on me.

*Please, God... if you're out there, don't you let her die like my Becky did. Please.*

Then she coughed. A painful, gargling cough, but it was life. I tipped the feline on her side, letting the water pour out from the deepest regions of her lungs as she hacked the beast out of her body. My ears started to twitch when I heard the soothing lullaby of the sirens in the distance, and they seemed to somehow calm the kitten's frantic wailing. Then the mother grabbed hold of my wet shirt, ripping at it with her claws as she continued to choke and cough. I didn't care though, because they were going to live. Thank God – they were going to be alright. And that's all I needed to know as I held onto the feline and waited for the ambulance to arrive.



I was glad to see one of the paramedics was a swine, probably a distant relative from the odor. It was rich and earthy, like freshly rooted dirt, and strong enough that even the crisp smell of rainwater couldn't mask his familiar scent. I watched as he began tending to the feline, and after only a few seconds, his snout started to twitch. He looked up in my direction, briefly making eye contact with me before the police snaked into the crowd and pulled me aside for questioning. It didn't matter though. I got what I needed. Just seeing into the pig's eyes, no matter how short lived, made me feel a whole lot better about leaving the mother in his care. I knew she'd be in good hands.

When the police were done with me, I staggered my way back to Allison's car. I flopped down on the wet pavement, leaning against the passenger side door with my legs tucked in close and my arms draped lifelessly over my knees. It felt comforting to rest my body against something solid, even if everything around me was still completely soaked. At least the rain had started to subside. It was down to a mere trickle of what it once was, barely grazing my snout as I looked up at the dark, cloud filled sky overhead. As strange as it might have sounded, I was actually beginning to feel safe again.

"Shane? Are you okay?" Allison asked, treading cautiously as if she were trying not to startle me. I nearly laughed, because again, I could smell her long before she ever decided to speak up.

"I'm fine," I answered with a tired grumble as I waited for Allison to make herself visible.

She kept quiet, eventually coming into my view from the front side of the car. That's when I realized she was vigorously rubbing her arms. I thought it was nerves at first, but I got worried when I saw the series of red claw marks standing out against Allison's light skin. They weren't bad, but I felt like they needed to be addressed, more for the kitten's sake than anything else. The infant only did what came natural.

"Did you have the paramedics take a look at those?"



"I'll clean 'em when I get home. They just itch a little," Allison replied softly, almost where a human wouldn't have been able to hear her.

"She only did it because she was scared. You know that, right?" I couldn't help defending the kitten. It just seemed to come out as naturally as breathing.

"Yeah. I know." She looked down at her arms before finally shifting to look at me. "That was an incredibly brave thing you just did. You saved two people."

I exhaled heavily out of my snout, and I didn't even try to stifle the grunt that followed. I didn't care anymore. "I saved more than just their lives tonight."

I paused for a moment, watching my fellow swine take control of the scene as he carefully loaded the mother and daughter into the ambulance. She was walking under her own power now, with her daughter close in hand, both of them wrapped in heavy towels as the paramedics tried to keep the chill off their thick, drenched fur.

"I also took something back. Something that was stolen from me a long time ago."

The beast knew I was talking about him. I could hear him grumbling in the distance, but the echo of his voice seemed more like a harmless yelp than the deafening roar of thunder it had been earlier that evening. The rain had also grown much quieter, and I was just now beginning to notice the strange, new sound it was making. I could no longer hear Becky's voice resonating in those tiny droplets of water. Her cries for help were gone, and for the first time since the accident, it didn't feel like she was trapped in there anymore.

"Well, whatever happened out there," Allison started to say as she watched the ambulance chirp its siren before driving off into the night. "I'm sure Becky would be proud of you."

"I hope so. I really do."

When Allison spoke again, her voice seemed a little lighter. She was probably smiling. "Are you sure you don't want to get checked out?"

"No. I just wanna go home. I'm tired."

"Then let's get in the car. You've had a long night."

It took me awhile to process that, and when I finally stood up and opened the passenger side door, Allison was already in the car with the engine running. But I wasn't quite ready to leave yet. I looked back at the dark sky once more, hearing the beast let out a frustrated mewl as he began receding into the thick clouds. It made my ears flick, spraying a fine mist of water as if I were brushing the dust off my shoulders after a long, hard fought battle.

“Go to sleep,” I told the beast confidently before I stepped inside of Allison’s car and slammed the door. I knew he wouldn’t be hunting anyone else tonight. And for the first time in a long, long while, I wasn’t scared of the water. It didn’t even bother me to hear the rain gently pelting the windshield as we drove away from the accident scene and disappeared into the calm, cold rainy night.

## **Susan's Ark: Where the Heart Is by Renee Carter Hall**

I almost can't blame the parents. After all, this isn't what they planned on. This isn't what they spent all that money for. This isn't what they were promised in MetaGen's brochures and slick videos and the folders of reproduced letters with heartfelt testimonials. This isn't what they wanted.

But it's no excuse.

Still, blame doesn't get anything done. And I can at least do what I can to make things a little more right.

It's been a good day so far, and the smaller cubs are down for their naps. I glance in the younger boys' room and smile. I can't have favorites, of course, but I can't help it: Jamie is a born charmer. There are still a few shreds of beef jerky from snacktime clinging to his whiskers, and his claws are dug securely into his stuffed elephant. At five, he says he's too big to need it anymore, but that he still likes to have it. Crucial difference.

Jamie is one of the few whose story I know fully. His parents had great hopes for him when MetaGen Technologies, Inc. promised to engineer the fetus for improved stamina, speed, and athleticism. His father is some obscure Olympic bronze-medal sprinter, his mother a champion tennis player.

No one knows they have a child. MetaGen learned early on how to keep things quiet. First because of the laws – and then because of this. Because using animal genes in human embryos didn't exactly turn out the way anyone predicted.

Most transgen kids don't begin to manifest physical effects until around age three or so, some even later. (The up side of this, I suppose, is that otherwise I'd be crowded with cribs and bassinets.) Jamie is one of the smaller-percentage group. He manifested at birth, just barely too late to show up on ultrasound or any of the more sophisticated tests.

Must have been a nasty shock for them. You expect a squirming wet helpless pink thing, and wind up with a squirming wet helpless furry thing instead.

The fur on Jamie's head is downy gold, his ears mobile and edged in black. Down the fine fur of his face, along the edges of his short muzzle, the cheetah's black tearstains are softly blurred at the edges.

He is lucky, though. His parents do come to visit sometimes; whether out of guilt or obligation or compassion, they do come. He is one of the few who can look forward to that. He does not wake in tears, as others do.

He does not wake screaming, as others do. The ones who were abandoned, tossed out into nowhere like a stray. The ones who were kept in cages by parents too frightened, too ashamed, too filled with hate for what they had created to ever be able to face them as parents.

There have been stories on the news shows... horrible pictures. I try not to think about them. I can't afford to; it doesn't help me do what I have to do. It doesn't help me take the place of the parents they should have had, the ones who walked away.

It's funny, really. I never wanted kids, never had any interest in having them. And now I have eight. So far.

The oldest, Madison, upstairs doing schoolwork, is fifteen. She's never told me much of her life before she came here, but I've gathered that her parents chose to do her transgen injections just before puberty, letting the hormonal changes provide a natural trigger. "Hurt like hell," she said. Sometime after, she ran away. I'm not sure what happened after that, or how she even found the Ark, but she's great with the little ones, and I don't know what I'd do without her.

After awhile, she comes downstairs to the kitchen and starts boiling the macaroni for tonight's mac and cheese dinner – some of the cubs' tastes are still very human. Looking at her now, it's hard to remember how she looked when I first saw her, curled up asleep by my back door, fur matted, wearing old jeans with a hole ripped for her tail and a filthy tank top that had once been cotton-candy pink.

I'm not sure whether her transgenes came from lion or cougar or maybe some combination, but she's definitely feline, tawny and lean but with a teenage girl's awkward kind of grace. She told me once that the thing she misses most about being human is her hair, which I gather used to be long and a dark shade of auburn. She's still trying to figure out how to fit some kind of cap or scarf around her ears, but nothing's quite worked yet.

She also wears a little gold cross, on a chain around her neck. She doesn't talk about it, and I've never asked.

I know she misses things like school and going out with friends. None of the cubs go to regular school, though I do the best I can with home-schooling materials and the Net. I do let Madison go on errands alone sometimes, but I worry about her. If she meets other girls her age, they tease her. Adults stare or look away... except for some men who look at her in a way that disgusts her and chills my blood. As if she's some kind of living character from a sexy cartoon or a comic book.

She is not allowed out after dark.

The others are eight and under; the youngest is Nicholas, an infant canine, still bottle-feeding, who showed up in a cardboard box on the doorstep one morning last winter. Free to good home, I suppose.

It's so hard not to be bitter. Not for my sake, but for theirs.

Madison has dinner well under control, so I leave the kitchen to look in on the cubs. Seven-year-old Ryan is in his corner of the playroom, drawing dinosaurs. I check his UV light and heat lamp, glancing at the thermometer sitting next to him. Well within range. I fill his spray bottle with warm water and mist his green scales lightly. He looks up and smiles, and his tongue peeks out to catch the droplets. He won't eat the mac and cheese later, but Madison will have romaine lettuce and orange slices and cherry tomatoes for him, and I will scoop a half-dozen crickets from the bin. The others, especially the boys, love to watch Ryan eat. Madison will lay her ears back and say, "Gross," but anyone having to watch Madison eat barbequed ribs would probably say the same thing.

Dinner, for once, goes smoothly. The oldest boy, eight-year-old Zachary, doesn't turn up his nose at the food tonight, though I suppose mac and cheese would rank fairly high on a transgen rat's list of favorite foods. My little three-year-old furball of trouble, the raccoon kit Hunter, doesn't steal off the others' plates this time, and the four-year-old girl, Hannah – who won't eat anything but vegetables thanks to her rabbit genes – actually eats some of her peas and carrots instead of just making designs with them on her plate, earning her a handful of timothy hay for dessert.

I am grateful things are going well tonight. And as I pick at my frozen dinner, I think about other things I'm thankful for. Like the fact that Dr. Hutchinson is not only willing to treat transgens, but makes house calls to us as well, so we don't have to brave his office. And the fact that his daughter Melissa is a vet tech who's happy to step in when her dad gets stumped. I am thankful for the inheritance and the donations that keep at least most of our bills paid on time.

Most of all, I am thankful that there hasn't been trouble. Not like Hunter's brand of hand-stuck-in-the-jar or rubber-duckie-down-the-toilet trouble. I mean the kind you'd have to spell with a capital T. The kind other people, angry people, frightened people make.

Honestly, it never ceases to amaze me that the same groups, the same people who lobbied so hard to keep unborn children from being aborted – because life is so precious – are also the ones who harass me and Madison at the grocery store, who picket across the street and leave hateful flyers – and worse – on the front lawn.

Save the blastocysts, but not the freaks?

I don't get it.

I wish we could afford a security system. I've never liked the thought of owning a gun, but I'm well aware that that time may come whether I want it to or not. I have never fired a weapon, never even held one. But I look around the table, at Madison making Hannah giggle with a joke, at Jamie sharing his leftovers with Hunter, at six-year-old wolf pup Sierra playing peek-a-boo with baby Nicholas, and I know I could do anything, would do anything, to keep them safe.



After dinner, I draw a lukewarm bath for Ryan to soak in while Madison reads to the others. She starts with a Curious George book for Hunter and Hannah, then moves on to another chapter of Stuart Little. Zach listens for a little while, then heads up to the room he shares with Ryan, to continue working his way through Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. (He complains a lot about there being more books about mice than about rats. I tell him to write his own and make it the way he wants it.)

I'm scanning through the day's assortment of emails – hate, hate, support, spam, hate, spam, spam – when the crash comes from downstairs. Everyone in the playroom looks just as surprised as I do, so I race into the kitchen to find Hunter sitting amid a jumble of chairs and footstools.

“Hunter!” I scoop him up and start checking for broken bones. “Hunter, are you okay? Does anything hurt?”

Hunter considers the question solemnly. “My tummy,” he says finally.

“Are you sick?” I touch his nose, testing, trying to remember what a raccoon’s normal body temperature is.

Hunter shakes his head. “Hungry.”

I sigh. I should have known. “Hunter, sweetie, if you want a snack, just ask me or Madison, okay? You could have gotten hurt trying to climb up there.” I make a mental note to get child-proof latches for the upper cabinets – not that they’ll likely do much against a determined raccoon kit.

“Okay,” Hunter says. “Can I have a snack?”

Madison has already opened the cabinet. She shrugs, grinning, and tosses me a Fruit Roll-Up. I carry Hunter back to the playroom, send Madison back in with Fruit Roll-Ups for the other cubs who are now begging, then start putting the furniture back in place. The chairs are never going to be the same, finish-wise, but it doesn’t really matter. There’s not a single piece of furniture in this house that hasn’t been scratched, ripped, scraped, snagged, or gouged by a hundred little claws. But I’m not exactly expecting any decorating magazines to come calling anytime soon, anyway.

Later, when the cubs are all tucked in and Madison is sprawled on her bed scribbling in her journal, I finally get back to the email. There’s one from Jamie’s parents, telling me they’ll be visiting next week.

I won’t say anything to Jamie until the morning of their visit. Once they had to reschedule at the last minute, and the poor kid was crushed. He must worry that maybe one day his parents will just stop coming, and then he’ll be like the others.

I sometimes wish they would stop coming. It would hurt Jamie terribly at first, but I can’t help thinking it would be for the best in the long run. It’s painful to see how hungrily he soaks up their presence, how much he longs for any sign of affection from either of them. How much he wants them to love him.

Every time, as they get ready to leave, he asks if he can go home with them. Just for a little while. Not even to stay. And every time, they exchange uncomfortable glances, and Jamie’s father says he doesn’t think so, not this time, it’s better he stays with us.

And I hate him for it.

It usually takes Jamie a day just to recover from one of their visits, to act like his normal cheerful self again instead of being quiet and withdrawn. I always hold my breath until he smiles again. I’m terrified that eventually, one of these times is going to break him completely, and I’m never going to see the Jamie I know again.

I sigh and hit “reply,” and I tell Jamie’s parents that yes, of course, that would be just fine, Jamie will be very happy to see them.

There’s also an email from our attorney with some good news. Thanks to his lobbying, the latest MetaGen settlement included a provision to allocate a percentage of the amount to us for the cubs’ ongoing care. There

are enough zeroes in the amount Michael quotes to keep us going as-is for another full year – or at least through the end of this year if something major breaks, which it probably will. I bought this place because it was huge, but it's also old.

I stare at the screen a moment, letting my gaze linger over the amount. Maybe I'll get that security system after all. Plus, Madison's birthday is next month... I'd love to get her an iPod. She deserves one, for everything she does around here. And I have the feeling that if she were still with her parents, she'd have one.

Well, at least I don't have to worry about keeping them all in shoes...

I finish with the email, check in on Nicholas – he is sleeping soundly in his crib and hopefully will keep up his recent trend of sleeping through the night – then settle down on the secondhand futon next to my computer desk.

I have been asleep for maybe two hours when the howling starts.



At least everyone else hasn't gotten up this time; the other cubs must be getting used to it. On my way to Sierra and Hannah's room, I pass Madison in the hall and send her back to bed. She got up last time, and she looks way more tired tonight than I feel.

As soon as I open the door, I see her, a small gray figure in a blue nightgown, sitting in the window seat with her knees hugged to her chest. Her head is tipped back, her eyes closed, all washed in the pale yellow glow of her Little Mermaid nightlight.

Sierra's voice is... unusual. It has all the rich mournful music of the wolf's howl, but there is an eerily human tone underneath. It is strangely, strikingly beautiful.

At least, it is when you're not hearing it at one-thirty in the morning after being awakened out of a sound sleep.

Hannah is still sleeping peacefully, her teddy bear tucked under her arm. I peer into the base of one long ear and smile; she has her earplugs in. Smart girl.

Sierra pauses and opens her eyes. When she sees me, her ears go down and she looks at the floor. "I'm sorry. I can't help it."

I go to sit with her. She snuggles against me. "I know, sweetie," I say, "but when you sing at night, no one else can sleep."

"Hannah can."

I smile. Hannah has more sense than any of us. Maybe we could all just learn to sleep with earplugs. Or we could set aside one night a week for Sierra... She is, ironically, the quietest of the cubs, never gets into trouble, rarely asks for much, gets along with everyone. Maybe we could sacrifice a little...

"I couldn't sleep," Sierra is explaining now. "And the wind was singing at the window, and I had to sing back. It's so hard to be quiet at night."

"I know," I say soothingly. Minutes pass, and she grows heavier in my arms, her breathing soft and deep. I think she's asleep, until she whispers a question.

"Susan?"

"Yes?"

"Are there other kids like me?"

"Of course there are, silly. You live with seven of them, remember?"

"No, I mean kids who look like me. Who sing like me."

I pause. "I don't know, sweetie. Maybe. I can try to find out, if you want."

There is another long pause, and then she speaks again, sleepily. "I hear them singing sometimes. In my dreams."

"Hear who?"

"The wolves." Her eyes are closed, her voice a whisper I can barely hear. "Real wolves."

Then she is asleep. I wait a few moments, then carry her back to bed. She doesn't wake as I tuck her in.

I go back to bed myself afterward. It's a long time before I'm able to fall asleep again.



On the morning of Jamie's parents' visit, I sit down in front of the computer with a cup of coffee (instant, but it works) and start searching. There are a handful of forums and communities online for caregivers of transgen kids, and I'm curious to see what – if anything – they say about mental effects of the treatment.

Dreams, for example.

The truth is, I'm a little worried about Sierra. Maybe she's just having normal dreams, coupled with a six-year-old's vivid imagination. But she's been even quieter and more distant than usual. And there's something... less human in her eyes. Is there some kind of memory in the wolf genes?

I take another sip of coffee and scroll down the page. Maybe I'm the one with an overactive imagination. Sleep deprivation can play all sorts of fun tricks on the brain, and Sierra's been singing every single night. She says she can't help it, and I'm starting to wonder if she might really be telling the truth.

But everybody online seems more concerned with the obvious physical effects. I read through the topics. Whether you should homeschool the cub or institutionalize him. Modified clothing patterns to allow for tails and ears. Whether certain species can be shaved, have their tails amputated – I wince – and be passed off as physically deformed humans.

Whether they should be called cubs or children, and whether calling them cubs dehumanizes them further and risks encouraging discrimination. Suggested diet plans for carnivores and herbivores. The best cricket and mealworm suppliers for transgen herps.



All of it somewhat interesting, but none of it helpful right now. I turn the computer off.

I told Jamie at breakfast that his parents were coming by. As I pass by the living room, I can see that he has already curled up in the easy chair by the window, his gaze fixed on the street, waiting. The tip of his tail twitches slightly, back and forth, back and forth.

They didn't say what time they'd be coming. If they don't show up by lunchtime, I'll have to send Jamie down to the treadmill in the basement, to run off some of that pent-up energy.

And if they don't show up at all...

I shake my head a little, scolding myself. They've always shown up. There's no reason to think they won't come today.

A glossy black car pulls up to the curb. Jamie bounds to the door. "Susan! They're here, they're here, they're here!"

"All right, settle down, I'm coming."

For obvious reasons, none of the cubs, not even Madison, are allowed to answer the door. I take a careful look through the panoramic peephole. The car is familiar, but I wait until the couple gets out, both of them walking briskly, businesslike, as if on an important errand. His mother carries a plain paper bag, as if she's trying to smuggle something in.

I open the door before they can ring the bell. As soon as they're inside, Jamie races for his mother.

"Mom! You're here!"

I imagine, just for an instant, how it would look if Jamie's mother caught him as he ran toward her with his arms open, his eyes lit with anticipation. I imagine how it would look if she swept him into a hug, if she held him, kissed him on the nose the way he likes, that makes him laugh.

Of course, that isn't what happens. She doesn't respond, and Jamie ends up gleefully hugging her legs. She reaches down to brush her French-manicured nails over his head, just touching the fur, with an air of detached interest, the way you might humor a friend's overly-enthusiastic dog with a pat on the head. She clutches the paper bag tightly.

I force myself to be polite, even friendly. For Jamie's sake.

"Would you like some coffee?" I ask.

"Oh, no, thank you," she says. "We stopped on the way."

Good. I can imagine what she'd think of instant. She glances down at Jamie, and he catches something in her expression and reluctantly disentangles himself.

If you ask me, Jamie's mother – Lynn, I should call her; she's not worthy of the title – doesn't look much like my idea of a mother. But then, I might be biased by the fact that she doesn't act like one.

And while I'm being brutally honest, I should add that maybe I am a little jealous. Lynn is, frankly, gorgeous. There's no other way to put it. She is toned and tanned, muscular where it's desirable and curved where it's even more desirable. Her hair is that shade of blonde that always looks like the sun's shining on it, and though I suspect we're close to the same age,

she looks ten years younger. (I also suspect that she panics over gaining two pounds where I could stand to lose twenty.)

She has striking ice-blue eyes. But there is no love in them for Jamie, and for that alone I despise her.

Jamie's father, Greg, has the typical dark-haired white-male good looks, a Ken doll with sparkling white teeth and deep brown eyes that remind me a little of Jamie's. He doesn't particularly look like an athlete, except for his lean build; in his suit and tie he could just as easily be a lawyer or an executive, or an anchor on one of the prime-time news shows. She is wearing a suit, too, just the right shade of blue to bring out her eyes while still looking professional. They could have been going to a business meeting, the way they're dressed. Maybe it's part of their cover.

Jamie has now moved on to gazing adoringly up at his father. Greg hesitates, reaches down as if to ruffle Jamie's hair, if Jamie had had hair, and then winds up patting him awkwardly on the head instead.

Good boy.

"It's good to see you, Jamie," Lynn says, as if reading from a script. She opens up the bag. "We brought something for you."

It's a boxed set of little action figures, Army men with a tank and a helicopter. Jamie's really more of a Legos-and-Play-Doh kind of kid, but of course they have no way of knowing that, or anything else about him other than his age.

He thanks them eagerly, as if it's something he's been wanting a long time.

Greg turns to me and speaks quietly. "We'd like to speak with you... in private... if you don't mind."

"Of course." I kneel by Jamie, who is fumbling with the box, trying to get it open. "Jamie, honey, why don't you take those into the playroom while I talk to your mom and dad for a few minutes?"

He looks disappointed, but says okay. I take Greg and Lynn into the office. They sit down on the futon, looking nervous.

For a moment, I allow myself to hope that they're going to ask to take Jamie home with them. But I know that's not going to happen, and anyway it would be cruel to send Jamie into a home like that.

Greg clears his throat. "This is the last time we'll be able to come here."

It's not a shock, but I wait a moment to collect myself before speaking. "What's changed?"

They exchange glances, and Lynn takes over. "There's a reporter who's been doing some digging..."

"Not a reporter," Greg cuts in. "Some hack with a camera who wants money."

"It's just that we can't afford for this to... I mean, I have two big endorsement contracts getting ready to be signed, and Greg has a shot at being on the team again in two years, and we don't want... well... something like this..."

I enjoy seeing her this flustered. "Bad publicity, you mean."

“Well... yes.”

“We can pay off one person, one tabloid,” Greg continues. “This isn’t a problem. But if we keep coming here, someone’s bound to find out again, and they may not have a price to keep quiet.”

He says all of this very reasonably, as if any sane, level-headed person would see it this way.

“So we were hoping,” Lynn picks up, “that you would tell Jamie... why we can’t... I mean, explain it to him so he can understand –”

“No.”

Greg frowns slightly. “I’m sorry?”

“No,” I repeat. I see now, more clearly than ever, how weak these two are, and it disgusts me. Weak minds, weak stomachs, weak hearts. “I’ll go with you; I’ll be there, for his sake. But if you want him stabbed through the heart, I’m not going to be the one holding the knife. You’re going to be responsible for him for once. You’re going to tell him.”

Surprisingly, they don’t argue. I follow them to the playroom, where Jamie is sitting on the floor, spinning the helicopter’s rotor slowly around and around. He looks up, and senses something wrong, and his parents – his parents – tell him what they have come to say.



“Of course we’ll continue to send our payments,” Greg says softly at the door, “as well as our yearly donation.”

“Of course.” I open the door for them.

“Thank you for being so understanding,” Lynn says. She doesn’t sound sarcastic, and I wonder if she’s just being polite, or if she’s really stupid enough to think that I understand.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. They slip out, and I close the door firmly behind them, then twist both locks into place.

I fantasize for a moment. Surely Michael knows a few reporters. Jamie’s very photogenic. But that’s not my concern right now.

Right now, I have to go pick up the pieces.



Jamie is still sitting on the floor, the new toys lying scattered and forgotten around him. His knees are drawn up to his chest, his arms folded, his chin resting on his arms. He is silent, dry-eyed, staring dully at nothing.

Oh, Jamie-boy. My sweet one. What have they done?

He was so quiet when they told him. He hardly reacted at all. His parents probably thought he was taking it very well.

But I knew better. I watched his eyes as they talked, saw the last hope fade from them. I saw how he looked as we left the room. So I’m not surprised to see him like this now, but I am worried.

“Jamie...”

I have no idea what to say to him, no idea where to begin. Nothing seems right.

I sit down next to him. As I settle myself onto the floor, my foot hits one of the action figures and knocks it over.

It's like breaking a spell. Jamie grabs the figure, tries to pull it apart, can't. He throws the figure against the wall, picks up another, throws it, again and again. The tank bounces a little on its tread, then rolls over onto its side. The helicopter hits the wall hard, and the rotor snaps off neatly.

Jamie looks at all of this imaginary carnage. He is silent but for puffing breaths, a moment, then two. Then he bursts into tears.

I hug him, afraid that he'll refuse me, but he clings to me. He is sobbing almost to the point of hysteria.

"Jamie," I breathed, smoothing the fur of his head and neck, stroking him, soothing him as best I can. "It's going to be okay, sweetie. I'm here. I'll always be here."

His crying eventually quiets down to hiccupping sobs. He says something I can't make out.

"Say that again?"

He doesn't look at me; his head is pressed against my chest. "Why don't they want me?"

"Oh, Jamie..." I rock him slightly, back and forth. I'm not sure which of us I'm trying to comfort. "It's not your fault."

"Yes it is."

"No, it isn't." I touch his face so that he pulls back. "Jamie, look at me. This isn't your fault. Sometimes..." How on earth am I going to explain this? "Sometimes people are afraid of... of people who are different. Your parents..."

I want to say, "Your parents love you," but the lie lodges in my throat.

"They're not bad, Jamie. And neither are you," I add, heading off the question I see in his eyes. "You haven't done anything wrong."

I sigh. "I know it's hard. It's just... the way things have to be."

He sniffles. "I'm never going to see them again, am I?"

I hold him. "No."

After a few minutes, he sighs, and his tense body relaxes a little against me. "I didn't mean to break the helicopter."

"It's okay. Maybe we can fix it."

"I didn't like it. But I thanked them anyway."

"Yes, you did. You were very polite."

There is a slight scuffling from the doorway, and I look up to see Hunter standing, wide-eyed, clutching his blanket.

"Hunter? Is something wrong?"

He shakes his head.

"Well, Jamie's feeling kind of sad, so I don't think he wants to play right now, okay?"

Hunter chews on one claw a minute, thinking this over. Then he comes up to us and holds out his blanket to Jamie. "Make you feel better," he says softly.

Jamie takes it and manages to smile a little. "Thanks."

Hunter nods, satisfied, then turns and toddles out. He stops at the last moment and turns back. "Just today," he adds firmly, and leaves.

I get a tissue for Jamie. "You know what?"

He looks at me uncertainly. "What?"

"I think this is a good time for a bubble bath."

He perks up a bit at that. For all his feline nature, bubble baths are somewhere in the top five of Jamie's all-time favorite things. "Really?"

"Really. And you know what else?"

"What?"

"I think these army men are going to get caught in a tidal wave."

His eyes are lighting up now. "All of them?"

"Well, the helicopter might have flown some of them to safety, but since the hurricane hit it..."

He gathers up the action figures and races to the upstairs bathroom.

I have been fighting back tears through all of this, of course, but I don't cry. Not even the night when I tuck Jamie in and he says, "Night, Mom." No, I don't cry until a few weeks later, when I see them on TV, smiling behind the microphones at the press conference. They've just announced she's pregnant with their very first child.



Madison looks so wiped out at breakfast that I set a mug of coffee in front of her. Sierra is driving us all to the point of sleeping during the day and lying awake most of the night. As much as I hate myself for considering it, I'm starting to wonder if Dr. Hutchinson could give Sierra something to keep her asleep.

Madison takes a sip of coffee and chokes. "God, it's like acid. How do you drink this?" She dumps several spoonfuls of sugar into the mug, tries it again, and grimaces. "That's it. I'm going out for a latté."

"Yeah, well, coffee stunts your growth, you know."

"Not funny." She pulls a denim jacket over her tank top and grabs her purse. "Do we need anything?"

"Nah, not today." Let her have an hour without worrying about everybody else. A tiny voice tells me I could use that, too, but I tell it to shut up. "Madison –"

She rolls her eyes. "I know. Be careful. I will." And she's out the door.

A little while later, I glance in the playroom. Jamie and Hunter are building some kind of fort out of blocks and Hunter's blanket. Ryan and Zach are using the slightly waterlogged army men in a complicated narrative involving two superheroes, an alien spaceship, and a naked Barbie doll. In the corner, Hannah is serving Jamie's stuffed elephant a plastic steak and carrots.

And Sierra... I scan the room and finally find her, curled up on a mat, fast asleep.

Something, I decide, has got to be done. Now I just have to figure out what.

The answer, when I happen on it, surprises me. While searching various websites for transgen info, I follow a link to one of the advertisers, a wolf sanctuary about two and a half hours' drive away. It's a husband-and-wife operation, home to a number of rescued wolves. They usually only allow visitors a couple weeks out of the year, preferring that the wolves not be on display, but I plead my case in an email and get a reply within the hour.

By the time I finish with the email and change Nicholas, it's almost time to start lunch. I glance worriedly at the clock. Madison hasn't come back.

Cell phone, I think. Never mind the iPod, what the girl needs is a cell phone.

I tell myself she's perfectly fine. There's no reason to worry.

But it doesn't take three hours to drink a latté. Not even a venti.

Relax... I look at the clock again. Maybe she ran into a friend.

Oh, sure. One of her many friends who are always calling her and coming to sleep over?

After exactly twenty-two minutes of this insane mental fear-dialogue, she comes in, carrying a little bag from the local coffeehouse.

"Where have you been?" I snap.

She blinks. "Having coffee."

"For three hours?"

"Yeah, well, you know." She holds out the bag. "I brought you a chocolate muffin."

"Don't think you can bribe me with... hey, this is still warm."

"They were just taking them out of the oven when we left." She heads upstairs.

The chocolate drizzle on top is melty and rich. "You could have brought some coffee back, too. You saw what I dri – wait a minute. Stop right there."

She stops on the stairs. To her credit, she doesn't roll her eyes, though I can tell she wants to.

"Who's 'we'?" I ask.

"Just... you know. Somebody I met."

"Somebody you met."

"Yeah."

I raise an eyebrow. "And would this somebody be male?"

She fidgets, playing with the strap on her purse. "Yeah, so?"

"Madison..."

"Calm down; it's okay. He wasn't a perv or anything."

"And how would you know –?"

"He was like me, okay? A leopard or a jaguar or something."

Interesting, but it doesn't get her off the hook. "How old was this leopard or jaguar or something?"

Now she does roll her eyes. "Seventeen. Just two years older. It's no big deal."

At fifteen, two years are an incredibly big deal, but I don't say that because I know it won't do any good.

"Look," Madison continues, looking down at me from halfway up the stairs, "we were just talking. I've never even seen a guy my age... like that. And I didn't realize I'd been gone that long. I'm not going to do anything stupid, okay?"

My muffin is getting cold. "Okay," I sigh. "But if I catch you tying your bedsheets together to run off with this guy —"

"Susan, please. He wasn't that good-looking."

But he must have looked good enough, because I catch her staring off into space a lot as she helps me with lunch. I shouldn't give her such a hard time, I know. There aren't many transgen teenagers as it is, so it's not like she's going to have dozens of guys to choose from. Serious dating, engagement, marriage, children — I can't even guess at the odds for those. If she wants to flirt a little and talk and have fun, she deserves that much at least. Even if it might get her hopes up.

I tell Madison about the wolf sanctuary, about the planned visit.

"Anything that'll get her to sleep through the night," she says. "But what about the others?"

I know what she means. Trips with the cubs are few and far between, and I don't want anyone getting jealous about Sierra's day out. I chop the lettuce and think it over.

"What if we just tell them that Sierra's going to see someone who'll help her figure out why she's been singing so much?"

Madison considers it. "They'd think it was a doctor." She shrugs and stirs taco sauce into the ground beef. "Sounds good to me."

I don't know what I'm expecting to happen at the sanctuary. But whatever the answer is, I sense that Sierra will have to find it for herself, and that she's only going to find it with —

With her own kind. I can't stop the thought.

But Sierra isn't a wolf. Not fully, anyway. And all we can do, I remind myself, is see what happens.

Madison turns off the burner and picks up the pan of ground beef. "Should I serve this, or just dump it all over everybody to save time?"

"Don't worry. It's my turn to do laundry this week." I grab the basket of taco shells and follow her to the table.



The entrance to the sanctuary is a long gravel driveway situated between an abandoned gas station and, of all things, a tattoo parlor. It looks about as far from wilderness as you can get, but as I drive farther, the minivan's tires crunching over the gravel, more and more trees show up to either side, and then I see the sign, the carved wolf head, and the low building that serves as office and visitor's center.

I glance in the rearview mirror. On the drive, Sierra has been alert but quiet, lost in her thoughts. Now I can almost feel all of her senses straining

as she presses herself to the window. She says nothing, but her ears and tail are up, and as I shut off the engine I can hear a soft, eager whine.

Janet and Carl come out to meet us. They are in their early fifties, I decide, based on the salt-and-pepper color of Carl's receding hair and the deep laugh lines on Janet's face. Both are in jeans; Carl wears a plaid shirt that looks as old as I am, while Janet's blue T-shirt has two wolves on the front.

"Come on in," they say.

Most of the cubs tend to be shy, especially around strangers – simply put, they don't get out that much, and they don't meet new people very often. Sierra, though, surprises me by introducing herself, and Janet and Carl are so responsive to her that I become certain that they've had children of their own, perhaps even grandchildren. They treat her as one might treat any six-year-old girl who loves wolves, and I love them for it.

Janet explains how the wolf pack is kind of like a big family, and I smile at that, mentally fitting our unusual family into the roles. Alpha female: I guess that's me. Madison as the beta.

Alpha male... Not necessary. Unless you figure I'm doing double duty.

I do wonder sometimes about good male role models for the boys as they grow up. Michael's good with them when he stops by, but he's hardly a permanent fixture. And I don't have time for a social life, let alone dating. Even if I wanted to.

Janet and Carl lead us over to the largest enclosure. There's a lot of brush and natural cover, and a little man-made stream courses through the trees. It's been an unusually warm spring, and when I first see the wolves, they're relaxing in the shade.

At first, looking at them, I can almost imagine that they're dogs, lazing in someone's overgrown backyard. But once they scent and see us, their ears and eyes ratchet to a level of alertness – a level of awareness – that I've never seen in any domestic dog. And when they turn their attention to Sierra, I can feel a subtle shift in the mood. Not threatening, not tense, but something uncertain. I think her scent confuses them, and none of them know quite how to react to a not-human-not-wolf.

Sierra drops to her knees by the enclosure, very close to the wire fence, so close that I want to warn her back. But I don't. I don't want to speak; this moment feels so fragile. Janet and Carl are silent as well, watching. Waiting.

Sierra keeps her gaze down, focused on the grass tangled in the base of the fence. The largest wolf, heavy and silver, approaches. There is confidence in his stance, but there is a wary edge to his body language that you don't have to be a wolf to pick up on.

Then a second wolf comes to the fence, a gray female who is heavily pregnant. For a moment, she shares her mate's caution, but then she visibly relaxes, and after a few beats, the male does, too.

I can imagine what she's saying: It's just a pup. It smells funny, but it's just a pup.



And then, following their lead, the other wolves crowd around for a look. There are four other adults, as well as two juveniles who still haven't quite grown into their paws. The young ones are especially eager, pressing their moist noses between the links of the fence, hungry for a new playmate.

Janet introduces them each in turn. I catch the alphas' names – Silver and Storm – but the rest wash over me, because all my attention is focused on Sierra.

It isn't only that I've never seen her so happy. I realized that I've never seen her look so... complete. She is relaxed here, and open, and somehow whole, in a way that she has never been before. The difference is all the more stunning because I never thought anything was missing.

"Do they sing?" Sierra asks, speaking for the first time since meeting the wolves.

"Mostly at dusk," Carl says, "but we can see if they feel like it."

Carl cups his hands around his mouth and produces a remarkable imitation of a wolf howl. The wolves turn his way, momentarily interested, but none take up the song.

Then Sierra raises her voice, and though the howl still has a pup's high-keening pitch, it is richer and sweeter than any wolf-pup's song could be. I hear Carl exhale softly, almost a sigh, and I feel that if he had been a man to swear, it would have been in that moment of wonder.

Before the note can die away, one of the juveniles takes it up, wrapping his cry around hers. Then the female – Storm – lifts her muzzle and joins in. Silver, the male, still looks wary, but in time he adds his voice, a powerful ringing howl that vibrates in my chest and stirs something in my heart that is older than human memory.

Everything looks blurry, and I blink away tears. I have no idea if this is normal behavior for wolves, but suddenly what's normal doesn't seem to matter as much as what's right.

Silver's last howl fades slowly into silence. I can hear my own breath in the quiet. My mind feels like a bell that's been rung and goes on vibrating, thrumming even after the sound has lowered past hearing. The air tingles on my skin.

Sierra is grinning as if she's just brought the house down in a school concert. I put my arm around her, pulling her gently to me. I don't know why, but I feel the need to touch her, to make contact with her, to bring her back. To claim her, somehow. All of a sudden, I don't know who she really belongs to, or where.

"How long until Storm has her pups?" Sierra asks, breaking the spell.

"No more than a week or two, now," Janet replies.

"Can I come back and see them?"

She asks this while looking at Storm, so I don't know if the question's meant for me or for Janet. I glance at Janet, and she nods, so I reply. "Of course."

"We'll give you a call when she's ready for visitors," Janet adds.

We stay a little while longer. Back at the office, they have juice and cookies for Sierra, and they tell her about the money they send to help wolves in the wild, showing her a thick photo album of glossy pictures. She lingers over these, studying the wolves' faces, sometimes pausing to touch one lightly. The air conditioning feels too cold on my skin.

There is a gift for her, too: a CD of wolfsong and light music, "for bedtime," Janet explains, and Sierra, my quiet one, usually so shy, not only thanks them both, but hugs Janet and lightly licks her cheek.

"Time to go, Sierra," I say finally. Dismay clouds her face for a moment, but she follows me out of the office. Janet and Carl walk us out to the van.

Sierra's ears perk at something I can't hear, and she looks to the enclosure, then turns to me. "Can I tell them goodbye?"

"Okay, but just for a minute."

At the enclosure, the wolves have moved out of sight, except for Storm. The alpha female stands at the fence as if she's waiting, as if she knew Sierra was coming back.

"I'll be back," Sierra whispers. Storm whines a soft reply, and that sound ghosts in my ears for the entire ride home.



When we get to the house, Michael's car is in the driveway, and he gets out to greet us. I unlock the door and hold it open for him. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"No big deal. I did some paperwork, made a few calls... Wow, something smells good."

"I bought a slow cooker with some of that settlement money. And roasts were on a good sale this week."

Sierra runs to find Hannah, and I head into the kitchen with Michael following. The pot roast has been cooking all day with carrots and potatoes, and the scent makes my stomach growl. I turn on the oven and toss some frozen dinner rolls onto a cookie sheet.

"Stay for dinner?" I ask Michael.

He raises an eyebrow at the roast. "I don't know... I kind of had my heart set on takeout from the Chinese place on the corner for the third time this week."

"I'll see if I can dig up a fortune cookie somewhere."

He smiles, and once again I'm taken by how young he looks, even though I know full well he's only a year or two younger than I am. His brown hair is so dark it's almost black, and though he keeps it short and neatly trimmed, it still has a tendency to curl. Add that effect to his wide brown eyes and slightly softened features, and he looks like nothing so much as a half-grown poodle, friendly and eager.

The cubs, of course, love him.

"So what brings you around?" I ask, putting the rolls into the oven. "Unless you can smell pot roast all the way from your office."

“Barbequed ribs, yes, but not pot roast.” His expression sobers a little. “Hunter’s case is coming up.”

“And?”

“Good news. They’re being charged with child abuse and neglect after all.”

I sigh, relieved. For a while, it looked like his parents were going to be charged with animal abuse instead, which would have set a dangerous precedent, to say the least.

“Of course,” he adds with a bitter chuckle, “we might have done better with animal cruelty. I think those sentences tend to be tougher.” Then the bitter note drops away. “How’s Hunter doing these days?”

“He’s doing okay,” I reply, thinking of the exchange with Jamie, marking the first time he’s ever willingly surrendered his blanket. “He’s talking a little more now. Getting into trouble. I have to be careful, though – for one thing, I can’t raise my voice with him.” I learned that the hard way, early on.

“Do you think he needs therapy?”

I brush my bangs out of my eyes, suddenly tired. “God, Michael, I don’t know. Probably they all need therapy. I need therapy.” I sigh. “Sorry. It’s been... kind of a weird day.”

“It’s okay. I forget sometimes.”

“Forget what?”

He smiles, a little sheepishly. “You always seem to have everything so... together over here. I forget that you might need a reminder to look after yourself every once in a while.”

“I’m okay,” I tell him, trying not to sound too defensive.

“I know,” he replies, and to his credit, he lets it go.

“Michael!”

It’s Zachary, skidding into the kitchen with a rattling box – his Chinese checker set. Michael steadies him. “Careful there, buddy, or you’ll lose all your marbles.”

Zach rolls his eyes but can’t help smiling, too. “Want to play before dinner?”

“Zach, dinner’s almost ready.” I glance at the timer; the rolls have about five minutes left.

“No problem,” Michael replies. “It won’t take me that long to beat him.”

“You wish!”

As they race off to the playroom, Madison comes in. “Everything go all right today?” I ask.

Madison rummages in the spice rack for a new jar of calcium dust for Ryan. “Hannah fell, but she’s okay.”

“She fell?”

“Relax. If she hadn’t had fur, she would have scraped her knee, that’s all. I put an ice cube on it and kissed it. She was fine five minutes later. How did it go with Sierra?”

“She had a good time.” I wasn’t sure what else I could put into words.

“Do you think it helped?”

The timer goes off, and I take the rolls out. “I guess we’ll find out tonight. Grab that basket for me?”

She hands me the bread basket, and I hunt around for a clean dishtowel to line it with. “Michael’s staying for dinner?” she asks.

“Yep.”

She smiles, eyeing me. “Good.”

“Don’t get any ideas.” In the beginning, Madison had a bit of a crush on Michael, not that she would ever have admitted it under pain of death. Soon enough, though, she picked up on the little signals Michael was sending – the ones I was careful to ignore – and now she’s determined to see the two of us either married or at least living together at the earliest possible opportunity.

I gather the plates and silverware, then look back at Madison. “You will behave yourself, won’t you?”

She smiles, takes the basket of rolls, and sweeps past me into the dining room.



Dinner is mercifully uneventful, unless you count Madison glaring pointedly at me during every lull in the conversation. Fortunately, Michael is used to the eating habits of transgen herps, and he doesn’t bat an eye as Ryan snaps up tonight’s allotment of dusted crickets.

Two helpings later, Michael places his knife and fork on his plate and sighs contentedly. “That’s the best meal I’ve had all week.”

“You should come by more often,” Madison says, getting up to collect everyone’s plates. “Shouldn’t he, Susan?”

I ignore her. “You know you’re always welcome,” I tell him.

He smiles at me over his iced tea. “You’re just looking for cheap babysitting.” He takes a drink, then stops. “I almost forgot. I have something for you out in the car. Hang on.”

Madison beams, obviously expecting something romantic, but I can’t help laughing when I see it: a coffee maker and two bags of coffee.

“I was just going to get the coffee,” he explains, “but then I wasn’t sure you... um, had anything, so...” He finishes with a shrug.

“I’ll handle the dishes,” Madison pipes up. “You guys go see if that works. Oh, wait. Here.” She dumps half a bag of Oreos onto a plate and hands it to me. “Dessert.”

“Thanks, Madison.” I grab two mugs, the fake creamer, and the sugar bowl, and Michael follows me to the office.

The coffee is, of course, incredible: rich and smooth without even a hint of bitterness. With creamer added – even my cheap stuff – the flavor turns even silkier. I’m afraid to even wonder how much the stuff cost, but I tell myself sternly to enjoy the gift without worrying about it. After all, not all of Michael’s work is pro bono.

Michael takes an Oreo and unscrews it, eating the cream first and then dunking the cookies. I smile as I watch him, and I find myself wondering if anyone ever called him Mike or even Mikey when he was a kid, or if he's been Michael his whole life. At the dinner table, surrounded by cubs, I could have asked him. Now, though, even a lighthearted question seems weighted with too much meaning.

"I wanted to thank you for everything," I say. "I mean... with the settlement..."

"Well, it wasn't just me on that. There were three of us working on it, plus a couple of long-suffering interns fueled completely by caffeine and the desire to make a difference. But on behalf of all of them, you're welcome." He pauses. "You deserve more, you know."

"Well, we'll keep working."

"That wasn't entirely what I meant," he says softly.

I stare into my coffee, trying to think of something to say. "This stuff is really good."

"I thought you should have a treat."

Another awkward pause.

"So," he begins, "what I was thinking was, I can't depend on you to know when you need a break. And I can't trust you yet to tell me, even if you do know. So I was thinking I might come by and barge in every so often. Maybe even kidnap you and drag you out of this place once in a while. Dinner, or a movie, or something."

I smile just a bit. "For my own good?"

"Not really," he says, his voice softening again. "Actually, it's kind of selfish. So... what do you say?"

I can't remember the last movie I watched that wasn't animated and/or on DVD. I think of Madison going out for coffee and coming back hours later. If I'm willing to let her have some semblance of a social life, I guess I can allow myself the same thing, even if – to be brutally honest – I'm more than a little scared of where all this might lead.

"I think I can handle that," I reply.

"Good," he says, as if we've struck a business deal. He finishes his coffee. "I'd better get going. I have an early hearing tomorrow."

"Good luck."

He raises an eyebrow. "You sure? You don't even know what side I'm on."

I smile. "I know you well enough. Whatever side you're on is the right one."

He smiles, then nods. "Thanks." He gets up, looks unsure for a moment, then gives a little wave. "I'll... see you later, then. Thanks again for dinner."

I nod. "Good night."

He smiles again and heads out. I pour myself the last cup of coffee and sip it slowly. I know that if I go back out there now, I'll have to suffer

Madison's eager interrogation, so I decide to catch up on email until it's time to get the cubs to bed.

There's a message from Janet and Carl, thanking us for coming, and mentioning how much they enjoyed seeing Sierra. Apparently their two grandchildren live four states away and aren't able to visit very often, so they miss having "little ones" around.

I remember how Sierra hugged Janet. A cub could do infinitely worse for adoptive grandparents; maybe I should invite them over sometime... I write a quick note back, thanking them for showing us around. The rest of the email is either spam or not worth reading, so after I send the message to the sanctuary, I carry the coffee mugs into the kitchen and go to help Madison.

The sound of enthusiastic splashing tells me that she must be giving Hunter his bath, and sure enough, the kit is in the tub, with so many toys surrounding him that I'm not even sure how he's managing to get wet, let alone clean. His blanket hangs nearby on the towel rack, and I wonder if I might have an easier time snagging it for laundry the next day.

Madison hates getting her fur wet, so I take over – bathing Hunter is like sitting in the splash zone at Sea World, and skin towels off far easier than fur. Hunter sits still long enough to have his fur soaped and rinsed; the shampoo's made for puppies, but it works well enough. By the time I get him toweled, blow-dried (thank you, grooming supply catalogs), and brushed, he's already sleepy, cuddling against me as I return his blanket and carry him into his room. He doesn't protest when I diaper him – he's trained during the day but feels better with a little help at night – and he's nearly asleep by the time I'm done.

I pause a moment, holding him, breathing in the scent of shampoo and clean fur, feeling the warm weight of his body in my arms. Did his mother ever hold him? Did she ever feel how soft and fine his fur was? Did she ever see, really see, the delicate texture of his black nose, his perfect tiny hands, the soft rings of his tail?

It wasn't likely. There's a reason the star-shaped nightlight in the corner always has to be on. The first few nights he was here, Hunter woke up screaming, a high, shrill sound that still haunts me and probably always will.

Hunter's parents were terrified to go near him after he manifested. So they bought a cage, the kind of wire crate people use to train dogs. And, whether out of their own fear or fear of others finding out, or some dark impulse I'll never understand, they put the cage in a closet, and they kept the door closed. By the time a social worker found him, Hunter was half-starved, completely withdrawn, and utterly panic-stricken whenever he was in the dark. From the child-development books I've read, I know that even now, he's still lagging about a year behind where he should be. All in all, though, I figure things could be much, much worse.

I hold Hunter a little tighter, and he sighs in his sleep, his eyelids fluttering. Soon enough, his parents will be in court, and from there... Well, I can only hope.

I hope their cells are very, very dark.



That night, I come wide awake at two a.m., and it takes me a few panicky moments to realize what woke me up is: nothing. The house is silent. No wolfsong, no nightmares, no emergencies. Only the quiet, soft as the clouds drifting by the moon.

I get out of bed anyway and make the rounds. Zachary and Ryan sleep soundly with the hum of Ryan's humidifier in the background. In the girls' room, Sierra is the picture of tranquility, her gray fur soft against her pillow. She fell asleep listening to her new CD, and the headphones have slipped off. Wolves howl from somewhere far away until I press stop, and the player buzzes a bit, then goes silent. In the next bed, Hannah has left her earplugs on her nightstand and is snoring softly.

I slip out and head down the hall. Jamie's stuffed elephant is tucked securely in next to him; Hunter still clutches his blanket in sleep. The nightlight burns steady and true. In his crib, Nicholas whimpers a bit, dreaming, then settles again.

I glance in Madison's room – it's hard to do much more, considering what a mess the place is. She has fallen asleep with a fashion magazine open next to her on the bed, and I crane my neck to read the headline in a swath of moonlight. The season's hottest haircuts.

I can't help smiling. Poor Mad. And then, because she isn't awake to protest, I pick my way to the bedside and kiss her forehead, lightly, the way I imagine her mother might have done, back when her child was still human. If I only knew where her parents were, I would tell them she was safe, with people who love her.

I wonder if they would care.

I'm not a religious person; I never have been. But in the gentle silence of early morning, with the cubs sleeping peacefully around me, the prayer comes unbidden, rising from a place within me that didn't exist before they came:

Keep them safe, please help me keep them safe. I'm only one person, only human, but I am all they have. I don't know what they would do without me.

I don't know what I would do without them.

## **Born To Be Mild by James R. Lane**

The full moon was rising, and while Lewis Gramm could not yet see it, he could feel its ancient pull building deep in his bones. Gramm's spirits were rising, too, since this was the one night a month when he allowed himself a special indulgence, an indulgence both thrilling and exquisitely lethal.

It was Lewis Gramm's night to run.

The new millennium was well past fresh, and despite the chaotic roller-coaster economy high-tech businesses and dot-com fortunes were once again springing up everywhere like weeds in a neglected ball field. Gramm was the CEO of a small, very lucrative networking consulting company located high in an elderly bank building, itself perched on the edge of the bay in far more elderly St. Augustine, Florida.

Gramm's money, however, hadn't blossomed overnight like so many of his contemporaries. He had carefully grown and protected his assets over many years, many businesses and in many countries. Most of those assets, though, were kept well hidden, since questions some of the assets would inevitably raise would be difficult to explain.

Lewis Gramm wasn't his original name, it wasn't even his only current name; it was merely the name that went with his present role.

Most of the building's businesspeople, as well as their employees, had already left for home, but since Gramm was the entire staff as well as the owner of his consulting firm, he often put in long hours. But not tonight. In leaving he even managed to slide past a local Realtor notorious for closing her office at six o'clock sharp, as she was heading out the front door of the antiquated building early that Friday evening.

"Lewis!" Mary Connerly called in surprise when he breezed by her matronly form as she approached the automated front doors. "What's the rush? You're always so...so neat and punctual; I can't imagine you being late for an appointment!"

Gramm tossed a wolfish grin over his shoulder but didn't break his loping stride as he said, "I've got to pick up Tiffany at the Jacksonville International Airport around midnight, and I've got a world of things to do before then. Ciao!"

"Ciao, indeed, you hunk of a yuppie twit," the woman muttered sourly, but not before Gramm was already half-way down the sidewalk. The handsome young man always seemed to be in prime physical condition, she absently noted, but this was the first time she'd ever seen him actually moving at anything above a casual, even languid pace. "If I lost some weight, and were about twenty years younger—" Connerly stepped out into the evening's warm, humid Florida air and cursed. "Crap. I still wouldn't stand a chance in Hell of landing him." She brushed a wayward wisp of bleached hair out of her eyes and added, "And after a few weeks of his neatnick perfectionism, not to mention smelling that Brut cologne he wears all the time, I'd probably be ready to kill him."



While Mary Connerly was just beginning to frump her way down the street Gramm had already rounded the corner at the end of the block. Moments later he opened the door of his stylish BMW X5 SUV, which had been patiently awaiting its master's arrival (as it always did) in a reserved slot in the nearest of the city's three municipal parking lots. After tossing his trendy magnesium brief case on the passenger seat and awakening the powerful engine to a feral snarl, Gramm waited a carefully timed minute to allow it to warm up and settle down before putting the truck into gear. He treated his truck as carefully as he did everything else in his precise, orderly life.

It had not always been thus, but then he had not always been the person he was at this point in time, either.

Moments later Gramm was clear of the parking lot, his metallic black SUV cruising with muted yet macho authority down a maze of narrow, tree-lined streets as he headed inland and away from the coastal town's confines. A short while later found him driving west toward the rural farm and scrub timberland that still comprised a substantial portion of the northeast Florida area, the powerful stereo in the truck blaring out a digitally-enhanced CD version of Steppenwolf's ancient yet timeless rock tune "Born To Be Wild". Much of the rush hour traffic had already dispersed, most of it heading either north or south to the dense subdivisions that seemed to sprout out of the coastal flatlands like mushrooms on a morning lawn.

But Gramm wasn't going home just yet, not before he partook of the one real treat he allowed himself each month.

Not before he ran.

Moonlit darkness was beginning to settle over the countryside by the time Gramm was far enough out of town to suit his purposes, and moments later he braked the big SUV, then turned into a dirt driveway that ended at a pipe gate no more than fifty feet off the road. Gramm touched a button on the built-in HomeLink radio transmitter, and a hidden battery-powered motor quickly pivoted the gate out of the way. After pulling the vehicle through the opening and clear of the gate's swinging path, he touched the transmitter button again and the gate closed and locked behind him. The BMW had full-time four-wheel-drive, so Gramm needed do nothing to ready the SUV for its short trip down the rutted, oftentimes muddy road, and less than five minutes later Gramm was deep in the pine and oak woods, far from any prying eyes. He stopped at a small clearing, switched off the engine, and his face suddenly lit up with a wolfish grin like that of a delighted, mischievous child.

It was time. To run.



Bruce Arnold was a bum. Never mind that the politically correct crowd and the bleeding heart social workers considered him to be an "unfortunate homeless man" – Arnold was nothing more or less than a bum. He was

even somewhat proud of that antiquated title. Although he was several years shy of his fiftieth birthday, his physical appearance seemed well matched to the seediness of the label. Bruce Arnold looked like a bum.

Born into a family that really didn't want him, Arnold had grown up soured on life in general, and he never really applied himself in school. Once he was old enough to be legally kicked out of the house his mother – unwed at the moments of conception, his birth and his eighteenth birthday, and anxious to be shed of the constant drain on her sanity and meager financial resources – literally locked him out and told him to fend for himself.

This wasn't, however, as cruel as it first seemed, since the young man had been more-or-less providing for his own needs for years. Stealing, fencing and dealing small-time drugs made him enough money to buy the things he couldn't get from his mother, and he'd kept himself well-supplied in cigarettes and beer since he reached his teens.

Yet, Bruce Arnold wasn't a genuinely bad man; merely a worthless one. Numerous brushes with the law and failed social service agencies had kept him moving on to the proverbial next town down the road every few months, and that endless string of towns and the months they represented in time turned into years, which turned into decades...of being a bum.

And so as the seasons advanced toward fall Bruce Arnold made his annual migration south, pausing for a time to sample the warm, laid-back and bum-friendly climate of St. Augustine, Florida. There, safely outside the annoyingly patrolled city limits, he unrolled his tattered polyfoam mattress in a well-used palmetto thicket near a small concrete bridge that would provide shelter against the occasional thunderstorm. It was the only kind of "home" he'd known for many years, and he could usually snag a ride into town every few days to mooch a hot meal and a bath at the local charity soup kitchen. Then he'd go hold a "homeless – please help" sign on a busy corner or loiter at the day labor office and work a few hours at some menial job, buy a bottle of rotgut whiskey or a jug of cheap wine and a few basic supplies and hitch a ride back to his woodland abode.

Arnold's abused body was beginning to show signs of pending failure. He had a chronic wet cough, some unsightly lumps and splotches on his skin that were most likely cancerous, and more often than not his urine was colored with red strings from an increasingly cranky prostate. He had hemorrhoids, bunions and bad teeth, too.

Down deep in his sometimes-foggy brain Arnold knew his days were numbered, and that his number would soon be up. Still, he wasn't quite yet ready to call it quits. More and more he found himself carefully limiting his booze and smoking fewer cigarettes, and that particular evening he was still stone cold sober, having just returned "home" from a profitable day's mooching. He had two rumpled twenty dollar bills in a back pants pocket, a fresh pack of Camel regulars in the other back pocket, four quarts of malt liquor, a full bottle of ABC-brand bourbon, a six-pack of Diet Cokes, a loaf of whole wheat bread, a couple of cans of Spam, a bag of Doritos and a

tattered old paperback book in a couple of plastic grocery sacks. Bruce Arnold was set for the weekend.

Some distance away Lewis Gramm had finished the preparations for his run, and after a parting glance at his beloved BMW he began loping down a nearby logging trail, one of thousands that crisscrossed the rural northeast Florida pine scrublands. It was going to be a fine night to run, Gramm thought with a toothy grin as he began stretching and warming his muscles.

Just like it had been countless times before.

Bruce Arnold had just finished taking a dump and the first of several nighttime leaks at his impromptu outhouse – an old fallen pine log well downwind from his camp – and was ambling back through the bright moonlit shadows when he suddenly had a strange chill. “Damn!” he muttered, stopping momentarily to rub his weathered arms and the back of his wrinkled neck. “Felt like a rat run ‘cross my grave.” He looked around mostly from reflex, not really expecting to see anything.

Ten feet away he saw two smoldering red eyes peering at him from the shadow of large palmetto frond. The eyes seemed to float about two feet above the ground.

“Shit!” the man yelled and jumped back, and had he not just emptied his bowels he would have filled his tattered, cheese-crusteds boxer shorts with it, too. The eyes blinked slowly, and for some strange reason the blink allowed Arnold to catch a faint glimpse of the face that held the eyes. He immediately regretting doing that, however, because as soon as he did he felt his never-quite-empty bladder spasm painfully and a trickle of warmth skittered down his left leg. The eyes, he suddenly realized, belonged to the biggest black wolf he’d ever seen – in fact, the only black wolf he’d ever seen – and then the monstrous creature slowly advanced toward him from beneath the palmettos.

Arnold didn’t waste time getting his lanky legs into motion, and considering his age and dubious physical condition he actually moved off through the woods at a respectable pace. Years of running from robbery victims, angry cops and others who wished him ill had schooled him well in the art of “beating feet”, and it didn’t take long before the man had broken free of the underbrush to begin frantically pounding down one of the numerous logging trails, the black wolf flowing effortlessly along in his wake.

Even though Arnold was certainly no marathon runner, it still took a good couple of minutes before adrenalin could no longer overcome his fatigue, and wheezing like a dying bagpipe he suddenly began to falter. He’d chanced but one quick look back at the silent nightmare following him, and he was puzzled why the huge animal had not simply pounced on him at the start. It was obviously more than capable of outrunning a tired old bum, the man reasoned despite his terror, yet it seemed to be carefully pacing itself so as not to end matters too soon. Too soon for what? Arnold thought, his mind racing far faster than his failing legs. What in God’s name IS that thing?

Eventually the man could go no farther. His legs simply quit responding and his tobacco-scarred lungs suddenly rebelled, throwing him into a tubercular coughing spasm that deposited him in a lumpy heap at the side of the logging road. And still the black wolf didn't pounce, didn't slash, didn't kill.

In time the gasping bum got over his coughing spell. Why didn't it attack? he wondered as he wiped his rheumy eyes and got his first good look at the huge black beast that had literally run him to ground. That's when Arnold noted that the wolf was apparently hunch-backed, something that made a strange situation even more bizarre. A portion of the man's tired brain knew that huge black wolves weren't native to sub-tropical Florida, and anyway, weren't wolves' eyes supposed to be yellow? But before he could contemplate those imponderables the beast's faintly glowing red eyes began blazing like hot coals being stoked, and some gut feeling, some primal instinct, told Arnold that the beast was finally preparing to strike.

Of course, seeing the gleam of its huge, impossibly white teeth in the moonlight as the black lips skinned back in a soft, guttural snarl may have given the man some clue to its intentions, too.

Slowly, wire-tight tension in its every move, the red-eyed ebon monster approached to within six feet of the doomed man. Arnold didn't even have a loose branch within reach, not that an improvised club would have done any good, he knew, against such an apparition. The man could even hear its harsh panting over his own wheezing, and he cringed uselessly back in the dirt as the hellish beast prepared to spring.

A tinny, polyphonic rendition of the old Duran Duran rock tune, *Hungry Like The Wolf* suddenly filled the air, and if Arnold had possessed a cell phone he would have automatically reached for it.

The melodious ring-tone tune was totally out-of-place in the spooky moonlit setting and high drama of the moment, and the effect it had on the demonic wolf was even more inconceivable. "Shit!" the frightened man distinctly heard the creature say in a low, rasping tone –

– And it stopped its advance, an obvious sigh escaping its midnight-furred form. The creature seemed disgusted and backed up a few steps, and then like something from a digitally animated special-effects movie scene its form quickly softened, blurred and began to flow, growing taller and more massive, finally standing erect on its hind legs before its form sharpened, solidified and became –

– An even more-terrifying black-furred monster, unmistakably male, but a monster that was wearing a small black nylon backpack which he quickly shed, then reached a gnarly, hideously-clawed hand into the pack's depths and retrieved a trendy translucent-blue Nokia cell phone. The monster used a finger-claw to flip it open, then carefully touched a claw-tip to one of the buttons on the key pad. After a moment of squinting a glowing-coal eye at the short text message on its tiny luminescent screen, he carefully folded it

and replaced the device in the backpack, settling it comfortably between his massive shoulders and refastening the straps.

And then the beast directed his attention to the terrified yet totally confused man lying almost at his taloned feet. “Y’know, this sucks,” the creature griped in a distinctly southern drawl. “The one night a month I allow myself a little pleasure, a well-earned tasty treat – and, god damn it all, I go and run myself clean out of time. Fuck!”

The monster stood at least eight feet tall, and looked like a sleek, classic version of a movie werewolf. Deep in his soul Arnold was convinced that this werewolf was no movie fake; despite such creatures supposedly being nothing more than legends, this nightmare was all too real. And then an errant breeze brought Arnold the scent of something totally unexpected. A werewolf smelling like Brut cologne? Arnold thought, momentarily puzzled. Shouldn’t he smell like a...a dog? “W-ho – what are you?” the man hesitantly asked.

“Give me a break, old man,” the monster cynically grumbled, standing with his horrible hands on his almost non-existent hips like a pro football quarterback pondering the next play. “Even someone like you has enough smarts to know what I am.”

“You’re a real werewolf?”

“Do I have to piss on a tree to convince you,” the black apparition snarled in contempt, “or would you like me to go ahead and rip your throat out for shits and giggles?” The creature suddenly grabbed his belly, which had begun rumbling noisily like a human’s does when totally empty. “What a bummer,” he grumbled. Glaring at Arnold he explained, “I don’t have enough time now to kill you, eat the tasty parts and then properly dispose of the rest.” He again snatched the small nylon backpack off his broad shoulders, dug frantically inside for a moment, then brought forth a couple of colorfully-wrapped items. “Damned health food bars taste like cardboard,” he complained as he quickly unwrapped them, “but at least they quiet the munchies.” After wolfing down the two nutrient bars he dutifully returned the wrappers to the backpack.

As he reseated the petite backpack he noticed the man fumbling with something around his neck. “Don’t waste your time with that cross,” he stated offhandedly. “I’ve never personally seen it happen, but they’re only supposed to work on vampires.” The living nightmare leaned down, bringing his horrifying muzzle close to the trembling man’s face. The monster’s breath smelled like granola, overlaid with a hint of Scope mouthwash.” And don’t believe all that crap about how silver is the only thing that hurts us.” He barked a laugh and the man wet himself again. “That and a lot of other things are myths we started and perpetuate to keep your kind off-balance. In fact, I wear silver jewelry all the time (the monster flicked his left ear and a tiny silver ankh swung from its ear-piercing wire); it’s cheap, low-quality gold that gives me an allergic rash. And shooting me with silver bullets won’t do any more damage than pricking my hide with a Martha Stewart designer kitchen knife.” He laughed again. “All bullshit. We

heal faster than you can hurt us, and until we're ready to bid this life goodbye – we don't die."

Arnold quit trying to display his little silver crucifix. Somehow it just didn't seem worth the trouble.

"Unfortunately I've got to cut this little party short," the werewolf stated as if apologizing to a business prospect. The beast stood erect and ineffectively brushed at his fur. "One of my bigger clients needs some 'handholding', and I've still got to get cleaned up before I drive to Jacksonville to pick up my girlfriend at the airport." When Arnold's mouth hung open in surprise the monster added, a surprising bit of humor in his raspy voice, "Yeah, she's a werewolf, too. It's her 'time of month' and we're gonna spend some real quality time together this weekend." Then he laughed that bone-chilling laugh again.

"One thing you need to remember," he suddenly stated in a voice that left no room for doubt. "It won't do you any good to talk about this...this encounter." The black nightmare again bent down to bring his fang-filled muzzle closer. "However," he added in a graveyard voice, "should you open your mouth about it anyway, I'll hunt you down – and I promise you a very slow death." He clacked his teeth together with a suggestive snap. "I've been around a long time, and I know hundreds of ways to make you scream."

With that, the creature once again underwent his movie-magic transformation, returning in seconds to the huge black wolf form – complete with a small nylon backpack. As the werewolf turned and began loping back down the logging road Arnold distinctly heard the monster say, "Ciao!"

In time Arnold muttered, "I never had a pet. I never even wanted a pet – especially a big dog..."



## Author Bios

**Michael W. Bard** is a long-time aspiring writer usually hiding in his lair in Toronto, Canada. He tries to write SF in the vein of the masters such as Anderson and Heinlein, but has been known to dabble in fantasy and horror. Reading voluminously, he writes almost as much. His work has been purchased by various e-zines and small print magazines. For the curious, his older works can be found online at <http://transform.to/~mwbard> and [http://www.shifti.org/User:Michael\\_Bard](http://www.shifti.org/User:Michael_Bard).



**Austen Crowder** is a technical writer in the day, political columnist in the evening, and a science fiction writer in the night. A collection of her stories can be found at <http://furaffinity.net/user/slyford>. She is also a regular contributor to The Bilerico Project – <http://www.bilerico.com>.



**Bernard Doove** is a keen fan of anthropomorphic art and literature, and has created his own unique species (chakats) and story universe. Originally created for background material for his characters, his stories have grown in number and sophistication, and become a shared universe popular with many other authors. Four of his stories have been professionally published as trade paperbacks through CreateSpace.

Aside from writing, Bernard is an artist of modest skill, and publishes South Fur Lands – an anthropomorphic fanzine. He runs a website called The Chakat's Den (<http://www.chakatsden.com>) and is also on the committee for the Ursa Major Awards and one of the organisers of MiDFur – an Australian furry convention. He lives in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, and travels to America regularly for other conventions. Born in 1957, he reckons all this imaginative anthropomorphic material helps keeps his mind young, and hopefully keeps the body going for a long while yet also!



**Seth Drake** hails from a small and insignificant island somewhere in the North Atlantic, where he also currently makes his lair. He has been writing for many years, although he has only recently begun submitting work for publication. When not slaving over a hot parchment, he can usually be found settled down with a good book and a nice hot cup of tea, playing board games and role-playing games, or making delicious fruit cakes.



Born 1984, **William Eakins** has been writing since the age of twelve and has hoped to become a real author someday since he found he liked it. He continues to try and write each day, and can be found at <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/Jelethorim>.



**Lanny Fields** is a great admirer of mythological and epic story tradition as well as the closely related subjects of history and spirituality. “The Journey” reflects an opportunity to tell a story which brings together certain aspects from each, as well as featuring interactions between humans and anthropomorphic animals.

The author currently resides in the vast, scorching, valley of the sun known as Phoenix, Arizona. This, despite having taken a blood oath over twenty years ago that he would never, ever, live in the desert because it was too hot. He works as a mild-mannered systems engineer by day and at night, he transforms into a writer (with big, pointy teeth) whose insanity and imagination know no bounds.



**Phil Geusz** is a Tennessee auto worker who also writes furry fiction. Perhaps best-known for his work in the “Blind Pig” storyverse, Phil has also authored several well-respected furry novels and long-running columns for various online publications. Nominated three times for the Ursa Major award, Phil has also published numerous short stories in non-furry collections and magazines. He was the Writing Guest of Honor at Rain Furrest 2007, and is currently looking forward to retirement from the auto industry so that he can devote more time to his true profession.



**Jason Gillespie’s** writings have appeared online under the pen name Charles Matthias since 1996. His major corpus is in the Metamor Keep Story Universe, <http://www.metamorkeep.com>, but he has written numerous short stories in fantasy, horror, and science fiction. He won the Ursa Major Award for Best Furry Novel in 2004 with his story “Never Again a Man”. He currently lives near Pittsburgh with his wife and works in Nuclear Engineering.

**Chris Goodwin** is the author of several short stories and poems, beginning with those featured in the early days of the USENET newsgroup *alt.cyberpunk.chatsubo*, under the name eibwen. This includes the serial work, “Mr. Tap’s Problem,” which was collected into a novel. He has also published the novellas “Scarab” and “The Ugly Man,” as well as the book “Fields Corner,” about his neighborhood in Dorchester, MA. He has written for the MIT student newspaper *The Thistle*, and in 1995, he won first prize for fiction in the Third Annual Henry Leeb Memorial Literary Competition for the short story, “Love.”

As an illustrator, he has been featured in works for both the Ironclaw and Jadeclaw line of role-playing games, as well as the novels “Black Iron” by Ted MacKinnon and “Black Dogs” by Ursula Vernon. He has also been published in several fanzines and periodicals. As a musician, he produces work as muleboy and has collaborated with many kind and generous folks.

He is currently teaching Illustration the Massachusetts College of Art. He lives with his cat, Mae Bell S. McGee, and his bicycle, Roxie.

Chris’ work can be found on the following web sites:

Fiction: <http://vicar.pbwiki.com>

Art: <http://goodwinillustration.com>

Music: <http://endlessbray.blogspot.com>



**Searska Grey Raven** is a student of philosophy and loves a good science-fiction or fantasy novel. She resides in the Midwest with a bearded dragon, a loud-mouth chipmunk, and her hoard of books. She can usually be found haunting the local college campus in the company of her keeper, who makes sure she eats when she’s holed up in her lair with her computer and a shiny new idea. “And the Sea Full of Stars” was one such idea, hatched after a conversation regarding politics, unwanted experiments, and the philosophy of sushi.



**Renee Carter Hall’s** fiction has appeared in a variety of publications both inside and outside the furry fandom, including Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Fantasy Magazine, The Summerset Review, New Fables, and A Fly in Amber. She lives in West Virginia with her husband. Readers can find more of her anthropomorphic work, including fiction, poetry, and a weekly prompt for writers, at <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/poetigress>.

Born, raised, and still living in a small town near Frankfurt, Germany, **Stefan Kaiser** studies math and English at the University of Mainz. In his spare time, he tries his hand at various forms of writing, though mostly fantasy and science-fiction short stories. Probing the depths of the human mind and soul, his stories lean towards darker themes and morally ambiguous endings. “By My Own Hands” is his first story published in print, but the progress of his ambitious writing projects can be followed at the infrequently updated journal at <http://catoninetales.livejournal.com>.



**James R. Lane** is a retired photojournalist/news writer/novelist with decades of experience reporting on the day-to-day wonders, strife, triumphs and tragedies that we Americans call life. Along the way he received an education in what being human really means, which helps in creating anthro characters that aren’t.

Years of exposure to firearms, edged weapons and harsh language taught him that while war may be hell, some things are even worse. Sometimes he squints down the sights of a firearm, and occasionally he scowls at the screen of a computer. He calls northeast Florida home. He seldom sits still.

His novels, Redeeming Factors and Lifetimes are both available from The Raccoon’s Bookshelf, <http://www.raccoons-bookshelf.com>.



**Alan Loewen** lives with his wife and three sons in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania with a Sheltie named Socrates, a homicidal parrot, and too many cats. He has been published in many small press markets, and in 2009 shared a WSFA Honorable Mention award with Ken Pick for “Mask of the Ferret” in the Twilight Times anthology, Infinite Space, Infinite God. The story is actually the first chapter of a large work in progress entitled, “The Adventures of Jill Noir.”

You can visit Alan’s work online at <http://literary-equine.livejournal.com>.



**Paul Lucas** was born many moons ago just a few snow drifts away from Buffalo on the shores of Lake Erie. He is the author of the novel *Creatura* and is the creative force behind the Orbital Vector website and blog (<http://www.orbitalvector.com>). His shorter works have seen the light of day in publications such as Strange Horizons, Afterburn, Tales of the Talisman and others. He currently resides in Pennsylvania and works as a freelance writer and artist.

**Eric Luhman** is an out-of-the-closet bibliophile, with special interests in fantasy and mythological traditions. He has always had an interest in how dragons and dragon-like creatures play parts in both mythology and modern fantasy, and it's one of his hobbies to try to write a view of dragon-like creatures that hasn't been used anywhere else before.

In his day job, he is currently a seminarian, working alongside the others there under a secret code name. He's training to be a pastor for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and until he graduates, he will be living in St. Louis, Missouri.



**Brian L. Miller** is a long-time science fiction and fantasy author, as well as the Editor in Chief of SilverFox Publications, a magazine company specializing in anthropomorphic anthologies. He is happily married to a lovely co-writer Annette and has two fox cubs of his own.



Born on Halloween Night under an auspicious moon, **Sara “Caribou” Palmer** spends her time herding cats, digging fresh graves, and trying out new recipes. She resides in a small New England town, prime for the setting of some underworld horror, equipped with the pre-requisite town tragedy of yore and a documented haunted graveyard. She scares most children, including her single daughter, and shares her home with many Egyptian Mau cats and one terrified dog. She has been making art for a frightening number of years, and is a well known name in some scurvy circles.



**Ken Pick** is a computer programmer from Southern California who's been keeping a low profile in the furry community since the 1980s. Cursed with a hyperactive imagination, he writes (among many-many other things) in an attempt “to stay sane.”

“Down to Cathuria” is set in the same WebFed universe as his previous stories (in the fanzine Yarf!) and forms part of an episodic novel-in-progress. The novel's introductory episode (the novelette “Mask of the Ferret”) appeared in the anthology Infinite Space, Infinite God from Twilight Times Books, winning Honorable Mention in the WSFA Small Press Short Fiction Award competition at Capclave 2008. A subsequent episode (the novella “Dyads”, following immediately after “Down to Cathuria”) will be forthcoming in 2010 in the sequel anthology Infinite Space, Infinite God II.

Having returned to his native quaking lands of southern California, **J. Scott Rogers** hasn't written anything more entertaining than scientific manuscripts, research grant applications, and emails vehemently denying he's the president of France.

As one of the co-creators of the classic "Biorg Universe" anthropomorphic fiction genre, he still gets requests to resurrect his old stories even though he's mostly retired from that pursuit. The idea for "Magnum Opus" originated back in graduate school after a discussion with a colleague over how their scientific discipline frequently ventured into the theological realm. Musing over the misconception that science and matters of faith were mutually exclusive, the idea that a scientist's greatest life pursuit could be considered a kind of "Heaven", or eternal reward unto itself was really appealing. "Magnum Opus" remains his favorite short story work, if only for the concept behind it being very personal; a bridge between my scientific and spiritual halves. The story was originally published July 2000 in Anthrolations #2 by Sofawolf Press.

Dr. Rogers works as a Project Scientist and Lab Director for a medium sized academic biomedical research laboratory at the University of California. He still makes appearances at west coast conventions under his long-time nom de plume, "Dr. Skorzy"... that's "Skorzy", not "Sarkozy"....



**Will A. Sanborn** lives in New England where he's gainfully employed as a computer-chip designer, wrangling logic bits to do his bidding. In his spare time, when he's not watching bad movies or riding extreme roller coasters with his crazy friends, he dabbles in writing. Besides editing this anthology, Will's current creative project is a fiction podcast with stories of anthropomorphic animals, showcasing the literary side of the furry fandom, which can be found at <http://www.anthrodreams.com>.

Will was one of the Guests of Honor at 2007's Midwest Fur Fest convention, held in November in the Chicago area. He will be returning there as a guest again this year, for their 10-year anniversary extravaganza.

"Fox's Tutelage" and "The Burning of the Library" first appeared in issues of Sofawolf Press' historical fiction magazine *Historimorphs*. "Faded Celluloid Dreams" was inspired by both by The Kinks' song "Celluloid Heroes," and more-importantly by the movie Ed Wood.

**Kris Schnee** is a jack of several trades. He studied history, law, and most recently engineering. He built a battle robot at MIT, hurt himself cleaning a zoo's bear exhibit, worked in a Las Vegas casino, and entered the Loebner Prize Contest (Turing Test) with a homemade AI. Recently he has taken up sailing near his new home in Florida, and hopes to become more involved in politics.

"Dance of the Fox" and "What a Dog Needs" both follow one of his favorite themes: freedom, and how it's gained or lost. They also come from his interest in seasteading (ocean colonies) and Japanese history and folklore.

**Sean Silva** is an industrial electrician working at a hydro pumping plant in California's Central Valley. When he's not spending his free time reading or trying to become an aspiring writer, he is kept blissfully entertained by his fiancé and their twelve cats and five dogs. An assortment of his stories can be found under the watchful eye of a grumpy looking pig at <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/duroc>.



**Tim Susman's** stories have appeared in small press publications, in Amazon's Digital Shorts program, and in iBooks' collection, Furry! His shared universe "New Tibet," a bleak industrial colony on an arctic world, has been the subject of two anthologies and his first novel, Common and Precious, all from Sofawolf Press. He edits the literary journal New Fables (<http://www.newfables.com>), and also keeps a writing blog at <http://timsusman.blogspot.com>. He lives with his partner in northern California.



**Wookie** (a nick-name given by his close friends) was born and raised in Scarborough Ontario Canada in 1964. Some of his hobbies include building Sci-Fi model kits and collecting movie memorabilia. Although Wookie has only ever written short stories back in the high school well over 20 years ago, the idea for "The Bonding Stone" came from his more recent interests in religion, Science Fiction and his fascination for anthropomorphic animals in animation, movies and literature.

Trevor was a brilliant human astronomer and pilot of the Star-View, a space touring shuttle of the space cruiser, Ramora. Trevor thought he understood the workings of the galaxy until an alien passenger arrived and opened his eyes to wonders he had never experienced.



