

Single Shots



Cat Scratch Fever

A Torquere Press Single Shot by Jane Davitt

Garin could feel it building from the moment he woke up.

Simon had asked him once what it felt like. Garin's usual eloquence had dried at the source, and he'd stuttered out a disjointed, lame handful of words, finishing up with, "Like your blood is fizzing. Like something's coming, and you can't stop it, and you don't want to stop it, but you don't want it to happen either, because when you do..."

"Yes?" Simon prompted, his eyebrows knitted in a frown as he tried to make sense of what Garin couldn't make clear.

"All hell breaks loose."

"Sounds like sex," Simon commented lightly, his hand moving in a soothing pattern over Garin's back. "Speaking of which --"

"I can't. It's not safe when I'm like this. You could get hurt."

Simon's gaze dropped to the white slash of a scar across his forearm. "Yeah. Been there, done that."

"I'm sorry," Garin whispered wretchedly.

"Hey!" Simon pulled him close. "Not your fault. Never your fault. And you're worth it, okay? So no sex, but we can still --" His hand came up to cup Garin's face, bringing their lips together in a kiss.

He'd had to shake his head and leave the bed, because Simon couldn't be that close and Garin not want him.

No matter what the consequences.

He wasn't used to being considerate; it didn't come at all naturally, but for Simon he'd try.

And now it was Monday morning, his electric toothbrush had spat out a warning shower of sparks just before he put it in his mouth, and he wasn't going near the coffee maker, no way.

Garin stared out at a rainy, windy, autumn day and reached for an umbrella. He wasn't going to risk driving, either.

By the time he arrived at the coffee shop, *A Spoonful of Sugar* was already lit up, a warm spill of light inviting the caffeine and sugar-deprived to come inside and kick-start their day. Groaning, because this was the third time this month that Sarah had had to open up, and she was going to make his life hell, Garin pushed open the door, and nodded to their first customer of the day, who returned the nod. Mitchell spoke to no one until he'd finished his first cup of strong, black sludge; the nod was more than Garin usually got.

"You're late." Sarah's full, smiling mouth went thin and tight. "And you're dripping all over the place!"

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry. I -- the car wouldn't start and I had to walk in."

"You walked? From Eglinton?" Sarah gazed at him with as much shock as if he'd told her that he'd done it naked. For a woman who spent hours with her feet slamming down against the unforgiving surface of a treadmill, she viewed the kind of walking that took someone from point A to point B with deep incredulity.

"It's not that far."

She shook her head. "Whatever. You're here now -- and you *will* be closing for me tonight, right?" She didn't wait for his rueful nod. "Because I've got a date."

"Really?" Garin feigned interest as he slipped behind the counter, taking off his soaked duster. Sarah's dates, whether successful or washouts, meant that he had to listen to her talk a lot more than he wanted to. Her voice, strident and sharp, hurt his head. He was slowly getting used to the loss of liquidly, lilting voices -- Simon's husky drawl was still deliciously exotic to his ears -- but he didn't think he'd ever get accustomed to Sarah's terse snarls.

"Really."

He escaped to the kitchen before she could say more than that, hanging up his coat and sniffing appreciatively at the warm, cinnamon-scented air. The dough he'd made the night before was ready to be transformed -- ready to be *cooked* -- and within fifteen minutes, they'd be selling like hot cakes.

He'd had to have that explained to him, and he still didn't think it was really funny.

The morning went by better than he'd expected considering the way it'd started. Whether it was the fact that cooking was, in a way, a release of energy, or just because being here in the familiar, enclosed surroundings calmed him, he didn't know.

He was just grateful for the respite from the aching pressure, pushing and pulling at him until he wasn't sure if he was being squeezed out of the world or about to explode and fill it with the power building within him.

As the morning rush gave way to a brief lull, before the lunchtime traffic had the bell above the door jangling every other minute, he baked, decorated pastries with swirls of frosting, set the dishwasher running again and again, and made sure that Sarah had fresh delights to sell, tempting and toothsome.

By two, he was starting to feel tired and the edginess was creeping back.

"Forgot to tell you." Sarah popped her head around the door, a smudge of chocolate frosting at the corner of her mouth telling Garin that she'd been sampling again. He tapped the corresponding spot on his own face and grinned as she stuck her tongue out at him before using it to lick her mouth clean.

"What?"

"Health inspection."

"What?" Garin repeated, frowning at her. "I'm perfectly fine."

"Not you, doofus. This place." She waved her hand around, noticed a smudge of frosting on her finger and shoved it onto her mouth. "Mm. Did you put something in this?"

"Orange flavoring."

"Love it. No; he's coming to look at the premises for violations; make sure we're clean."

"How dare he!" Garin gave the kitchen a sweeping look, feeling fiercely protective of his domain. "It's spotless."

"Looks fine to me," she agreed. "But you know what these guys are like. He wants to find something, he will. This one's a total bastard; shut down Connie over on West Street for a week because he said he'd seen a mouse."

"Had he?"

"Probably. Place was a dump. Not the point; we get shut down for a *day*, and we're toast. God knows when he'll turn up, not like he gives you a time; he likes to catch you with your pants down."

"I'll make sure whenever he comes that mine are just where they should be," Garin assured her grimly, hitching up his jeans. "I've finished baking now. I'll clean until there isn't a crumb out of place."

"Knew I could count on you."

Garin gave her a decisive nod and reached for the jumbo bottle of spray cleaner. He hadn't realized how attached he'd become to the place. The thought of having to leave and find somewhere else to work was very unsettling. Polishing and scrubbing with vigor, he began to work his way around the kitchen, noticing areas of splattered, dried-on batter on the tiles with a small moan of anguish.

He was absorbed in his work, but not so much that the imperious chirp and the insistent bump against his jean-clad knee failed to register. He glanced down into insolent amber eyes, his own widening.

"Cat? A cat?"

The cat's nose twitched disdainfully.

Garin stared at the door to the alleyway and realized that he'd left it ajar after taking out some trash.

"Nothing here for you. No fish, meat, or... well, I do have milk but I think it's a commonly agreed that milk isn't good for you, despite it being the traditional -- ow!"

The cat, a lithe, muscular tom with deep orange fur, was climbing his leg as if it was a tree, claws piercing denim with ease and drawing blood at regular intervals.

It *hurt*, and Garin was still not used to pain, minor, purely physical pain, at least. Howling, he reached down to dislodge the cat, who hissed and lifted one front paw to swipe spitefully at his hand, compensating for its loss as an anchor point by driving the remaining claws in even deeper.

"Wrack and frack!" Garin evaded the paw and grabbed the cat by the scruff. "Get *off* me!"

The jangle of the bell and a deep voice announcing himself as Mr. Simmonds, the Health Inspector, lent urgency to Garin's attempts. If a mouse was bad, wouldn't a cat be worse?

The cat gave an ominous yowl, unearthly and wild, and Garin froze.

"What was that?" Mr. Simmonds asked Sarah.

"Uh, kids? Playing? In the street?"

Sarah sounded pretty ominous herself. Not to mention desperate. It must have been obvious that the noise had come from the kitchen behind her, and the sound a cat made was unmistakable. Garin closed his eyes, feeling panic swell. They'd come in here, they'd see the cat, and all would be chaos...

The cat's teeth, pointed and sharp, met around his finger, and Garin felt his skin split. As his blood welled up and out, he just had time to think that the claws couldn't have done as much damage as he'd thought, or this would've happened sooner.

Thwarted, repressed, damned, and thrice-damned magic rose on the tide of spilled blood and Garin felt his body tingle alive and awake again. Months since the last time, *months*, and he'd thought himself safe, with Simon's love giving him the strength he needed to bury his nature deep and safe.

The pain in his hand lessened and he opened his eyes and blinked.

The cat had gone.

In its place was a man. Naked, kneeling, *spitting on the floor*...

"Stop that!" Garin hissed, looking around frantically for his bottle of cleaner and a paper towel. "Do you have any idea of how many germs there are in saliva?"

The transformed cat tilted his head to one side, looking puzzled. His eyes were still amber but the orange fur had become tanned skin over a muscular body, topped with a sleek fall of auburn, shoulder-length hair. A swift glance, all Garin could spare,

showed him several scars on the lean body: raking slashes, presumably relics of past fights.

"You can't speak?" Garin demanded, keeping his voice low as he bent down to mop up the mess. "Why can't you speak?"

The man opened his mouth and cautiously moved it as if testing its range.
"Mmmroooowl?"

"Not good enough!"

"Through here?" Mr. Simmonds sounded impatient.

"Yes." Sarah raised her voice. "The kitchen, with *just my chef in there*, is right through here. Unless you'd like to sit down and try one of his Lemon Sizzle bars first and a complimentary latte?"

"I trust that wasn't intended to be a bribe?"

"God forbid. Unless you take them?" Sarah cleared her throat. "Ha. My wacky sense of humor! Ignore me. This way."

Garin closed his eyes, but when he opened them again, he still had a naked man clinging to his leg and -- oh, by the small gods -- nuzzling into his groin.

With a groan of defeat, he held out his hand, palm forward, and channeled the power still loose within him, holding the humans in place, just outside the open doorway, their eyes unfocused, and their mouths slack. He couldn't keep them like that for long, but hopefully he wouldn't have to.

He knelt down and took the man's face in his hands, holding the amber gaze. "You have to change back. You have to become what you once were." The man turned his head and licked a warm, wet stripe across the inside of Garin's wrist, biting at the damp skin gently. Garin shivered, his pulse leaping along with his cock. "Very well, yes, that was... nice, but not helpful."

Willing himself to concentrate, he tried to enforce the change and felt his power smack up against an unyielding barrier. Damn. Not going to work and that had used up a good part of what he had. Long denied, his magic was difficult to control; like a wave, it had spent itself in that first rush and now its strength was all but exhausted.

Gathering every scrap of power he could, Garin put his mouth against the well-shaped, lush pout of the man's lips and kissed him, sending all he knew of speech and the human world into the confused, waiting mind, feeling it accept his gift. The connection between them was broken, and he pulled back, wiping his hand across his mouth.

"Garin."

The voice was as melodic as his own. Garin nodded. "Yes. And you are?"

"I don't know." Thick brown eyebrows drew together before smoothing out. "How about Tom?"

"Amusing," Garin said, getting up. "Look, you must have a lot of questions --"

"Yeah." Tom stood gracefully. "They can wait." His hand hooked around Garin's neck and pulled him closer. "Strip. Bend over something. Want to fuck you."

"Don't make me hurt you."

"Don't let me stop you trying."

Garin disentangled himself from Tom's grip and stepped back. "Do you know who I am?"

"Garin. I told you." Tom's tongue tasted his lip. "You're not human."

He didn't sound perturbed by that, but as Tom wasn't human either, not really, Garin supposed that made sense.

"Elf. We can talk about it later. You have to get the hell out of here. And get dressed. The other way around would be best."

"No. Fuck." Tom tilted his head and looked plaintive. "*Need* to."

Garin looked down and rolled his eyes. "It'll pass." He brushed past Tom and got a T-shirt and a pair of old jeans from a storage cupboard; his own, kept there after the time he'd spilled a jug of maple syrup down his front and had nothing to change into for five long, sticky hours. No short, socks, or shoes, but it was a start.

"Here."

Tom sniffed.

"You're not in any position to be fussy, and we're running out of time!" Garin glared at Tom until he took the clothes and began to pull them on reluctantly. "Right. Dressed. That's something... Okay, I suppose you're going to have to come home with me. Oh, fuck, Simon isn't going to like this..."

"Simon?" Tom's eyes glittered with a speculative interest Garin found profoundly disturbing as Tom had a hand around his cock at the time, easing it aside as he zipped up his borrowed jeans.

"My partner." Garin's tone was as stiff as Tom's -- no. He had to stop thinking about that.

He closed his eyes, feeling the tenuous hold over the two humans beside him start to fade. "I can't leave here for hours yet, and I don't trust you."

"Wise." Tom gave him an enchanting smile and dipped his finger into an overlooked splodge of frosting. "Mmm. I think." He pulled his finger out of his mouth with an audible pop. "Is it supposed to taste like that?"

"Like what? No; never mind." Garin moaned. "I don't know what to do!"

"You're an elf. Notoriously bad at forward-thinking."

"We are not!" Garin pulled out his cell and hit the second button to call Simon at work. "Simon? Love?"

"What do you want?" Simon sounded suspicious. "You only call me that when you've done something spectacularly stupid."

"I do? I don't!" It was possible that he did. It wasn't that he didn't have a score of love-names for Simon, but the man either pretended to gag or looked embarrassed and hissed, "Shut *up*" when he used them, so Garin had been forced to fall back on some very dull, uninspired, Simon-sanctioned ones. "I might have done something... it wasn't my fault."

"What do you need me to do?" Simon sounded resigned.

"I can't leave work because I was late arriving, and there's someone here that we're going to have to look after for a short, a very short, while. Could he stay at the store with you until I close here?"

"Look after? How old? God, you're not saying we have to babysit, are you? Because I don't do diapers. I don't do children, period."

"Oh, he's adult," Garin said. "Just... new."

"What? Where is he from? *Who* is --?"

"I don't have time!" Garin gave Sarah and the inspector a frantic, assessing look. Had Sarah just blinked? "It's one of *those* things. You know?"

"Oh, fuck, not again."

"Mmm-hmm." If it was possible to feel guiltier he would, but he couldn't.

"Let me destroy the hopes of everyone wanting to buy books in this town by flipping the sign to 'closed' and I'll be there in five."

"I love you."

"I'll want proof of that, later."

Garin swallowed. Oh, that he could do now his stored, denied power had been taken to safe levels again. "Thank you."

He tucked his phone away and nodded toward the cafe. "Go in there. Sit at a table. I'll get you a coffee and you can pretend to be a customer until Simon comes."

"What does he look like? Is he human?"

"Tall. Blond. Mine. Yes."

Garin added a lot of cream to a plain coffee, got Tom settled in the otherwise empty cafe, and stepped back into the kitchen. This was going to be tricky...

"So, what happened?"

Garin sighed and wriggled deeper into Simon's embrace, resting his head against a wide shoulder. The couch was big enough for both of them to lie on, big enough to fuck on, too. Right now, he just wanted to do this. Simon's heartbeat was slow and strong, reverberating through Garin's body, and his hands were gentle as they moved over Garin's back and thigh, stroking him into a much-needed state of relaxation.

"I blurred their memory just enough that they thought they saw nothing untoward. It left the man shaken enough that his inspection was perfunctory rather than searching. He passed us."

"Ah." Simon's hand stilled against Garin's shoulder. "I... don't like it when you do that."

"I would never -- *have* never -- not to you," Garin murmured, knowing what the root cause of Simon's concern was. "And I had to. I had no choice."

"If you'd been human, you would have had to just deal with it."

"If I'd been human, I'd have been explaining away a stray cat, not a naked, transformed cat," Garin pointed out sleepily. The fireplace had been lit earlier and the apple wood logs were burning well, dappling the dim room with a reddish glow, the snapping of the sap as soothing as the rush of waves upon a shore.

"I still don't see how that happened." Simon moved restlessly and Garin sat up, reluctant to leave his comfortable sprawl.

"It could have been anything. Anyone. I could have killed the cat, set fire to the cafe - - turned the cakes to gold or shit. I can't predict what happens when it spills over like that, you know I can't." Garin reached out and traced the scar on Simon's arm. "You know," he repeated quietly.

"I know it's happening more and more often and it's stronger."

"Yes. Well, there's nothing I can do about that." Garin's head began to ache. "Simon, we've gone over this so many times --"

"Run it by me."

They turned to see Tom in the doorway, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He yawned, lifted his arms high above his head and arched his back in an extravagant, sensual, utterly unselfconscious stretch.

Which made for an interesting view as he was only wearing the T-shirt Garin had lent him.

Garin dragged his eyes away from the tight curve of Tom's cock, full and bobbing gently as Tom lowered his arms and grinned at them.

"You didn't give him anything to wear?" he asked Simon, trying not to sound accusing.

"He said he wanted to nap; you don't need clothes for that. And I didn't know he wasn't wearing underwear."

"He was barefoot! That wasn't a clue?"

"Do you two always argue this much?" Tom frowned at them. "It's not peaceful." He looked toward the fire and his eyes brightened. "Nice..."

"If he curls up in front of that --"

Simon got a scornful look from amber eyes. "I'm going to *sit* beside it," Tom informed him. "Human now."

"Not exactly," Garin said.

Tom sat down on the sheepskin rug in front of the fire and wriggled his ass appreciatively against the softness. "I feel human." He glanced down and patted his cock. "Look human. Look good." He smiled at Simon. "*You* think so, don't you? I can tell."

Garin gave Simon a narrow-eyed look. "Simon -- he's not human."

"And you need to tell me this, because?" Simon's mouth was tight. "You think the idea of fucking a complete stranger, when I'm in a relationship with you, is so appealing that I have to be warned that it's verging on --"

"No!" Garin took a deep breath. "That isn't what I meant. He's just -- he's not --"

"What's an elf doing with a human?"

Grateful for the interruption, even if it was a personal question he wasn't entirely comfortable with answering, Garin turned to look at Tom. "I'm half-human."

"Still doesn't explain it."

Simon sighed and stood up. "I'm getting a drink. Garin?"

"Wine, please," Garin replied, distracted by watching the languorous scrape of Tom's nails across his flat belly.

Simon snorted and picked up a cashmere throw from the back of an armchair. Shaking it out, he walked over to Tom and dropped it so that it draped heavily over his lap and legs, the forest-green material making his hair a shade brighter. "That better? Less distracting?" he asked Garin pointedly.

"It's soft." Tom's fingers ran across it appreciatively. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Simon's manners were good enough that when he returned he'd brought three glasses, not two, although Tom just sniffed dubiously at the oak-spiced Chilean red before giving it a cautious sip and setting it aside.

"You need to tell him," Simon prompted Garin when the silence in the room showed no signs of ending. "He has a right to know why this has happened."

Garin took a deep swallow of wine. "Yes, well, forgive me for not wanting to make a long story of it."

"No, don't," Tom murmured. He snuggled down under the blanket and leaned back on an ottoman. "I get distracted easily."

"My mother was --" Garin began.

"A princess?"

"A cook," Garin said. "A human servant of the Sidhe. She was seduced by --"

"A prince?"

"An elf, yes, a prince, no. He was --" Garin shrugged. "Just a member of the court. He held the title of Hunt Master for a while, but that was about the limit of his rise within the ranks."

"Oh."

"What?" Garin couldn't keep the surprise from his voice. "I'm sorry; am I failing to fulfill your expectations? I'm the bastard son of a servant with a small amount of power, no more."

"Enough power to do this." Tom gestured at himself and tilted his head questioningly.

"Enough stored power," Garin corrected. "I don't use the power, and out here there's nowhere for it to go and I attract it and it builds and *builds* --"

"Hey!" Simon wrapped his arm around Garin's shoulder, hugging him close. "Don't. Just -- I'll tell him, okay?" Simon turned to look at Tom who was watching them from the floor, his eyes alight with curiosity. "This is how he explained it to me, so it's the ABC version. There's power. Everywhere. Some people -- some animals -- can use it, and those that can also attract it. Cats are traditionally associated with magic, so maybe that's part of the reason why you... changed. When he was at court, the power was shared between so many of them, on a strongest gets most scale, that he --"

"Got very little," Garin said wryly.

"Yeah. But out here, there's not much competition, so he picks up anything that's going like lint on velvet."

"Or cat hair on cashmere," Garin said, leaning forward and plucking a hair off the throw across Tom's legs. He twirled it between his fingers, watching it flare red in the firelight. "At court we use magic constantly; to clothe ourselves, make us more beautiful, create wonders... Out here, I don't -- I *won't* -- do that. I use a very little, that's all."

"To do what?" Tom asked bluntly. "I don't suppose I come under the heading of little, now, do I?"

"To do *this*," Garin answered. He felt a flare of power as he ripped through an illusion he was so used to sustaining that he no longer thought about it, allowing them to see him as he really was.

Simon closed his eyes. "Don't." His voice was husky with longing and pain. "Please..."

Tom just stared.

Garin stood and walked to a mirror hung in a dark corner of the room, just where it reflected the firelight. He saw the silvered glass shimmer as it filled with his image, his hair the pure yellow of buttercups, his eyes the same shade as massed bluebells.

Leaning in, he peered at himself and then shrugged. "I prefer this..." His eyes darkened to gray, his hair to brown. "I tried dyeing it and using contacts but..."

"It didn't work." Simon still sounded a little shaky. "The dye wouldn't take and he was virtually blind with the contacts in."

"But I did try," Garin said softly, going over to him. "And this... shielding is the only magic I use, I swear."

"You know, hate to break it to you, but if that's why I'm lacking in the whisker and tail department, maybe you need to rethink that plan."

Simon's mouth set stubbornly. "Garin doesn't want to use his powers, and I agree with him."

"Why?" Tom blinked at them both. "I got a lot of information when you kissed me, but that still isn't making any -- what?"

There was an ominous chill in the air as Simon glared at Garin. "You *kissed* him?"

"Part of the spell. I didn't -- it wasn't like *that*. There was a need for a physical connection and that's a traditional method."

"Oh, I just bet it is."

"No tongue," Tom said helpfully. "Didn't do a thing for me. Just gave me what I needed to talk and get by as a human." He frowned. "You know, I'm sure I wasn't attracted to tomcats before or I'd have had more scars..."

"So?" Simon snapped out. "What are you saying?"

"I have this feeling that I really need to fuck someone, and you two look appealing. It's different, but I'm adaptable. You'll have to talk me through it, but I catch on fast."

Garin gave Simon a cautious look, expecting an explosion of anger, but he looked reluctantly amused.

"You do, I'll give you that, but you're still not fucking either of us." Simon gave Garin a level stare. "Is he?"

"Of course not." Garin sighed. "God, this is insane. Tom -- I'll do what I can to change you back and if I can't -- there are people I know, favors I can call in..."

"Don't bother," Tom told him. "I'm getting used to this now."

"You can't stay like this!"

"Why?"

Garin shook his head violently. "It's not right. Unstable."

"He could change back?" Simon sounded entirely too hopeful.

"He could," Garin said reluctantly. "I don't like to think about what the ripple effect would be, though. It'd be an uncontrolled transformation --"

"Like you were so in charge last time!" Tom said with a chortle.

Garin kicked Tom in the leg. "I was still there, you little fuzzball." Simon gave a choke of smothered laughter. "I was monitoring it, even if it was at an unconscious level. If you flip back, and I'm not around... anything could happen. And you might keep the knowledge I gave you."

Simon's amusement cut off. "He'd still think he was human? He'd be trapped inside an animal's body with all his thoughts those of a human?"

"That doesn't sound fun," Tom said flatly.

"Yes, and no, it doesn't. It's still one of the better outcomes."

"So tell me one of the less appealing ones."

Oh, Simon didn't sound pleased... Garin swallowed. "Kerblooey? Bang?"

"Fuck."

Now Simon sounded pissed.

Bedtime was awkward. Tom appeared in the bedroom doorway, naked again, holding up a toothbrush and looking innocently inquiring.

"It seems to me that people who know about this world would know how to use a toothbrush," Simon said coldly, flicking over a page of his book, and pulling the sheets up higher over his chest.

"He does," Garin told him.

"I do," Tom confirmed. "I just wanted to know where I was supposed to be sleeping."

"I showed you." Simon's voice sharpened. "The room at the end of the hall."

Tom's gaze flickered to Garin, who sighed and leaned over to put his hand on Simon's rigid arm. "I told you, love; he has to be close."

Simon tossed his book onto the nightstand. "Then *I'll* go in there—"

"No!" Garin's grip tightened. "Simon, please."

"I'm not sharing a bed with him."

"He can sleep on the floor."

"I can?" Tom curled his toes against the carpet. "Feels hard. Drafty, too."

Garin didn't say anything. Simon was too kind to let that happen. He'd seen that kindness the moment they'd met.

"He sleeps beside me," Simon said. "I'm going in the middle, okay?"

"Whatever you say," Garin agreed and then frowned. "Uh; why?"

"Because he wants me," Tom said smugly, climbing in beside Simon and cuddling close. "I told you."

"Get in the middle," Garin told Tom, his eyes locked with Simon's. "I want you where I can touch you."

"And you don't want to touch *me*?" Simon snapped.

"You know I do."

"I'm not getting that feeling-- hey!"

Tom landed between them with a thud, after scrambling over Simon unceremoniously. "I like it here," he assured them. "Feels warm. Cozy. Reminds me of when I was a kitten."

"Oh, God," Simon moaned. "Why did I have to fall for a --"

"A what?" Garin said, his voice tight. "A freak?"

"No." Simon sighed, reaching across Tom to brush his fingers over Garin's cheek. "Never that. Believe me."

Garin turned his face into the light caress, letting it carry the truth of Simon's words to him. No, Simon had never thought that. He'd been ... surprised when his half joking, half exasperated question about what planet Garin was from that he'd never learned to drink Coke without choking on the bubbles had been answered in a way most people would have been incapable of accepting, but no more than that.

Simon was special, and Garin loved him beyond words, sense, and feeling.

Acceptance was something Simon was good at, his tolerance a quality Garin had never expected to find out here in the hard-edged garishness of the human world -- that still held a dull flatness compared to home, for all its flash and glitter.

He met Tom's amber eyes and saw a flicker of sympathy there. "You don't have it easy, do you, Garin?"

"No," Simon answered for him. "He doesn't. But it's worth it. Now, go to sleep and if you change back in the night, watch what your claws do."

Tom flexed his hand, studying his fingernails. "I wish I did still have my claws. I can't do much damage with these. Or climb. Or scratch."

Garin and Simon exchanged a reminiscent, amused look, Garin's body heating as he recalled a night the week before when Simon's nails, blunt though they were, had left his back scarlet and stinging. That had been one minor pain he'd welcomed, even encouraged, crying out and arching his back as Simon scored his thumbnails slowly, so slowly, down the long hollow of his spine to his ass, pausing an endless moment before his hands curved and cupped the waiting, wanting flesh.

He saw a matching arousal on Simon's face and swallowed, wanting to reach out to him.

"Get some sleep." Simon sounded resigned now, and he rolled away, his back to Tom, who snuggled down, yawned widely, exposing sharp white teeth, and licked his hand before tucking it under his chin.

With nothing else to do but sleep, Garin turned out the bedside lamp and closed his eyes.

Garin woke to find a tongue swiping insistently across his thigh and his cock nudging Tom's ear. He'd had more fraught awakenings, but not many. His hand shot down, grabbed a handful of hair, and yanked upwards.

"Stop that!" he hissed.

Beside him, Simon stirred, murmuring irritably, and Garin panicked, tugging harder on Tom's hair.

"Ow!" Simon muttered, making Garin frown, puzzled. Ow?

"It's Garin's fault." Tom sounded awake and smug, neither of which Garin approved of this early in the morning. He lifted the covers and discovered that Tom's hand had been wrapped around the solid thrust of Simon's waking erection.

"Let go of him, too!"

"Too?" Simon thrashed about, the bed heaving. "What the hell is he doing down there?"

Tom's smugness turned to bewilderment. "He smelled good." He shook his head, the gesture not quite matching the one a human would make; too wide a sweep, too exaggerated a movement. "You both do. Warm and good and -- I was glad I was still human."

"You're not," Simon snapped. "You're... I don't know what you are, but you're not human."

Tom bit him on the nipple, drawing an indignant yowl from Simon that Garin thought -- but didn't say -- was rather feline itself.

"Will you get the hell out of this bed?" Simon sounded angry. Garin wasn't used to that.

Tom didn't look abashed but he gave Simon's nipple a soft lick that might have been intended as an apology. Garin saw the shiver Simon gave and the way both his nipples hardened. Oh, he'd liked that, hadn't he?

"Tom, you have to understand that you can't just -- intrude like this," he said helplessly, knowing he wasn't going to get Tom to understand. Cats didn't have boundaries, didn't have much concern for any comfort but their own. Selfish, but with

such a sublime confidence backing it up that Garin had always been rather charmed by the ones at court, padding around, their heads held haughtily high. One had once leaped up onto the king's lap as he signed a treaty, jogging his hand and making the Royal signature look like something a child would be ashamed to own. And the king, his flash of anger softened to an admonishing pat, had allowed the cat to remain curled and purring while sand was brought to erase the scrawl.

Somehow, Garin thought Tom was more used to anger than pats.

"What was it like for you before?" he asked. Simon gave him a surprised look that held a little hurt.

Tom sat up and faced them, then tugged the covers up around his shoulders, oblivious to the fact that Garin and Simon were left bare and shivering. "Well, I lived in a warehouse --"

"Oh, for God's sake," Simon snapped. "I'm freezing. If you're not going away, come between us again so we can all have some of the covers."

Tom shrugged, wriggled into place, and fussed until the covers were as he wanted them.

"A warehouse?" Garin prompted him.

"That's right."

Simon sighed impatiently. "And?" he prompted when Tom remained silent. "Where was it?"

"I was a cat; we're smart, but literacy isn't one of our talents." Tom tucked his hands behind his head, making Garin and Simon flinch back from the threat of his elbows, and stretched. "Down by the river. Which was where I was born and where I nearly died a week later." He huffed. "I got thrown in there; you know; a sack, a brick, and a watery grave."

"That's awful," Simon said, looking pale. "How can people do that?"

"I don't know," Garin told him, feeling no guilt as his people would never have done such a thing. Animals were hunted, yes, and the court was by no means a kind place at times for those who were weaker, but that kind of unthinking cruelty would have been viewed with horror. "You should know; you are one."

"I wouldn't do that!"

"No," Tom said, turning his head and beaming at Simon. "You smell too nice."

An unwilling smile spread across Simon's face and for the first time since Tom had entered their lives Garin felt himself relax. There was something comforting about this; curled up and warm in the bed. Something different, too, but he couldn't quite...

"I'm hungry," Tom announced, his earlier arousal clearly forgotten as another need took its place. "There's food in the fridge?"

"Oh, I suppose so," Simon told him. "Help yourself."

Tom blinked as if the idea of doing anything else hadn't occurred to him, and slid down the bed and out of the door without a backward glance, leaving Garin and Simon alone.

"Do you think he's ever going to start wearing clothes?" Simon didn't sound as if he was sure he wanted Tom to learn and Garin could understand that. The lean, scarred body was, well, it was...

"I want you," he told Simon, sliding his hand around Simon's waist and pulling him closer, into the gap Tom had left.

"Garin... he could come back any minute..." Simon's body was eager, though, already fitting snugly against Garin's, his cock hardening.

"He won't." Garin extended his senses along the thin thread of magic connecting him to Tom. "He's eating and then he's going to go to sleep."

"He just woke up!"

"He's still going to nap," Garin assured him.

Simon looked resigned. "And you know this how? No, don't tell me."

With an impatience he didn't usually feel or show in bed, Garin bit down on Simon's shoulder, nuzzling fiercely into the crook of his neck. "Simon..."

"Is it safe?" Simon arched his neck even as he spoke, his words and actions deliciously contradictory, his hand moving in slow sweeps up and down Garin's back.

"It is." Garin frowned. "It's odd... I should feel the power building again by now but it isn't."

"Hmm?" Simon was doing a little kissing of his own. "Well. That's good, isn't it?"

"Yes..." Garin knew he should be giving it more thought than that, but with the hard heat of Simon's erection pressed against his stomach and the matching arousal he felt, well, it could wait.

It could all wait. He went back to kissing Simon's body, each kiss taking him lower until his mouth was teasingly close to the source of all that heat. Simon groaned, reduced to wordless, murmured sounds that flicked Garin's need like a whip taken to a horse, urging him on. He pinned Simon to the bed with a hand on Simon's hip, and used his other hand to circle around the base of Simon's cock.

Then he did his best to go slowly, achieving his aim for the space of a few moments only, because the taste of Simon of his lips and tongue was deliciously tempting and really, why not give in?

So he let his tongue swirl and lick, lapping eagerly at the wet-tipped cock, savoring the taste and the warm, intimate smell of Simon's skin here, his alone to know and enjoy. The prickle of hair, just a shade darker than the blond hair on Simon's head, brushed his cheek and he tilted his head, rubbing against it like a --

He was too caught up in the moment, Simon's hands tight in his hair, urging him on, Simon's soft groans echoed in his own harsh gasps for air, to spare Tom more than a passing thought but somehow, as he captured the quivering exclamation point of Simon's cock inside his mouth, Tom seemed very close.

Simon came, hips jerking strongly enough to dislodge Garin's hand, fucking Garin's mouth with an abandonment Garin gloried in. His own people were so languid and polite, centuries of living stretching passion thin and colorless. Simon was all brightness, all fire.

Simon gave an indignant choke of astonishment and Garin sighed, swallowed, and eased back. "He's watching us, isn't he?"

"How long have you been there?" Simon demanded, the question directed over Garin's head. His next words, and the solid thump of his fist, were for Garin's ears and shoulder. "Did you know he was there? I thought you said he'd gone to sleep!"

"I had," Tom said. He landed on the bed with a pounce and a wriggle. "You woke me."

"We were quiet enough," Simon protested. He looked uncertain. "Weren't we?"

Garin shrugged. "I was busy." A throb from his neglected cock reminded him that he was *still* busy, but somehow he didn't think Simon was in the mood to reciprocate or, as he often did, roll over, relaxed and still aroused, pushing back onto Garin's fingers or cock with a needy, ecstatic whimper.

Garin wasn't the only one who got greedy.

"I have good ears," Tom said a little complacently. A puzzled look crossed his face. "But they don't twitch anymore."

Watching Tom try, anyway, was enough to make both Garin and Simon laugh despite themselves.

"Okay," Simon said, getting his amusement under control. "I think we need to get up and do something with the day."

"Such as?" Garin asked. They'd just done one of his favorite activities for a Sunday morning -- well, any morning, but Sunday was the only day they could both lie in, able to ignore the remorseless tick of the clock.

"I don't know--" Simon began, but he was interrupted by Tom.

"I want to go back to my home. I *need* to."

Garin and Simon exchanged glances. "Uh, I think you're in it," Simon said. "Temporary lodging, anyway."

"My real home," Tom snapped.

"A cardboard box? Will you fit?"

"Where exactly did you live?" Garin asked as Tom's face clouded over. It wasn't like Simon to be that sarcastic, but he didn't comment. Simon was already looking abashed. "You said it was a warehouse, but there are a lot of them."

"Down by the river," Tom said vaguely. "I'll know the smell."

Garin could -- just -- understand the need to see one's home, without particularly sharing it. He'd left court after his father had beaten him once too often for hanging around the palace kitchen, learning the culinary arts from the human cook, in clear defiance of tradition. He didn't think anyone but the cats was missing him; they'd loved him because he fed them and combed the tangles from their silky fur.

And when he'd knelt before the king and begged leave to depart, the king's face creasing in a frown, one had padded over and nudged his face with a warm, damp nose until he'd broken his obeisance and tickled it, the king's displeasure melting into an indulgent chuckle.

Simon sighed. "Oh, well. I suppose we can try to find it. And you can't go alone... can he?"

Garin shook his head. "We can't risk it."

"Then I guess we go to the river."

The warehouse area was quiet, the normal weekday bustle replaced by an echoing silence, broken by the cry of gulls, wheeling overhead, silhouetted against a pale blue sky.

Tom led them along the riverbank, his head tilted, his expression one of curiosity and bewilderment. "It looks -- it's so different."

"I can imagine," Garin agreed. "Anything looking familiar, though?"

Tom sniffed the air and sighed. "No."

"Is there anything you can remember; a -- a landmark?" Simon asked. "The color of the door to the place..."

"We don't see in colors," Tom said absently. He turned and stroked his hand over Simon's shirt, fingering the rich blue linen. "This is so bright, so --" He waved a hand. "It's like music."

"Do you know what music is?" Garin asked.

Tom looked scornful. "Of course! I'm a cat; we love music, all of us." He threw back his head and gave an unearthly wail. "See?"

"Never, ever, do that again," Simon said, with deep conviction, his hands clamped over his ears.

With an insulted sniff, Tom walked away.

"I have to stay close," Garin told Simon apologetically.

"I know." Simon sighed and fell into step beside him. "Can't you, well, *you* know. Find the place for him?"

"You don't like me using magic!"

"I'm classing anything to do with Tom as an emergency. Consider the normal rules suspended."

"They're not rules," Garin snapped, annoyed with Simon, something that only happened rarely. "It's a choice I made. I'm here to live as a human and I want to fit in. If I use magic, I'm going to get careless, and --"

"But if you don't use it, we get, well, we get *him*," Simon pointed out. "I want you to be human, Garin. I guess maybe I think if you're using your magic you'll decide to go back and I'd lose you --"

Touched by the desolate tone of Simon's voice, Garin reached out and took Simon's hand, squeezing it gently. "I would never leave you. And I would never take you there."

"I have to admit, I'm curious."

Garin shuddered. "Don't be. It's not a bad place, perhaps, but it's so... frozen. Traditions, meaningless, unchanged; set ways to speak and act; protocol it takes a child years to learn..."

"But it's beautiful?" Simon asked, his voice a little wistful.

Garin sighed. "Yes, it's beautiful. The same way a fire is beautiful, but it's still destroying the wood as it burns." He glanced at Simon. "I can show it to you, perhaps. Summon up a picture of it that you could walk inside."

"Like a virtual reality tour?" Simon sounded intrigued, his eyes sparkling with interest. "An Elven holodeck..."

Garin knew what that meant; he'd sat through many episodes of TV shows Simon had decided were vital to his efforts to blend in. "Yes," he said dryly. "Just like that."

"I'd like that. To see where you're from," Simon told him. "So are you going to do it?"

"I just said I would."

"Use magic to help Tom," Simon elaborated.

They looked at Tom, who was staring out at the river, his shoulders slumped, the picture of dejection.

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

They joined Tom, who glanced at them without speaking. "I think I can find it for you," Garin said. "I can track you, not this human form, but what you were."

"That form doesn't exist now," Tom said. "How?"

For the first time in a long time, Garin thought of his father with some pride and a little affection. Just a little. "My father taught me. Transformed or not, you still... you taste the same. Your essence is unchanged."

"Taste? Essence? If you kiss him again..." Simon glared at Garin, who tried not to feel irritated. Humans.

"I kissed him once; that's enough. I know what he tastes like and it's not that kind of a taste -- oh!" Simon was grinning. "I *see*," Garin said ominously. Simon's grin widened.

Garin kissed Simon once, hard, lovingly bruising that smiling mouth, and stepped away. "Simon, put some distance between you and Tom."

"Is this enough?" Simon said, backing away a few yards. His cheeks had flushed and if Garin could have had a wish granted, right then it would have been for the two of them to be in a bed.

Just the two of them -- although somehow he couldn't help remembering how comfortable it had felt with Tom snuggled between them.

"No. More." Garin gave Simon a swift, teasing glance. "You're distracting."

Simon's lips pursed, their pout as teasing as Garin's glance had been. "So you've said." He walked farther away and kept on going, as if he'd only been waiting for an excuse, no reluctance visible. Simon had never quite accepted that magic *was*, the same way that rain and night and the fall of leaves in the autumn were; natural, needed, inevitable.

He thought it was something imposed upon the world, an invader.

It wasn't.

Garin, again, so soon again, let power flow into him. It rushed at him like the seventh wave, and engulfed him, dragged him under, gasping for air. This was death, his face smiling a welcome, this was pain unendurable. He was empty, yes, hollow, bare of thought and memory, but he could not hold it all, could not --

Some instinct severed the link between him and the ambient forces around him.

Not full, but complete.

He threw back his head, staring with undazzled eyes at the sun, shielded, himself burning brighter than that distant star. Maybe he was fooling himself when he insisted that he'd come out into the world to be human. Maybe he'd known, always known, that out here was power for the taking, even for him, halfling, weakling --

Not weak now.

He screamed at the sky, as defiant and arrogant as a full-blood elf, and felt a sharp, hot pain sting his face.

His name rang in his ears as loudly as the slap, and he just had time to remember that this was Simon and he loved him before the surge of power racing through him to deal with his attacker boiled the water of the river and sent a mist rising from the surface.

Sagging helplessly in Simon's arms, he heard Tom say thoughtfully, "Well, that went well," and then he allowed himself to slip away into the welcoming darkness.

"If you ever -- no, I mean it -- if you ever --"

Simon's voice wavered and cracked and Garin shook his head weakly. "Simon -- love -- I'm sorry. Sorry. I don't know why -- it's never done that. Never. So *much* --"

He could taste it, thick and sweet and heavy, honey on his tongue.

Cloying.

He turned his head into Simon's shoulder and sobbed dryly, the weakness still with him. Hands stroked his head; patted his back. Too many hands, he realized; Tom was crouched beside them, too, where they sat huddled against a stack of empty crates.

"Was it me?" Tom asked, sounding uncertain. "If it's never been like that before, was it me?"

Garin forced himself to straighten, and made sure every avenue to the power was inaccessible. He didn't even care what he looked like, although as the expressions of the two men watching him didn't alter, he guessed that illusion was still holding.

"I don't know. Maybe, although I don't see why it would."

"I don't care," Simon said. He was milk-pale, a fine tremor in his hands. "Garin -- you should have seen yourself. It was terrifying."

The mist had dispersed, but Garin wondered how many fish had died. He glanced at the river and saw a few shapes bobbing on the surface. Not too many, then.

Even so...

"You saved me." He cupped Simon's face, needing to know if Simon would flinch, and felt something tight in his chest ease when Simon grabbed his hand and squeezed it, not releasing it. "You have my thanks."

"Any time." Simon gave him a rueful look. "I think I bruised your cheek."

"Over there," Tom said.

"Huh?" Simon glanced around. "God, did someone see us?"

"My home," Tom said, and pointed to a building off to the right.

"There?" Simon's voice rose indignantly. 'It's right there and you had Garin doing spells and damn near frying us into grease spots on the concrete, and it's right there?"

"It looked different when I was standing up," Tom said without sounding particularly apologetic. "From down here, it's obvious." He scrambled up. "Come on."

Simon raised his eyebrows. "You able to walk? Or do you want to stay here?"

"I can't," Garin reminded him. "I need to stay --"

"Close," Simon finished. "Right."

With Simon's help, Garin got to his feet. His head was swimming and his eyes were watering, but he wasn't in any pain. He had trouble keeping up with Tom, though, who was running now, his hair streaming out behind him.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" Simon sounded thoughtful rather than admiring. "What was he like as a cat?"

"Moth-eaten. Scruffy." Simon elbowed him in the ribs and he surrendered and told the truth. "He looked like that; strong, wild. Beautiful? I don't know. To another cat, I suppose."

"And now?"

Garin sighed. "What do you want me to say?" Simon averted his head, staring out at the river and Garin blinked. "No; what do you want me to *ask*? If you want him? If I do?"

"Is it that obvious?"

They'd stopped walking now, with Tom no longer in sight. That was dangerous, Garin knew, but this was too important to ignore. "He's a cat, Simon. He's in rut and it's spilling out and affecting you, that's all." Reluctantly, he added, "It's not affecting me, not the same way, but, yes, he's appealing. He's just so..."

"Honest," Simon supplied, when Garin ran out of words. "He's transparent and open, and it's, well, it's refreshing."

"It's a novelty in your world, that's for sure," Garin said a little dryly.

"And the court doesn't have politics? Intrigue?"

"Your point," Garin allowed as they began to walk again. "But --"

The door of the warehouse Tom had disappeared into burst open and Tom ran out, heading toward the river, pursued by a security guard, a lumbering bear of a man, his face flushed with anger.

"Oh, shit," Simon said, which summed the situation up nicely. "Garin, I'll try and calm the guard down, you get close to Tom before something happens."

Tom was cornered when they caught up to him, crouched between two stacks of crates, the space narrowing too sharply for him to squeeze through. He was wailing up at the guard, a desolate sound that raised the hair on the back of Garin's neck.

"Get out of there, you thief." The guard panted, his breath wheezing in his chest. "God, can't breathe... damn allergies... fucking stray cats everywhere..."

Simon and Garin exchanged rueful looks. "Look," Simon began. "We can explain, if you'll just listen. He's a friend of ours and he's not well --"

The guard turned, his expression suspicious. "Who the hell are you? Get back, or I'm calling the cops."

Tom snarled deep in his throat and dived forward, past them all with a wriggle and a little squirm. He took off in a run along the riverbank, dodging from side to side as they chased him. Fueled by desperation, he was moving at a speed none of them could match, but as Garin tried to make his legs move faster, Tom stumbled.

Garin felt it, as if his body had faltered, too; felt the tug of the connection between them and knew what was going to happen without being able to stop it.

When Tom landed in the water, he was already changing, his body shortening, shrinking, fur lying sleek over his limbs. The guard skidded to a halt, his ruddy face turning a peculiar shade of gray. "Did you see that?"

Simon put himself hastily between the guard and the water, persuasive words babbling from his mouth, and Garin took one step, two, and dived into the filthy,

freezing water, much as his father had done once when hunting a renegade shape-shifter who had taken the form of a doe, then a leaping, silver-sided salmon.

Garin had all his father's resolve, but it was concern that drove him, not the thrill of the hunt. Tom was his responsibility and it was his fault that the transformation had been reversed. If Tom as a cat would have made all their lives easier, he didn't let that thought stop him from clawing through the water in search of an armful of fur and scratch.

He broke the surface and gasped for air. "There!" Simon called. The guard was slumped against a wall, using an inhaler; Garin saw sunlight glint off it, the small detail taking his attention even as the water pulled at him.

"Over there!" Simon yelled and waved his arms frantically. "Garin --"

Tom's head was an orange splash of color, his fur dark and wet, his eyes wide with terror. Garin swam over to him, his clothing dragging at him, and followed Tom back down into the cold darkness as the cat sank again.

His fingers brushed fur and then teeth dug into his hand, and he clumsily gathered the squirming body into his arms and kicked up toward the light.

Simon was at the riverbank to help them get out, worry twisting his face. "Garin, my God, are you all right? When I saw you go under I realized I didn't even know if you could swim." He struggled out of his coat. "Here..."

Even as he shivered, his teeth chattering violently, Garin felt a small glow of warmth that Simon's first thought had been of him, but when Tom lay still between them, he couldn't feel that way for long.

He froze the guard in place as the man began to get to his feet, using magic without guilt, not caring if Simon objected. He couldn't deal with the man right then. They used Simon's coat as a bed for Tom and laid the small, limp shape on it.

"What do we do?" Simon said. He began to massage the cat's ribs, squeezing him with a firm gentle touch. "I can do CPR, but on a human, not a -- oh!" He jerked his hands out of the way as the cat shimmered and shifted and became a wet, naked man. "Did you do that?"

"No," Garin said. "Not me. I don't know what's happening."

"Never mind." Efficiently, his hands deft, his brow furrowed in concentration, Simon began to work on Tom, breathing into his slack mouth, pressing down rhythmically on his chest. Garin watched, unsure of the mechanics of what Simon was doing but keenly aware of the symbolism. Gifting someone with life was powerful magic -- ask any mother -- and he could feel the power build. Without thinking about it, he put his hand on Simon's shoulder and slipped his other hand into one of Tom's, linking them.

Then he poured all the strength that he had, every ounce of it, into the circle.

He felt the tiny, flickering spark that was Tom's life go dark for one endless moment, and then it flared bright and strong, a sunburst against his closed eyes. He sensed, rather than saw, the connections running between the three of them, linking them, binding them, holding Tom safe.

And keeping him human.

With no chance to ask Tom what he preferred, Garin felt the change from cat to man lock into place, irrevocable, permanent. Before, in the café, he'd acted impulsively, the magic correspondingly vague; this time he was aware of what he was doing and the power was leashed, his to wield.

Tom choked and spat out water, his chest convulsing, and Garin's awareness snapped back into the here and now.

"We have to get out of here," Simon said urgently. He pushed the wet hair out of Tom's face. "Tom? Can you walk?" He looked at Garin. "We need to get him checked over. He could have --"

"He's fine," Garin said, giving Simon's arm a reassuring pat. "Trust me."

"No, I'm not," Tom said crossly, sitting up. "I'm *freezing*. Take me home." He looked at them both, his expression vulnerable, his usual confidence gone and repeated himself, making it a question loaded with meaning. "Take me home?"

The security guard stirred, the spell holding him fading fast.

"We'll talk about it later," Garin said, and helped Simon to haul Tom up to his feet. Simon's coat was just long enough to cover Tom to mid-thigh but they needed to leave. "Later, I promise."

He knew they wouldn't.

And he thought they were going to need a bigger bed.

"Do you miss it? Being a cat?" Simon asked. He was stroking Tom's hair idly, Tom's head in his lap.

Garin ran his hand over Simon's chest and pinched a nipple reprovingly. "Now he'll start telling us about eating mice and you know I hate that."

The bed rocked as Tom rolled onto his back and grinned up at them. "They crunch and squeak..." he began dreamily. "And then they get squishy..."

"Oh, God." Simon clapped his hand over Tom's mouth, half laughing, half horrified. "And we kiss that mouth."

Garin leaned in and kissed Simon as the subject had been brought up, enjoying the warmth of his mouth and giving a soft moan at the taste of it. Sometimes, he felt as if he could never get enough of that taste, indefinable, arousing, addictive. "We could give him something else to --"

"Chew?" Tom asked.

"No!" Simon said.

Tom smiled. "I wouldn't."

Fingering a bruise on his hip where Tom had done just that, Garin sighed. "You would, but it's worth the risk."

Tom's mouth was *wicked*. He'd had to be shown -- once -- how to give what Simon rather inelegantly, Garin thought, called a blow job, and after that he'd applied the memory of years of grooming himself and could generally reduce them both to incoherence without even trying. His tongue was still a little rougher than usual, which helped; Garin could shudder and grow hard at the most inappropriate times thinking of that tongue on him, in him.

"I wouldn't chew you *there*," Tom said positively. "I like your cock. Yours and Simon's."

"We like yours, too," Simon replied, his voice filled with the loving amusement he saved for Tom. Garin didn't mind; he didn't really want Simon to find him funny. He just wanted Simon to love him, which he did.

In the months since Tom had come into their lives, he'd learned just how much. Simon had been the patient one, the peacekeeper. He'd made it work, secure in the knowledge that it was what all three of them wanted. And, just as he had accepted Garin, he had made room in his life for Tom.

Garin's own feelings of responsibility toward Tom, together with a healthy dollop of uncomplicated lust, had become love too gradually for him to chart, but it didn't really matter. Just as the discovery that with Tom around to act as a shield of sorts, the power didn't build to dangerous levels, didn't matter, because by then that wasn't why Garin wanted Tom to stay.

What Tom thought of them, Garin still didn't know.

Tom began to lap industriously at Simon's fingers, loosely curled on his shoulder. Simon shivered and slid two fingers inside Tom's mouth, and he and Garin watched Tom suck them, his eyes closed, his expression blissful.

"Want more," Tom said after a moment, the words mumbled around the fingers gently fucking his mouth. "Want both of you."

Garin and Simon exchanged questioning glances and then shrugged in unison.

Garin moved to the foot of the bed as Tom went on all fours and Simon leaned back against the headboard, legs spread.

"No," Tom said. "Kneel up. I want you fucking my mouth, not me sucking you."

"So blunt..." Simon murmured.

"So bossy," Garin corrected him, and gave Tom's ass a smack with just enough sting to it to leave a mark.

Tom chuckled unrepentantly and wiggled. "Again."

Garin rolled his eyes and bent down to kiss the pink skin instead. "No. Simon, do whatever you have to do to get him to be quiet."

"Now who's being bossy?" Simon was already shifting position, though, kneeling so that the head of his cock brushed teasingly over Tom's mouth. Garin couldn't see, but from the way Simon's head tipped back, the muscles in his neck showing as he grunted breathlessly, Tom's tongue had probably darted out to administer a welcoming lick.

"Just one thing," Tom said few moments later as Garin was easing into him, riding the wave of sensation at that first, intense grip of smooth, hot muscle.

Simon made a sound of protest, his hand tightening on Tom's shoulder, his other hand working his neglected erection.

"What is it?" Garin asked, more resigned to the pause than Tom, as he was sheathed in slick, tight heat.

"I love you," Tom said. "Both of you." He glanced up at Simon and then twisted to look back at Garin. "Not just your cocks," he added.

Simon's mouth twitched in a smile that became a grin. "We love you, too," he said. "All of you."

Tom purred, bumped his head against Simon's hip, and went back to what he'd been doing.

And Garin, realizing that Tom's forgotten question had been answered, did, too.

Cat Scratch Fever

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