

I WAS AN ALIEN CAT TOY



ANN SOMERVILLE

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Ann Somerville

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For Paul

Chapter 1

A sudden pitch by the podpod to the left and the instantaneous alarm response from the console snapped Temin to attention, his stomach almost turning inside out from the shock. He grabbed for the controls and fought to quell the prickle-sick of adrenaline, even as instinct guided his fingers and his responses, letting him rapidly assess the warning lights and system messages flying across the heads-up display.

“What the shefting crack was that?” he muttered, before realising just how bad the problem really was. Frantically he switched to manual to try and boost power, but it was hopeless. The FTL drive was dying—no, dead—and the sudden clarity of stars in front of his small observation window was like a slap in the face, the silence of dead engines loud as a drum as he stared into the endless night. “And where the hell am I?”

The HUD gave him the answer. Pexis system—a good forty light years from his home on Venshu. What the sheft was wrong with the FTL drive? He’d never heard of one of them failing before. He ran through the diagnostics, but communications with the FTL were down so he was getting no usable data. The sublight engines were...sheft it! He was losing power to virtually all the systems...but where...? He sent a chasing programme down the lines as he frantically shut everything but bare life support down. Artificial gravity was failing, and crap, even the CO2 scrubbers were struggling. He had to get into a breathable atmosphere and repair this or he was one dead spacer.

The alarms were more insistent now, and as the artificial gravity failed completely and his stomach lurched in response, he rapidly scanned the HUD, willing his heart to slow down so he could shefting think.

Planet U67809 was reachable if his life support could hold on for another twenty hours, by no means assured, but it was the only possible option. With relief he felt the sublights kick in—he had to hand it to the engineers who demanded that the FTL and sublight systems were isolated. Unfortunately, they were the same engineers who insisted there was no point ensuring podpods were capable of atmospheric re-entry, so his gratitude wasn't exactly unlimited.

Once the auto guidance programme took over, he could stop and analyse the results of his tracing prog. It looked like a whole bank of controls had failed, which just should not happen—unless he was hit by debris or something, but his shields had been good, and even now they were still operational. He couldn't think what single unit could fail so catastrophically and take out so many essential systems, but that was why he had to land. Which was his next urgent problem. The artificial gravity failing had stopped the power leak almost entirely. Shutting down the rest of the inessentials had slowed the drain even more. He still needed to secure that because if he didn't have enough power for the shields, the question of whether the sublights would slow his landing wouldn't come into play. He'd just be a bright light in a sky and a few mysterious bits of litter on the ground.

He didn't bother with the distress beacon—there were no sublight capable craft in this sector, and no civilisations capable of building any either. The data on the planet indicated the upper atmosphere was heavily ionised, so a signal might or might not get through. If he survived the landing, he could think about it then. If he couldn't repair the FTL, he might not be able to achieve escape velocity with the sublights, but marooned and alive was still alive and he forced himself to focus on the achievable. Spending the next twenty hours thinking up worst case scenarios would do nothing for his chances, and right now, he need to garner all the good luck that positive thinking could possibly get him, because there wasn't a shefting lot else going for him.



His first thought was 'ouch' quickly followed by 'huh, not dead'. He spent the next few minutes assessing how much of him had survived the crash (apparently all, with no obvious breakages, so chalk one up to those whacky engineers again) and how much of the podpod had survived as well. The capsule had protected him just as designed, but the deceleration from the sublights hadn't been quite enough to ensure a smooth landing, and he'd blacked out from the g-forces. The forward shields had held, he was sure. That didn't mean he had a podpod that could take off again.

He snapped the harness catches and then opened the capsule. The viewscreen was intact and the structure wasn't obviously damaged. Now to see if the same could be said of him...ouch. He winced as he climbed out, and his hips twisted. Despite the capsule padding, he'd been thrown around pretty thoroughly, and he was lucky only to be bruised. He took a few seconds to make sure he wasn't overlooking an injury in the post-adrenalin come down, and then began checking his systems. The news was pretty bad—power levels nil, the console was dead, no HUD. As things stood, he had no hope of getting shields back up, unless he could find out what had caused the cascading power failure.

As he cracked the rear hatch, a blast of freezing air hit him in the face, so he hastily closed it again. Shefting shit, it was cold out there, and he'd never seen so much snow. His flight suit was well insulated, intended to give a vital few seconds' survival in the vacuum of space, but he needed his gloves and some kind of head covering, since he could hardly work in his EVA suit. He removed the microfibre lining of the EVA helmet and it made a cosy, if ungainly fit. Time to tackle the freezer again.

He was in a world of white and grey, with needles in every breath. Snow blasted into his eyes if he even turned slightly into the knife-like wind, almost penetrating the suit, and threatening to freeze-dry the little skin he'd left exposed. He really wished the pathetic survival kit on board had included things like gloves he could actually work in, and goggles, and, oh, he didn't know, maybe enough food to last more than three days. But it didn't, so all he could do was squint against the wind, and start clearing away the snow from the engine side. It was going to take a while. He only had his hands and an empty storage container to use as a shovel and the podpod's rough landing had compacted the head-high snow into stone-hard ice.

When he thought he couldn't dig another second, he was so shefting cold, he realised he could finally reach the panel covering the FTL controls. He did a little jig to try and get his blood circulating again in his feet and legs, scrubbed his ice-encrusted face clear of snow, then he popped the panel lock. With any luck he could....

Sheft it.

Temin stared in disbelief at the blackened mess that used to be quite a sophisticated and robust mechanism for travelling around the galaxy, and was now about as good for that as the snowflakes settling on the charred remains. *A fire? In here?* There was nothing that could...but then he reached in and pulled out a half-melted control box and realised this had been no accident, no quirk of fate or failure of engineering. Someone had put a bomb on his craft. Why? If they wanted to kill him, why do it this way?

He tossed the remains of the device back into the guts of the drive and slammed the panel cover down. So no getting home the conventional way, and since the sublights would take over a hundred years to

get him even close to Venshu, they weren't much use either. He could set the beacon, sure—the solars in the roof of the podpod would power it until long after he was dead—but the chances of the signal escaping the atmosphere, and then someone actually picking it up, were so slight as to be non-existent. Effectively he was marooned for life on a planet with no other human inhabitants.

He allowed himself a moment's panic, another moment to feel sorry for himself, and then he kicked himself in the pants. He was alive, uninjured, had shelter, some food, water, and weapons. If he could get the trickle charger working from the solars, in a day he would have access to limited scans and the entire database of knowledge held in the main Venshu depository. That would give him maps, advice, and data on the planet. On his descent, he'd read U67809 had been a seed settlement but the colony had never been established. No one knew why, but just because a bunch of colonists five hundred years ago disappeared without trace, didn't mean he couldn't survive here. And he would.

He locked himself back inside the podpod, glad to get away from the wind and the featureless snowy landscape. He could live in the podpod for a while, though he couldn't cook inside it and the bathroom facilities were definitely not going to see him through. The survival kit, which wasn't really designed for terrestrial activities, didn't contain anything as useful as a tent, or even an axe, though he had a full toolkit and a wicked-looking knife that Jeng had given him last year. He'd done an inventory during the descent and there had been nothing of any use to him in the anonymous boxes of chemicals he'd been carrying back from Nixal—they were still in their restraints, for all the good it did him, them and DCIR, the drug manufacturer who'd paid for the shipment. All he had apart from the kit was the remains of the food he'd bought on Nixal—just snacks, really—and a couple of shirts he'd bought in the markets. If he'd known he was going to be marooned, he'd have bought something more useful, but that line of thinking wasn't going to help him either.

He set up the beacon and the trickle charger, then he could only wait until he could connect his handheld and download from the database. He settled into the passenger's chair and stared gloomily out into the slowly darkening landscape—by his reckoning, the sun would set in about half a standard hour. He'd landed on the hemisphere just entering its cold season, which wouldn't have been his choice but it was just how it worked out. This planet had a twenty-six standard hour revolution, years of five hundred standard days, ninety-two percent standard gravity. There were several large landmasses, but it was largely oceanic—in theory, it was so similar to the ancestral Terra, it should have made an ideal colony. But like three other groups, the initial colonisers had simply disappeared, and the policy was not to return to an unsuccessful seeding site. There was no need, not with dozens of habitable worlds, and FTL technology making the distances between them trivial. It had all seemed sensible to Temin when he was studying colonial history at

school. Now, looking at a world and a future devoid of human company, he kind of wished the early governments had been a bit more persistent.

He was quite warm in the suit and the podpod, but he shivered as he looked at the snow covering the viewscreen. Could he do this? Survive? He'd done a little camping, knew the basics of fire starting and shelter building, but this world, this frigid territory, was nothing like he'd ever encountered before. If the person who'd planted the bomb had intended him to die, it was likely they'd succeeded. But he couldn't think of a single person who even disliked him much, let alone wanted him dead.

And that, in a roundabout way, led his thoughts to Jeng. Would Jeng try to find him? Break regs and come searching? Temin hoped not. Jeng could look for fifty years and never find a clue to Temin's location, and the last thing he wanted was anyone wasting their life on something like that. Their commander would probably stop Jeng before he did something gallant and pointless that got his lover thrown out of the flight service. Temin hoped he would, anyway. Jeng was a good man, a really great guy. The best pilot on their wing, the best man Temin knew and the love of....

He rubbed his forehead and sighed. Jeng would kick his butt for sitting here and getting all maudlin over him. But it wasn't just thinking about Jeng that was getting him down. His family wouldn't know what happened to him, and that bothered him, bothered him more than the prospect of dying on this lonely planet. Tsuji and Liseng, they'd probably cope okay—they had their kids, their partners, jobs. They'd miss him, but they'd move on. But his Mum...if she didn't find out what happened to him, she'd never have any peace. She didn't deserve this, not after what happened to his Dad. Maybe he could send a databurst on repeat or something once he had some power. It was possible someone might pick it up eventually. Even if it took ten years or more, it would be something if he could make sure no one else suffered too much over this.

He rubbed his face and sighed. Thinking about all that wouldn't help right now. He should eat, and get some rest—he'd not slept at all during the planet-wards descent and post-adrenalin fatigue was tugging at his eyelids. Sheft it, he was just too buggered to be bothered with a meal. He'd eat in the morning. In the morning, he could get on with things. He climbed back into the capsule and pulled his sole thermal blanket around him, wishing it was thicker and that he had a few more of them. "Stop it," he told himself sternly. Wishing for the impossible wasn't helpful either. That was one thing he'd learned from his father, before the stupid bastard had got himself killed in a speeder. *Concentrate on the possible. The impossible makes you weak.*

"Should be easy," he muttered to himself. There wasn't much that *was* possible right now.



Waking stiff and achy didn't make it easy to keep a positive attitude, and surveying his meagre supplies as he selected one of the meals didn't help either. But the charger had worked, and finally he was getting a response from the console, though the HUD remained offline and he had to use the tiny backup monitor to read data. It confirmed what he already suspected—that the FTL and sublight engines were offline or unresponsive and because of the mechanical damage, he couldn't reroute power to the sublights from the secondary systems. He was able to boost the signal on the beacon a tad, and he could maintain minimal heating inside the podpod indefinitely.

He downloaded the database into the handheld as a backup should the main console fail again, and looking at the technical specs, he thought he could see a way to bypass the damaged area. It would take a while, but then he had all the time in the world—if he could find food. So that gave him a purpose, and he used that purpose to pull himself out of his growing funk. Find food, fix the podpod, boost the distress beacon signal, maybe even achieve escape velocity, and use the sublights to move within range of FTL capable craft. Simple. If nothing else, he could use the sublights to explore the surface of the planet.

But he only had a vague idea about how to go about getting food, and data on the lifeforms on this planet were sparse. As he slowly ate his breakfast, he read what information was available. He'd landed in the middle of the largest continent, about two thousands clicks from the nearest ocean. There were several large mountain ranges crossing the landmass, but none were within six hundred clicks of him. Mineralogical analysis indicated soil fertility was good and Terra-like, so he had to hope there were some plants he could eat, but he was no botanist, and had rarely given much thought to the raw materials of food beyond what was being served in the canteen—or his mother's kitchen—on any given day. The reality of his situation began to make him despair again.

"Concentrate on the possible," he muttered, as he switched on the scanner. The first few sweeps indicated nothing, which didn't surprise him, but wasn't exactly heartening, but then...there. Several moving lifeforms of at least human size, about a click west of him. Potential prey—and if there was one thing Temin could shefting well do, it was shoot accurately. If he could bring down a decent sized animal—and he'd worry about how to cook it if he did—that would be a shefting good start on his plan to get out of here.

He prepared a light pack with a meal, energy bars, water, medical kit and the knife. He decided he'd take both guns, since he had no idea how hard the animals would be to kill. The small scanner he put in his breast pocket so he could find the podpod again—he didn't trust that white, unforgiving terrain to offer any

clues—and after a little consideration, he put the handheld into the pack as well.

“Right.” He hoisted the gear onto his shoulders. “Pyr Temin, the mighty hunter, goes forth.” He hit the control for the hatch, put the shield cum cloaking device on time delay and prepared himself for the frigid blast.

It had stopped snowing, and the wind had dropped, but according to the scanner, it was still something like twenty below zero. No worse than the vacuum of space, he told himself. He just had to keep moving and check for—what did the database call it? Frostbite. Simple.

Only walking through snow wasn’t easy at all. Every step made him sink down to his knees, and he had to drag not only his boots but also several kilos of snow up with them to free his feet and advance. He couldn’t work out how the lifeforms he was reading on the scanner were able to move around so easily and quickly. Were they birds? They weren’t moving fast enough for birds, and besides, they were shefting huge to be flying. He gritted his teeth and trudged on. He had to hope he didn’t have to sneak up on those things to get a bead on one of them.

He was aiming for a stand of gigantic twisted black trees, and the snow grew less dense the closer he got, which made walking slightly less of a chore. As he approached, he saw movement, and then something large and dark leaping among the branches. That explained the speed—but it didn’t make catching them any easier. He drew closer, using the unizoom to get a better look—hell, they looked like the monkeys he’d seen in history books of old Terra, or some of the primate-like animals common on Nixal. Long reddish fur, long fluffy tails, probably not carnivorous but he couldn’t take that for granted. Now he’d stopped and could get his eye in, he spotted one gnawing on some plant material high in the tree a few metres ahead of him. He pulled out the pulse pistol, but before he could take aim, the shefting thing had buggered off. The air was suddenly full of screeching calls and snow clumps knocked from branches—there had to be fifty of the creatures, dancing in outrage and screaming at him. He was supposed to be intimidated, he guessed.

The problem was choosing a target—they were moving around so much, focussing on an individual was impossible. He had no experience of hunting—didn’t hunters drive their prey or something? The screaming, jumping animals seemed to be mocking him for his uselessness—yeah, definitely mocking. *Oh, charming.* “I’ll piss on you too if I catch you,” he yelled, jumping out of the way of the bright yellow stream, and shaking his fist. If he ever got out of this, he was going to suggest monkey-hunting went to the top of the list for new flight recruit training.

This is hopeless, he thought, scrubbing the piss off his arm with a handful of snow. Maybe if he moved on and ignored them, they’d settle down and he could take one of them by surprise. He vaguely

remembered a documentary about some large carnivores on Narn doing that, but it was a long time ago and it had been computer generated, so maybe it wasn't such a good authority. But it was all he had to go on. He put a harmless grin on his face, holstered the pistol and did his best to saunter casually through the trees, an effect spoiled immediately by his tripping over a tree root. He swore the hairy bastards were laughing at him.

He straightened up, but as he started to walk on, the monkeys started screaming again, bouncing through the trees, and in seconds were gone as if they had never been. Sheft! What had scared them? Temin could swear it wasn't him—they hadn't even been looking at him. Maybe they were just flighty anyway, and a change in the wind had startled them. But now he was without prey—or was he? He pulled out the scanner. The monkeys were moving away from him, but there was still something large to his left. Something large and unmoving. Had to be worth checking out, seeing how he'd trudged all this way. He put the scanner away and drew his pistol again.

It was now very quiet, the monkey screams all but a memory. The air was still among the trees, the light dull and shadowless through branches and scanty leaves so dark green they looked as black as the tree bark from a distance. It was all a bit creepy, and the shiver ran up Temin's spine had nothing to do with the bitter cold. For a yien, he'd have turned tail and headed back to the podpod, but he still had to solve his food supply problem, and that wouldn't happen if he acted like a coward. He scrubbed at his frozen nose and made himself walk confidently.

The animal wasn't moving—it might be asleep, which would make it easier. Whatever it was, was huge. Might need the stun rifle. He holstered his pistol again, still walking, and reached behind him for the rifle. As his hand touched the butt of the weapon, his foot caught on something—he barely had time to look down and realise it wasn't a tree root before he found himself being swept up into the air by the ankle, entangled in a thick net of ropes. Every movement he made, every struggle, just enmeshed him more—he couldn't even get a hand free to find his knife or reach the pistol again.

Shefting crack. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to calm down. He didn't know what this was, or who'd set it, but first he had to get out of it. He waited until he stopped swinging, and worked out he was about three metres off the ground—a far from impossible drop onto snow if he could just cut the shefting ropes.

He inched his fingers along to his utility belt to his knife. He could see now that the 'ropes' were actually leather, braided tight—did that mean there were humans on this planet after all? Maybe this was actually good news for him.

The thought cheered him up no end, until he heard a low growl, and twisted towards the noise.

It was kind of ironic, he thought, swallowing hard against a suddenly dry throat as an enormous paw, scythe-like claws extended, came sweeping towards his face—of all the ways he thought he'd be killed on this planet, death by giant cat wasn't even on the shefting list.

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“Uncle Gredar! You're back! How did the gathering go?”

Gredar chuckled as Buhi bounded across the well-swept courtyard and rubbed his head enthusiastically against Gredar's jaw, while Gredar ran his clawed hand carefully through Buhi's luscious fur. “Fine, fine. You've been behaving yourself, I hope.”

Buhi's tail twitched in annoyance. “Grandmother's had me working like a keriv since you left. I haven't had time to misbehave.”

Gredar chuckled again, knowing that his wise mother had most likely planned it that way. “Poor Buhi,” he said, rubbing his face affectionately against his nephew's. “I'm back now, so you can play.”

“Play with you?” Buhi asked slyly, twining their tails suggestively.

Gredar pushed him off. “Go find a grooming mate your own age, kit. I'm too old for you.”

“Not what I heard. Filwui's been telling us....”

“What's not fit for youngsters' ears, no doubt,” Gredar said, cuffing the younger daiyne's shoulder. “Now, off with you, or you'll be wishing your grandmother was still keeping you busy.”

Buhi gave him a cheeky chirrup and loped off, clearly glad to be let off his duty. Gredar shook his head ruefully and shouldered his pack again. Gone a moonsweep and the place went to rack and ruin.

The courtyard of his mother's house was busy, as always, with daiynes of both sexes entering and leaving, some with kits at their side, others bearing goods for the household. He was greeted cheerfully by many of the visitors, several coming over to rub jaws or touch noses, and even whispering invitations to come visit more privately later. Gredar groomed and greeted and was a little surprised, as he usually was, that a daiyne of his age should still be a desirable mate, even for fun. Not that he minded rising to the challenge, not at all. But Filwui was usually as much as he could handle, and his younger clan mate took a *lot* of handling.

He found his mother in one of the sun-warmed front workrooms, a favourite retreat from the bustle of the rest of the house, where he and Jilen had played many a time in their younger days.

“Gredar! I was hoping you'd be home soon.” She extended a hand to him, and he knelt, allowing her

to scratch his head as he rubbed extravagantly against her shoulder, inhaling her familiar, comforting scent.

She was minding two kitlings, Jilen's new offspring, barely a moonsweep old when he'd left for the clan gathering, and a handful and a half for a much younger female than his mother. She was struggling now to control them as they tried to crawl over her legs while she was greeting him. "Weikil, Shiri, now now," she said, hauling them back, but they squirmed and started to complain. She sighed in a put-upon way. "Four strikes they've been awake, and not still the whole time. If Jilen wasn't so busy with her patients, I'd take them down to her."

Gredar thought he might be able to help. He picked the youngsters up by their scruffs and brought them close to his face so they could smell his breath and his scent. "Settle down, kitlings," he said in a low, even voice, and then licked them both on the tummy until they were limp and purring. He settled them on his lap and began to comb their fur with his half-extended claws, using his strength and size to comfort and control. He'd seen so many kits in thirty cycles. His mother's clan was large and fecund, and he was always in demand as a guardian. Yet he still found the youngsters such a joy—especially when they could be persuaded to calm down and fall asleep with a bit of careful handling.

"Oh, thank you, dear. They're being so boisterous today, and I've got so many things to attend to. Have you been to your workroom yet?"

"Not yet," he said as she stood and stretched, clearly trapped for too long in the one position by her little charges. She was getting a bit too old for this, though she did adore her grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. "But I'm yours to command, Mother, as always."

She lightly gripped his neck in affection. "You were missed, my son. Buhi tries, but he's got none of your patience and the kits do misbehave around him."

"He's still a kit himself...what's that?" He squinted over to the far corner of the room, where a strange hairless creature was huddling.

"Oh! My new pet, though I think I might have taken on more than I can handle."

Gredar frowned. His mother hadn't kept a jopa in years, always saying that she had more than enough pets with all the kitlings in the household. She walked over to the animal and unwound a rope from a hook in the wall, then tugged it to its feet. With some reluctance, it let her pull it over to Gredar, where she made it sit close by him.

"What is it? A jopa?" Instinctively he raised his hands to guard his precious charges—no harm had ever come to a kit in his care, and he wasn't going to allow it now, though the animal wasn't acting in any way threatening.

“We think so,” she said, giving the thing a slightly puzzled glance. It was like no jopa he’d ever seen. Apart from a long mane of black hair which someone had taken the trouble to braid, and a tuft of the same colour between its legs, it was completely naked of any fur. It also had no tail, which looked very peculiar on its bare rump, but for all that, it was elsart—well-proportioned, and the bare skin was an attractive colour, a light even brown, like dried clay of fine quality. “I took it to Martek. He couldn’t find a record of a similar creature in any of the histories. His best guess is that it’s merely an aberrant form.”

Gredar reached and touched the animal’s shoulder—it flinched away from his hand. “Nervous, isn’t it? Where did you get it? It’s a male—are you going to cut it?”

She sighed, rubbing her clan medallion absently. “Truly, I considered it, it was such a nuisance in the beginning. Karwa caught it on a hunting trip. He was going to butcher it but then he thought I might find it elsart. Which I did, but it’s been no end of trouble. It has a dreadfully finicky stomach, can’t eat meat unless it’s cooked, and you daren’t let it off the chain or it tries to run off. It gets into everything if it’s left alone in the kitchen or my workroom. I suspect its former owner wasn’t sorry to lose it.” Gredar cocked his head at his mother quizzically. “Karwa’s sure it’s an escaped pet. It was wearing some odd ornaments, and its hair was braided. But no one’s trained it, that’s for sure.”

“It’s behaving now.” Gredar shifted the kitlings carefully so he could lean forward and take a closer look at the oddity. Its eyes were dark brown like other jopas, but rather larger and the wrong shape, and no jopa had this long tail of hair on its head, nor fur this deep, pure black. “Does it make any noise?”

“When Karwa first brought it, it never shut up. It’s settled down now, but don’t let it fool you—it’s a little terror.”

The jopa stared up at Gredar, nostrils flared. Gredar wondered how clever it was—some jopas were very cunning in an animal way, which made them amusing but also something of a nuisance. He could understand why Karwa thought it might be a suitable gift for his grandmother, but she had more than enough to deal with. “Perhaps you should cut it after all.”

“I would, but Martek thought it might be possible to breed from it. I’m not interested for myself, but you know what he’s like, always trying new things and investigating. I told him he should take it as a pet but he said he was worried what it would do to his books.”

Gredar chuckled—after the loyalty to the clan and Kadit herself, nothing was as important to their historian than his books. “Gredar, dear, you don’t want it, do you? You’re so good with the young ones—maybe you could train it properly.”

“Me? But I’m due to travel again in half a moonsweep.”

“Well, you could take it for that long.”

His mother looked harassed, and though he doubted it was because of this animal, Gredar hated to have her upset for such a trivial cause. He rubbed his head against her hand. “Yes, of course I can. Now, do you want to take these two mischiefs back or should I see if their older brother can handle two soundly sleeping kitlings?”

“Oh, Buhi will rouse them up again. Let me take them, but if you could let Jilen know they’ll need feeding in a half-strike, I’d be grateful.”

“Certainly.” He passed the two kitlings carefully to her—they didn’t stir and looked as peaceful as he was sure they were not when awake—then picked up the jopa’s leash. “Did you name him?”

“Yes—I thought ‘Kirin’ suited him.”

Gredar laughed. “That’s mean, mother.” ‘Bald one’—accurate but hardly flattering.

“It’s not like it has feelings to be offended,” she said with a whimsical flick of her ear. “The only good thing about it is that it doesn’t bite. It did try to use its fists and feet but after a few smacks, it stopped. It’s easy to get it under control that way—it’s not even as strong as a young jopa—but it’s not how a pet should be trained.”

Gredar had to agree. “Perhaps breeding from it would be a bad idea. Up you get, Kirin.” He tugged the leash and noted with amusement that it put its hands over its rather obvious genitals. No jopa he’d seen had exposed its kala in this fashion when not in use. Most likely it had been driven out of its troop for its strangeness—such was the way of jopas, who were quite vicious towards their own kind.

“Oh, and you can’t let it go outside. It nearly froze to death one night when Buhi put it out for being a nuisance. Jilen had to work quite hard to save its life.”

“It has no fur—couldn’t Buhi work that out for himself?” Gredar growled a little in irritation. Buhi could be a bit of a fool sometimes. “I’ll take it upstairs. Buhi can make himself useful and bring its bedding.”

“Thank you, dear.” He bent forward and accepted an affectionate nuzzle, raked his unclawed fingers very gently down the tummies of the sleeping kits, then tugged his new pet to follow him. “Come on, Kirin. Let’s see if you like your new quarters.”

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Temin didn’t even think of resisting the enormous male who now seemed to be in charge of him. Not only could the youngest of these towering cat people outrun him with ease and knock him down with the

slightest force from their powerful paws, he had nowhere to run to. It was still winter, he didn't know how far he'd been taken from the podpod, he had no clothes or weapons or transport to help him get back there, and after six weeks of lousy food and worse sleep, of sitting on stone floors and being yanked around by his neck and occasionally his hair, he was exhausted and sick. It was just easier to let this big cat-man pull him along and hope the shefting bugger wouldn't knock him around too much.

There was equally no point in trying to make himself understood. He'd yelled himself hoarse in those first few days after he was captured, but that only seemed to amuse or annoy his new owners. Their own speech sounded nothing more than growls and purrs and chirps to his ears, yet they were clearly having proper conversations—he could only assume he sounded just as incomprehensible to them.

They were going to the kitchen. Temin didn't mind that. It was warm there, and after nearly dying a month ago because no one had realised their pathetic human pet couldn't survive the outdoor temperatures here without the cat people's beautiful, thick pelts, warmth wasn't something he took for granted. The house temperature was well above freezing thanks to the kitchen's huge oven and closed heaters powered by wood in some of the rooms, but the stone floors were cold, and it didn't occur to anyone that he might find them chilly. He was left most days to sit in corners or at the feet of the female who seemed to own the house, his arse turning to ice and his back knotting up in tension. He'd thought himself relatively hardy and fit before all this—now he felt three times his age, and wondered if his joints would ever recover.

The kitchen ran day and night, feeding the dozens of occupants, visitors, and other pets—some birds in cages, and at least six of the monkey things, leashed and collared as he was. Temin had learned to keep well clear of them—they bit and saw him as an enemy. He looked around warily now, but there were none to be seen, just a busy, well-equipped kitchen preparing the evening meal. A carcass big as a man was being roasted on a spit on the far side, and he could smell bread being baked. It made him hungry, but he knew better than to expect the food to actually taste as good as it smelled.

There were twenty or so of the cat people working or idling in the kitchen, and they greeted Temin's keeper enthusiastically. Most of the workers came over to lick or pat him, running their claws down his arms and back in a way that looked terrifying but which was obviously some kind of friendly gesture. Once everyone had said hello, he spoke to one of the females apparently about Temin's bed, and the hated litter tray, pointing and gesturing that made it clear he was asking for something to be done with them as she nodded. So things were going to change for him—Temin didn't know if that was good or bad yet. He wondered why the head female had given him away now. Maybe they just did that kind of thing.

He would never find out, most likely. Some nights, the idea that not only was he going to spend the

rest of his life without human company but it would also be spent in confusion and ignorance too, forced tears from him that even missing Jeng could not. Sometimes it made him scream at the cat people in raw frustration at their inability to understand him even a little bit. All it ever earned him was a pat, the gentleness of which depended on how irritated he'd made the nearest cat-person. He didn't do that so much now.

The big male was talking to another male. It had taken him a while to tell individuals apart. He could just about distinguish some of the females by their fur markings, and many of them wore elaborate pendants and bangles which he was starting to recognise, but the males came and went so often, he had yet to work out how many there were, and who was who. But this big green-eyed fellow, the one with the firm hand on his leash and a pendant like a golden starburst around his neck—Temin was sure he'd never seen him before. It was eerie how much they resembled Terran felines—not the domestic cats, but the great, now extinct wild cats. He'd once seen photos of cheetahs, and these animals reminded him strongly of them, only without the spots. He couldn't get used to the fact they were bipedal—he kept expecting them to drop onto all fours, but he'd never seen any of them do that except to pick something up or play with a youngster.

Now the shefting leash was tugged again, the male having finished his conversation. He picked up a bowl of food and rubbed his face against the female who gave it to him—they did that a lot, rubbing their heads against each other. That and casual fucking. Hardly a day went past that he didn't see one or other of the adults bent over a table in the kitchen or the storeroom, being enthusiastically taken, before getting up and going on with their routine. It seemed to mean about as much to them as a kiss. Very strange, and a little disturbing too.

He was led through the house again, and to his surprise, found he was being taken up to the next floor. The stairs weren't human scale, and seeing the way Temin struggled with the outsize treads, the male just picked Temin up, cupped a hand under his butt, and carried him, while Temin's skin flushed hot in embarrassment. This was worse than the shefting litter tray!

Utterly unaware of his feelings, the male carried him as if he weighed nothing, as if Temin was a tenth his size and not nearly half. But he was also careful with him as some of the others had not. Temin didn't feel he had to worry about being dropped and having his backside bruised for a week or more as had happened twice now. This one seemed to be used to carrying things with care—he'd handled those two kittens downstairs like he did it all the time. Maybe he was the tribe's babysitter or something.

The male continued to carry him even once they'd climbed the stairs, Temin on one arm, the bowl of food held in the crook of the other. Temin thought about struggling to be put down, but the creature's thick, tawny fur was warm and soft against his bare skin, and all he was likely to do was earn himself a cuff to the

head, so he behaved himself. He'd not been taken to the upper floors yet—to him, this house was enormous, but then everything was, built to the scale of residents whose adults were four metres high and where even the children overtopped him. Only the fact that they didn't seem to use chairs of any kind meant Temin could see over the tops of tables and desks here.

Up to now, he'd been forced to sleep either in the kitchen or in a store room next to it, on an admittedly luxurious fur covered cushion, but he'd still been far from warm or comfortable. He'd never seen any of the private quarters, so despite his general depression at his situation, he was curious to see something new. It turned out to be a spacious, airy room, the walls, like all those on the lower floor, intricately and brightly decorated with images of the cat people and their world. Filtered light came through long banks of glass bricks in the ceiling—ventilation, as downstairs, was through slits in the wall, and here, in the roof, though the vents seemed to be closed for the moment. To one side stood a polished reddish wood desk with the usual cushion in front of it, and a low bed that looked nearly the size of a podpod, covered with furs, with a carved headboard that looked very old. There were a couple of furry bolsters, but no pillows, sheets or blankets—Temin hadn't seen cloth of any kind the whole time he'd been captive, but since the cat people didn't wear clothes, maybe that wasn't surprising. They used soft leather for towels and wiping things down, which meant there was very little Temin could steal and use as a replacement for his missing clothing.

He might find something in this male's quarters, though. Maybe if he acted like a perfectly well-behaved pet, this one might trust him enough to let him off the leash. The feel of it around his throat had made him want to vomit from fear and disgust at first, and though he was getting used to it, he still hated it.

He was set down once the door was closed, though the male kept a firm paw on Temin's leash, talking to Temin the whole time, or at least, vocalising, much as Temin would do himself to a pet cat. The irony that he was supposed to be reassured that the giant predator with the knife-like claws wouldn't hurt him, didn't escape him. But the male wasn't threatening him, and was in fact paying him a lot of apparently well-meant attention.

There was a low table at the far end of the room where the male set the bowl of food, and now he tugged Temin over to sit, apparently expecting him to wait with him while he ate. Temin's leash was tied securely around one of the short legs but with enough play for him to move around if he needed to. Temin reluctantly sat on the cold floor, which meant the top of his head was about level with the table. The male stared at him for a moment or so, then made an odd noise and stood up to fetch the cushion from in front of the desk. Temin, shocked by this sudden consideration, was urged to stand and the cushion placed where he could sit on it.

The relief from the stone floor was immediate—and now he was high enough to at least see what was on the table instead of just its edge. Temin stared at the male who was vocalising at him again—maybe asking if he liked it. Temin smiled and patted the cushion, hoping that conveyed some of his gratitude. At least it seemed to satisfy the male who sat down on his own cushion, his long, thick-furred tail coiled neatly around him.

A plate and knife was retrieved from a drawer under the table—a real bachelor set up if Temin had ever seen one—and then the cooked food was doled out onto the plate. At least the male wasn't eating raw meat, which was about half of what the cat people ate from what Temin could tell. They'd tried to make him eat it the first couple of days, but it had made him vomit uncontrollably. The raw vegetables they'd tried next were almost worse, and Temin hadn't been sure if he would die of food poisoning or starvation first. Finally they'd worked out he could eat cooked meat and vegetables, bread, some of the fruit and a kind of tasteless nut which wasn't plentiful or appealing, but at least didn't make him want to throw up. The problem was, they gave him too little of the nutritious stuff he could eat, and the rest was just watery stodge without much protein. He'd lost weight, he knew that—another reason he was in no position to make a run for it.

He suddenly found a manageable piece of cooked, pale green vegetable shoved in front of his face, held on the knife the male was using for his own meal. Temin blinked up at his owner—was he supposed to eat it off the knife? The male was waiting patiently, no sign that he was irritated by Temin's hesitation. Temin decided he didn't quite have enough courage to put anything sensitive near the wicked looking blade, so he pulled the vegetable off the knife and held it in his hands. The male made a little chirrup when he did that—he didn't *sound* annoyed—and placed a small dish in front of Temin to catch any falling food. Protecting the lovingly polished wood of this handsome inlaid table was the most human thing Temin had seen any of them doing, and it made his throat close up a little in homesickness.

Observing him falter in his eating, the male cocked his head as if concerned. Temin smiled and made himself stuff some of the vegetable into his mouth. It was protein-poor, and rather bland, like nearly everything else he'd eaten—they didn't seem to go in for spices or herbs at all—but he'd eaten it before, so he knew it wouldn't kill him.

As soon as he finished the vegetable, he found a large piece of meat shoved in front of him. He took it, but then was at a loss to know what to do with it—it was easily a kilo or more in weight, and he had nothing to cut it with. He put it on the plate, thinking he would have to gnaw at it in some way, but then he heard a low growl. His guts turned to ice as he slowly looked up, expecting a blow at the very least, and he flinched as the huge knife descended. But all that happened was that the meat was speared and removed,

taken back to the male's plate, and returned in smaller pieces Temin could easily manage. He was so dumbstruck, he could only stare in surprise—the male stared back, apparently waiting for his response.

Temin reached out and took a bit of the meat, and smiled. “Good!” he said cheerfully, and mimed eating heartily. The male chirped and then touched Temin's arm gently with one huge paw—a paw that could easily kill him but which now, with claws sheathed, felt like being caressed by a furry cushion. Then Temin was left to eat his meat in peace.

The male was watching him again as he finished what he could—they always gave him too much, but it was better than too little, he supposed, and the meat was welcome. Temin decided a little physical display of gratitude would probably work better than smiles, since he doubted his expressions meant much to these creatures. He reached over and put his hand on the male's thickly-furred arm, digging his fingers in carefully—he jumped as the male lifted his other hand, but it was only so he could pet Temin, just as carefully. A low purr came from that massive throat, loud as a drill.

And it was then he realised, he'd been going about this all *wrong*. He'd been acting like he was a slave or a prisoner, the helpless pawn of these huge bastards, and he'd missed the really important thing—he was a *pet*. And pets got their owners to do all kinds of things for them without any need for language. He'd seen for himself how cats had normally intelligent and independent humans running to their beck and call with a few well-placed yowls and carefully doled out acts of apparent affection. Shefting shit, he'd even learned about it in school—why the human colonists had brought some animals with them which had no economic or nutritional importance. Humans needed the emotional rewards of grooming, of caring, and while children and friends could fulfil that to a certain extent, pets offered so much in that way to their human carers that it overrode their relative uselessness as food animals. These cat people must have the same basic urges—and if Temin wanted to make his lot more comfortable, he would have to ‘train’ his owner just as cats and dogs had done Terrans for thousands of years.

So he'd just discovered that touch was appreciated—maybe he could try that head-rubbing thing the cat people went in for. Tentatively he bent and rubbed his forehead along the furred arm, and the purr got a little louder, the petting a little more enthusiastic. He started to suppress a grin, then wondered why he was bothering—if by some miracle they ever worked out what his facial expressions meant, they still wouldn't realise he was attempting to manipulate them. He was just a dumb animal to them.

He let the male pet him for a little bit, but then sat up and stretched—no point in letting the guy think that Temin was easy, after all. The male let him go immediately, unusually respectful of his wishes, then got to his feet, removing the food and dishes to a side room Temin couldn't see into. The male—Temin thought

he should really start to name these creatures to keep them straight—returning with a cleaning leather, kneeling and taking Temin’s hands carefully to wipe them, then his face. This, Temin was used to, because these cat people were as fastidious as their little Terran cousins—only they liked water too, unfortunately, and had given him several unwelcome freezing cold baths to satisfy their need for hygiene.

But none of them had been this gentle before, and Temin found it soothing. The male—Temin decided he would call him Xexe, after a large cat his aunt had owned when he was small—wiped his own face and muzzle, then returned the cloth to wherever he’d got it. Temin stretched out on the cushion—leather too, but soft and supple against his skin, such a pleasure after stone floors—and thought that this wasn’t so bad, compared to how it had been and how much worse it could be. Things might be taking a turn for the better, at last.



Gredar chuckled to himself as he cleaned the dishes—his new pet was far better behaved than his mother had led him to believe, and quite a delight. Jopas could be such noisy, unsettled creatures, but this one sat nicely and made small but charming sounds—one could call it well-mannered in fact. He wondered if the trouble his mother had had with it was more than a little down to the carelessness of the younger kits like Buhi, and a simple misunderstanding of how to put the animal at its ease. Kirin’s nakedness was a challenge—the poor thing had to be cold all the time. However could it have survived in the wild? Perhaps it had been taken as a pet as a youngster, and had never lived outdoors for long. He also wondered how old it was—it was likely to be an adult, but it was such an oddity, nothing about it could be taken for granted.

He would have to make some sketches—already he could imagine the decorations on a set of dishes. Perhaps a gift for his mother on her birthday. Yes, that would be the very thing. It was several moonsweeps away, and even with the next gathering not long in coming, he would have time. He might take Kirin with him to the gathering—it would cause a sensation once the other clans got a look at him.

He heard the door opening and then an angry screech from his pet—he hastily went out into the room and found Filwui crouching in front of Kirin while the jopa cringed back against the table leg. “Leave him be, Filwui,” he warned, as his grooming mate reached out a hand to tug at Kirin’s hair.

Filwui gave a little growl of frustration as he stood. “I was only looking. What are you doing with it? I thought it was Kadit’s.”

“She gave it to me, and why are we talking about a jopa when I’ve not seen you in nearly a

moonsweep?”

Filwui chirruped and flung himself at Gredar, claws extended and teeth bared in lust. Gredar took him hard and fast over the desk, biting Filwui’s neck with less care than he’d give a more inexperienced lover, and breathing his familiar scent in with joy, reanointing Filwui with his own scent, claiming him. Ah, he’d missed Filwui. Casual couplings were fine, but there was something about having someone hard and warm to curl up against in the evening.

Filwui pulled him onto the bed when they were done, and began to rake his claws down Gredar’s back as Gredar stretched extravagantly on the furs and said, “I hear you’ve been filling Buhi’s head with nonsense about my technique.” He turned and looked over his shoulder—Filwui’s yellow eyes were full of mischief, but this was nothing new.

“The kitling’s a little gullible—is that my fault?”

“If my mother learns what you’re telling her grandson, you’ll have to explain yourself to her. The lad’s more than a handful already—the cheeky brat propositioned me in the street today.” Filwui only laughed at Gredar’s pout. “You’d think these white hairs would earn me some respect, but no....”

Filwui bent and licked at Gredar’s muzzle where those white hairs told the world that Gredar was an old daiyne and deserving of kindness. “I respect you,” Filwui growled, and Gredar felt himself tighten with need again, for all that he’d just spent his lust so forcefully.

He surged and flipped his young mate, pinning him down, biting his neck almost to blood point. Filwui began to purr, his claws retracting and extending in reflex as he rubbed his groin against Gredar. Gredar held him down long enough to exert proper dominance, then moved down and licked his unruly lover to climax while Filwui squirmed and purred and clawed at him.

Gredar loomed over him when he was done. “Respect me always, kitling,” he murmured, rubbing his face against Filwui’s jaw.

“I can’t. I’m dead.”

Gredar chuckled and rolled off him, keeping a proprietary hand on Filwui’s powerful chest. “So, dead one, tell me your news.”

They lay together, tails companionably entwined while Filwui brought him up to date, and Gredar told him all the gossip from the gathering. “And did many females present to you?” Filwui asked, his tail sliding slyly between Gredar’s legs.

“One or two.” More than Gredar could have expected, actually. He could have sworn at least one of them was even in her fertile phase, which seemed a little unwise. Gatherings were notoriously wanton affairs,

but he would have thought a fertile female would be looking for a male of proven potency, and not an old daiyne like himself. “I know you’ve been busy—I don’t even need to ask.”

“It’s my duty to the clan, you know that.”

Gredar poked him. “Duty to your balls, you mean,” and Filwui flicked an ear at him. “You should come to the next gathering.”

“Can’t. We’ll be raising the new barn and stables soon and that will take at least a moonsweep to complete. Kadit will eat me if I don’t apply myself.”

“She might well do.”

Filwui nodded absently, his eyes drifting across the room to the jopa. “You still didn’t explain how you ended up with it. Can I have a look? Kadit never let me get close enough—she said it was too bad-tempered.”

“It’s not, actually.” Feeling a little guilty at abandoning his pet just as he was trying to settle it in, Gredar got up and went over to the table under which Kirin was still hiding. “Come on, pretty one—he won’t hurt you.”

Kirin was reluctant but with a couple of gentle tugs on his leash, he was persuaded to leave his refuge. Gredar brought him over to the bed, but before he could place him on it, Filwui lifted his hands in protest. “Careful—they’re dirty things.”

“Kirin’s not, and he’s got lovely manners.”

“That’s not what your mother said.”

“My mother had Buhi looking after him. The idiot doesn’t have the first idea how to care for an animal or a kit, you know that. Look at him—does he seem dirty? The biggest problem is that he’s probably cold all the time. Here, let him onto the bed.”

Kirin sat down in his dainty fashion, hands folded over his groin—of course Filwui would notice that. “Is he hiding something?”

“No, it’s just his way. Shhh, it’s all right, Kirin,” he murmured, tugging his pet’s hands away so Filwui could see his strange hair arrangement.

“‘Kirin’?”

“Yes, I know. A torqu name for an elsart creature. I might rename him. Right now, I’m just settling him in.” Filwui reached a hand out to touch Kirin’s braid—the jopa flinched and tried to move away from him. “Don’t tease him—but that reminds me, I was going to tidy this up. Want to help?”

“I’ve never seen such a thing before, on a jopa or anything else.”

“I know. I want to find out more about him—there might be more of his kind and we could breed them. They’d make excellent trade items at gatherings.”

“Hmmm,” Filwui said, beginning to undo Kirin’s braid as Gredar fetched a brush. Kirin clearly didn’t like someone else being in the room, but considering his nervousness, he was behaving beautifully.

Filwui had shifted his exploration from Kirin’s hair to his body—his lower body. As Kirin sat rigid, his paws in tight fists, Filwui stroked his fingers over those peculiar genitals. “Strange, very strange. Look—he’s getting excited.”

“I don’t think he likes you touching him like that,” Gredar protested mildly.

“Nonsense—he’s enjoying it. See? His kala is hard. Maybe we should find him a female to fuck. Poor thing will be lonely if we don’t get him mated.”

Gredar very much doubted Kirin’s welfare was of any real interest to Filwui—his kala was though. It was a strange thing—blunt and rather thick, as thick and nearly as long as an adult daiyne’s even though the jopa’s body was less than half the size of any grown member of their clan. And it was also odd that the kala was hard without there being anything there for Kirin to fuck. Gredar tried to remember what a jopa’s kala normally looked like, but he had to confess he’d paid little attention to the animals before now, and their genitals were hidden in thick fur just as a daiyne’s was. It might be that any jopa would look like this if they were shaved—he’d have to ask Jilen about it.

Filwui suddenly bent and sniffed hard at Kirin’s kala, then licked it, making Gredar’s pet cry out. Gredar touched Filwui’s shoulder. “What are you—?”

“It’s...Gredar, you have to....” Filwui’s voice was rather strangled and harsh. He ran his hand roughly over Kirin’s groin then shoved it into Gredar’s face, against his nose. “Can’t you smell it? Taste it?”

It was...rather musky, salty, and not particularly pleasant. “Filwui, I don’t....”

Suddenly, it hit, like...having claws in his hips and a tongue on his kala...he felt hot and desperate to.... “Paznit! Filwui, I need....”

“Me too!” Filwui bent over the bed, his swishing tail demanding attention. “Now! Gredar!”

Gredar needed no urging, finding Filwui’s taeng open and ready for him, but even as he fucked Filwui so hard he was sure he had to be causing an injury, he was amazed at his reaction. What was in Kirin’s scent that was so potent?

He spent very quickly, his hips jerking in the aftershocks, and then, exhausted from the sudden passion and lust so rapidly sated, he hung over his lover’s body like a gutted kizaz. His pet, tethered too close to them for comfort, had retreated to the extent of the leash and was watching him warily with wide eyes, his

unbound hair all around his body. “Sorry, Kirin,” Gredar murmured, apologising for frightening him.

“Never mind your paznit animal, get off me.”

Gredar growled at the blatant disrespect from his inferior, and dug a reprimanding claw in Filwui’s haunch, making him whine, before climbing off him.

Filwui flopped on the bed. “That was....”

“Most peculiar,” Gredar said, sitting next to him. His kala still twitched as if it would be ready for another round. He didn’t know where the energy for this was coming from at all.

“I was going to say, ‘wonderful’.” Filwui flicked an ear at him. “I have a new appreciation for why you wanted this thing for a pet. Does your mother know about this?”

“No, and you’re not to tell her.”

Filwui sat up on his elbows to look at him. “Why not?”

“Because it’s...torgu.”

Filwui scoffed. “It’s not. It’s just another oddity about your pet. Now if we could put whatever it is he produces into a pot, we could increase the clan wealth a thousand fold overnight! Lend him to me so I can....”

“No. Leave him alone, Filwui. I won’t have him milked. He’s too...rare for that.”

“Exactly. A rarity to exploit.”

Gredar growled in warning, really annoyed. “No. I have spoken, kitling.”

“I’m sorry.” Filwui’s tail coiled around Gredar submissively. “I was just...surprised by all that.”

“Me too.” Gredar moved closer to his pet, and got hold of his leash. “I need to finish settling him in and then I’ve got work to do—I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Filwui cocked his head as if he hadn’t been expecting a dismissal, but Gredar hadn’t been back a sun pass and he’d told the simple truth. He was only waiting for Kirin’s bed and toilet box to be brought up, and then he had to get on.

“Tomorrow then.” Filwui reached over and patted Kirin on the head. “Farewell, baldy.”

“Filwui....”

“Going—see you!”

Gredar flicked his tail in amused irritation as his grooming mate departed. “Isn’t he mean, Kirin?” He stroked his pet’s face. “Now, let me sort out all this elsart hair of yours and you can rest while I work.”

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The new male had handled him carelessly and painfully and though ‘Xexe’ seemed less than happy with that, he hadn’t stopped him. That was when Temin realised his smugness over manipulating his new owner was ridiculous. Had he really thought he could make these beasts do a damn thing they didn’t want? He was just a toy to them. He could still feel the paws—the fingers—of the other male on him, stimulating him against his will, the rough tongue on his dick making him hard even through his terror at what was going to happen to him. And then those huge bodies rutting almost on top of him, coming close to crushing him—he really thought he’d been about to die. He was still shaking.

But now Xexe was trying to soothe him by grooming him, and if Temin was to be a good little pet, he would have to be soothed, even though he couldn’t stop trembling. He desperately wanted to cover himself, win some privacy, but pets didn’t have privacy—who’d think they needed it?

As he brushed and braided Temin’s hair, Xexe made little chirruping noises that sounded enquiring in tone—but Temin didn’t know if his owner was asking him if he was all right, telling him to settle the sheft down, or something else. He clenched his fists and bit back the sudden urge to scream and scream his frustration until his throat broke—it would do no good, and undo the progress he’d made, little as it was.

Xexe’s hands on his hair, so slow and careful for all their enormous size, reminded him of Jeng, and that memory, twisted up though it was with one of unwelcome alien hands on him, made his chest ache and his eyes get itchy. He covered his face with his hands, trying to hide it from his master, trying to keep at least this for himself, but it was in vain. His hands were tugged away, though not with any violence, and a pair of huge green eyes peered at him. Temin could make nothing of the cat’s expression—he knew enough about the domestic ones to know that what owners saw as amusement or hauteur were nothing of the kind.

“Go away,” he said, voice clogged, more for his own benefit than because he expected the creature to understand. “Why don’t you eat me or leave me alone?” He rubbed at his face. Maybe he was finally having the nervous breakdown he was surely owed after all this.

Xexe made a weird little growl, then pushed on Temin’s shoulder, the command to lie down very clear. He had no choice but to obey, but he began to shake again. He really was cracking up—he felt cold, and so very tired, and he half thought of provoking this beast into killing him. One bite from those massive teeth—couldn’t hurt for too long, could it? But he couldn’t make himself move, as Xexe arranged him on the furs of his own bed, and began to stroke him with his fingers, claws carefully retracted, down his arm, his side, his back. It was the same thing he’d done with the kittens downstairs—intended to calm and comfort. So Xexe had at least understood he was upset. That was something.

Temin stared up at his owner, who stared back, furred face inscrutable, his vocalisations silenced for

now, the only clue to his mood the twitching tip of his luxurious tail, coiled over his thigh. Temin found himself becoming mesmerised by the slow, continuous stroking, and that tiny tail flick, and his breathing eased, as did his shaking.

“I’m not a pet,” he said to Xexe, who only chirruped back as he kept up his caresses. He reached out a hand and touched the flicking tail—such gorgeous, soft fur they all had, the guard hairs tipped with deepest black, the roots and underfur a pure cream, the overall effect a tawny perfection. There was some variation between individuals, some were a little darker than others, some had spots here and there. Some had the suggestion of faint striping, especially in the females, and Xexe seemed to have more white on his muzzle than the creepy male who’d come calling. Was that one Xexe’s lover? Hard to tell when they all fucked so often and so casually.

The tail tuft felt so soft against his hand, and the bed furs thick and yielding under him. For the first time in...well, since before he’d crashed, he was warm and comfortable. He yawned, startling himself and Xexe who gave a little yowl of surprise. He clamped his mouth shut, afraid what a display of teeth might mean in this culture, but Xexe didn’t seem to be alarmed or annoyed. “I’m tired,” Temin said. “I want to go home and eat food I recognise, and make love to Jeng, and see my mother and my sisters and their kids, and fly a podpod again, and wear clothes. I want a beer. I want my own room. I want to go home.”

Almost as if he was responding, Xexe bent and licked his face, his tongue incredibly rough but not actually unpleasant. Was Temin being tasted? Cleaned? Comforted? He had no idea—pet cats licked humans all the time, but he had no idea about that either. He could only lie there and let it happen.

He still had Xexe’s tail in his hand—why was that being allowed? He tried to make it lie still, just to see if he could—the muscle power was really amazing. The tails were prehensile, not like Terran cats at all, but they seemed to be used socially, not as a fifth limb. Were these creatures related at all to Terran cats? He couldn’t see how they could be.

He realised with a jolt that Xexe was *encouraging* him to play with his tail. Being playful and teasing him with it, pretending that Temin’s human strength could control any part of him in the least. Xexe was trying to *cheer him up*. Why was this big male able to make some kind of connection with him when none of the others had even tried? Was he someone special among their kind, or just good with animals and children? The need, so powerful, so impossible, to communicate with his captors was like a choking weight. He would have given almost anything to know what was going on in Xexe’s mind, and to have Xexe know his.

He burrowed into the furs, wishing he could hide completely. Xexe took his hands off Temin but only so he could finish Temin’s braid and tie it off. Then the leash was attached to a bed leg and Xexe got up,

‘talking’ to Temin again. Moments later, Temin was covered with a night-black fur that Xexe had fetched from a closet at the other end of the room—finally someone had worked out that he was *cold*.

“You’re either really smart or your friends are shefting idiots,” Temin said, smiling at the male, snuggling into the fur. He had no idea what animal had died to provide it, but he had a strong impression only his own lack of fur had saved him from a similar fate.

Xexe chirruped and patted him, clearly satisfied. He vocalised some more, and Temin realised he was preparing to go out—he pushed off the fur and sat up. “You can’t leave me here on my own! What if that bastard comes back?”

Xexe crouched and stared into Temin’s eyes for long seconds, then pushed him down with a quiet growl, the command clear—lie down, be quiet. “I’ll bite him, I swear,” Temin warned, as Xexe put the fur over him again. “If I can find his balls I’ll kick him in them, I promise.”

More vocalisation, and then Xexe was leaving. Temin could see no sign of a door lock, so he guessed anyone could and would walk in as they pleased. The best he could hope for was that, hidden under this pelt, no one would even notice he was there.

As a tactic, it worked better than he could have hoped. A little while later, he heard someone coming into the room, so he pulled the fur over his head and lay completely still, and when everything had gone quiet, he poked his head out to find his own bed and the shefting litter tray had been left neatly to one side. He needed a piss so that had been well-timed. He was grateful to have at least one chance to relieve himself without a kitchen full of nosy bastards staring at him and his dick. He yawned again, the light doze he’d fallen into barely enough to take the edge off his tiredness. Was he supposed to get onto his own bed now? But pets didn’t take the initiative and Xexe’s bed was a lot warmer and more comfortable, so he decided he would shamelessly exploit his supposed lack of brains until Xexe told him otherwise.

It was a chance to explore, though he couldn’t undo the leash at either end—the leather ropes made incredibly tough knots—so he could only walk to the end of it which wasn’t very far. He couldn’t reach the side room or closet, or the desk, which he felt might have things he could use to escape if and when he could get the rest of it worked out. He *could* reach the low table that Xexe had used to dine on, and the knife would have been a prize, except Temin couldn’t get the shefting drawer catch undone—something else that needed a cat man’s strength, it seemed. He thumped and pushed, even lying on the ground and using his feet, but the lever mechanism under the drawer wouldn’t budge. So much for that idea.

He sat on the cushion again, finally having the leisure to look at his surroundings, though the light through the high glass panels was failing. He was struck again by the obsession these cat people had with

beauty and decoration. The only unpolished wood he'd seen had been used in the kitchen cooking fire—everything else, however mundane, was finished to perfection, and either inlaid or carved. Even the knife Xexe had used at supper had been worked, the metal handle shaped like a leaf. They wouldn't tolerate dirt indoors either, and whenever he'd been out of the kitchen, there was always someone sweeping, polishing or cleaning the floors, railings, even the lamp covers.

But it was the wall paintings that were truly remarkable. Naturalistic in style, the images seemed nearly to walk off the surface of the walls. Some of the creatures and objects, Temin recognised—the cat people themselves, birds, the monkey creatures, fish in lush pools surrounded by greenery, which told him this world was a very different place when winter was over. There were other things he had never seen the like of, and hoped they were fanciful, because if ten metre long snakes with spikes and wings really did live in the trees around here, taking a walk in the woods could get a bit hairy. The walls seemed to be telling a story, but without a guide, Temin couldn't really work out what it was.

What was also obvious was that they disliked abstract and asymmetrical forms. Everything was paired, balanced, recognizable. Colours were harmonious to Temin's human eyes, so he guessed the cat people saw the world much as he did. They liked intense, gem-like colours, deep blues, greens and reds—little black, except for edging, and white and yellow were used for highlighting. The paint was worked into the fabric of the building—into the render. He wondered how old it was. He thought that this wasn't a race that admired change, and that tradition probably was more important than innovation. But he didn't know. He knew so little, and he could be completely wrong in his interpretation.

It wasn't long before he had to stop looking at the pretty pictures, as he could barely see his hand in front of him. Using what was left of the light, he stretched, and did some of the exercises he'd been taught in the academy to counteract bone loss in spacers. He was losing fitness—enforced immobility, the lower grav—but there was nothing he could do about it yet. By his calculation there were about another four standard months before the end of winter, and he had no idea how cold spring was. If he was going to have to make a run for it naked, then he wanted to be sure he could survive the nights. If he could persuade Xexe to let him off the shefting leash, Temin was hoping he could start to collect the necessary equipment he would need to get back to the podpod—if he could ever work out where it was. At the very least, he might be able to find some place to hole up until he could make some clothes and set up a camp. It wouldn't be much of a life, but at least he'd be free.

It was now so dark that if he didn't get back to the bed, he'd never find it again, and he was still tired, so it made sense to get some decent rest while he had the chance. He wondered if Xexe would let him keep

this loose fur which made all the difference to his comfort. He seemed pretty intuitive—Temin should be able to ‘talk’ him into it.

He woke startled and heart thudding with terror as something large moved near him—but as a huge but gentle paw settled on his head and the wavering candlelight made the shadows resolve into Xexe’s form, he relaxed a little. He expected to be turned out of the bed and onto his own, but Xexe just blew out the candle, soft click of pottery against wood telling Temin he’d set the lamp on the table, a clink of metal and chain on the same side table which was probably the elegant pendant, and then Xexe lay down next to him, his thick, warm fur delicious against Temin’s back. He smelled faintly...of earth? Clay? Something foreign, but not unpleasant. Temin wondered what his owner did for a living, because he very much doubted he spent his days dandling kittens and playing with pets.

He lay still, not wanting to be put out as a pest, but Xexe seemed to like him being there, petting him slowly, a low rumbling purr building up in his massive chest and vibrating through Temin’s own. Despite the leash, despite the fact of his captivity, it was impossible not to enjoy the sensuality of touch and warmth, the cushioning of his tired body on layers and layers of fur so dense, he felt a little like he was floating. “It’s nice, Xexe. Thank you.”

The purr got a little louder, and Xexe traced a finger down Temin’s spine. He liked being talked to. He liked being touched. There—that was two things they had in common.



For all it had been the impulse of someone who was frazzled and wanting to rid herself of something tiresome, Gredar was very grateful to his mother for his new pet. Certainly he had not a single complaint to make about Kirin’s manners or behaviour. He’d even taken him down to the pottery, and Kirin had sat on a cushion, the fur that Gredar had given him firmly clutched around his shoulders, and watched Gredar and his people work without causing any fuss or getting in their way. The secret was surely that he’d been cold and miserable since he’d been caught, and that had made him fractious, as it would any creature. Gredar had done what he could to remedy that, and been rewarded with delightful affection. Kirin had such clever fingers, and Gredar had become very fond of his delicate grooming. It was most soothing.

The jopa remained wary of Filwui, but Filwui had learned some manners too, and while Kirin was clearly not inclined to spread his affections around, he was well-mannered and quiet when Filwui visited, to the point where Filwui complained he was a rather boring pet, for all he was elsart. Gredar had only grinned

at his lover and given him something else to amuse him.

When Filwui left, Kirin would curl up against him and make those delightful noises, his small fingers stroking and playing in Gredar's fur until one or both of them fell asleep. On the nights Filwui wasn't there, Kirin always slept in Gredar's bed—warmer for the animal, and Gredar liked his company. And he wasn't the least bit dirty either—he was as fastidious as any daiyne, and after feeding or toileting, always wanted to be clean. Gredar had put out two dishes of water for him, and the jopa, unlike any other of his kind that Gredar had ever heard of, always meticulously reserved one dish for washing, the other for drinking. Gredar was going to put the word out at the next gathering to find out if any other of Kirin's kind was known, because he'd love to breed more of these pretty creatures. He'd decided, reluctantly, not to take Kirin himself though—the poor thing simply could not bear the cold, and there was always a risk he might be molested or hurt in the rather lively gathering atmosphere. Gredar was most anxious to keep his treasure safe.

And now he wanted to surprise his mother, who was in her main workroom with Jilen, discussing the health of the clan, and what herbs and medicines Gredar would need to buy when he travelled to the gathering. The pungent, multilayered smells from the stores wafted over him as he walked in.

His mother rose to greet him. "Gredar, darling, how...?" Then she spotted Kirin. "What are you doing, letting that thing off the leash in here! Get it out—shoo!"

Kirin cringed behind him, and Gredar put a protective arm between his pet and his irritated mother, whose flattened ears and bared teeth boded ill for both of them if he didn't quickly explain. "Mother, it's all right—just watch. Kirin, come out—that's it, pretty one." Kirin slowly emerged, and Gredar patted his head in encouragement. "He won't cause any trouble, I promise you."

His mother growled a little, her erect-furred tail shivering angrily. "Gredar, I remember just how much trouble he caused when he got here...."

"Yes, I'm sure, but I've found how to handle him, and I promise, he's completely safe and quiet now. Sit down, Kirin." He pointed at a spare cushion and his pet folded himself gracefully, looking up at him expectantly. Gredar stroked under his chin. "Good pet."

His mother's angry demeanour eased, and her ears returned to a more friendly position. "Well now, kit, you've made some changes." She sat down, though she still eyed Kirin rather warily. "Have you had to discipline him to get him to this state?"

"Not at all. In fact, all I had to do was make sure he was warm enough, and find food that suited his stomach a little better, and he's been no trouble at all. I never need the leash now, and he obeys everything I tell him to do."

His sister came out from behind the desk and peered at Kirin. “Brother, I have to admit it looks well. You changed the diet, you said?”

“Yes—fewer vegetables, more fruit and meat and he likes a little more bread than he was getting.” He had to be careful not to be seen to be criticising the household, because that reflected on his mother’s dignity. “It takes some time to get these things right.”

“And who has time for a dumb animal anyway?” She was being sarcastic. Jilen disliked animals being wilfully mistreated because it was wasteful and torgu and made work for her when she was already so very busy. “He’s the most curious creature I ever saw.” Kirin spoke at her, and she smiled. “That’s a nicer sound than all that screeching and carrying on in those first few days....”

“He was just frightened,” Gredar said, stroking his pet again, and smiling at the way Kirin rubbed against his hand. “We’re so much bigger than him, and we don’t know what goes on in their tiny brains, do we?”

“Not much, I suspect.” His mother looked away from the jopa, dismissing it, and turned her attention to Gredar. “It’s lovely you’ve done such good work with him, dear, but we have work here too. I hope you’ve come to do some.”

“Yes, Mother.”

They spent nearly two hours going over lists and quantities and trade values until Gredar’s head was spinning. Through it all, Kirin sat, then lay on the cushion without making a sound, just playing idly with Gredar’s tail or rubbing against Gredar’s hand if he happened to pat him. Jilen watched them together from time to time, clearly curious, and as she shut her accounts book, she sat back on her haunches. “Will you take it with you to the gathering?”

“No, it think it’s best this time not to. I wanted to ask you if you would keep an eye on him for me.”

“Me? Brother, when would I have the time? Ask Buhi.”

Gredar’s mother snorted as Gredar gave his twin a look of disbelief. “Sister, would you leave your babies with your oldest? Because I wouldn’t. He nearly killed Kirin, have you forgotten?”

“Ah, yes. I had,” she said, looking thoughtful. “But I really don’t have time. What about Filwui?”

“He’s not very good with Kirin, actually.”

His mother shook her head. “We can’t waste people’s time running after your animal, Gredar. Lock him in your room, I’ll have Buhi feed him and change the litter tray. Leave instructions, I’ll make sure they’re carried out. But you must keep it on the leash while you’re gone—I won’t have it escaping or causing a nuisance. I have spoken.”

Gredar would have argued back but for those three words, which made it a crime even for him to disobey or question. He could only bow his head submissively. “Yes, Mother.”

“Don’t give me that look, kitling. You’ll be gone but half a moonsweep and you can play with it when you return. It’ll be quite safe in your room—just put the breakables away, leave it some toys or something.”

“Yes, Mother.” He strove to sound agreeable and pleasant because it was his habit and his mother was merely being sensible and he, rather foolish, he had to admit. But he couldn’t help but be disappointed that his family weren’t going to take this chance to benefit from Kirin’s wonderful company. He was also worried that being left on his own for so long would unsettle his pet. “Will you allow one or two of my workers to drop in to amuse him?”

“If they can do that and still do their work, yes. I’m not trying to be cruel, dear—I just have a house and a clan to run, and it *is* just an animal.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Jilen rose as he did. “Come see my kitlings, Gredar. You can tell me more about what your pet needs and I’ll make sure Buhi does it right this time.”

He rubbed his head against his mother’s shoulder and accepted a caress, then he and his sister walked out together, Kirin close at his side. “He doesn’t like to be far from you, does he?” she observed.

“It’s Filwui’s fault, I think—he got rather rough with him when I first took him to my room, and now Kirin’s rather suspicious of any one of us he doesn’t know.”

“Most unlike a jopa. They’re usually too brainless to tell the difference between their owner or anyone else, and I’ve never seen one sit still for so long. When it dies, I want to do an autopsy—there’s something odd about the way it walks, and I’m sure his skeleton would be interesting.”

Gredar was grateful then that Kirin couldn’t possibly understand the conversation. “Less talk of my pet dying, Jilen. I don’t know how long his kind lives, but I’m too fond of him to want him to die soon. You don’t have any idea how old he is?”

“He’s got adult teeth so far as I can tell,” she said with a shrug. “Other than that, no idea. I can’t imagine it’s very old, judging by the lack of wear on its teeth. Maybe five, six cycles? It can’t have lived very long without fur.”

“I want to trade for another, if I can—breed him, if he’s really old enough.”

“Mother won’t like that.”

Gredar grinned at her. “I’ll win her over, me and Kirin. Jilen, the main thing is he *has* to be kept



warm—and he mustn't be teased or shouted at. That clod of a kit you call a son isn't at all gentle.”

“Yes, I know and I have no idea why,” she said, sighing. “I got done up by the wrong male, probably. My other kits aren't like that. His twin died too young for me to know if she'd be the same.”

Gredar stroked his sister's arm, the loss, even so long ago, of one of her first birthing, painful still. “Buhi is a strong, healthy kit—just not...naturally gifted with weak things. He's becoming an excellent carpenter, Filwui tells me.”

“He's lazy,” she said, dismissing the praise, though her tail twitched with pleasure. “Now, brother, come and amuse my little ones for a bit while I work. They always behave best for you.”

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“No!” Temin put his hands around his neck, trying to thwart his owner's determined efforts to put that shefting thing on him again. Why? For weeks he'd walked around untethered—what had changed? “No! Leave me alone!”

But of course he had no real chance of making Xexe stop, however much of a tantrum he threw—and to the cat man, that was all it would look like. He glared furiously up at Xexe's inscrutable face as the collar was refastened and the leash tied firmly to the leg of the bed. “I *hate* your shefting guts, you thug. I should pull your whiskers out.”

Xexe crouched and patted him, making the little yowling chirruping noises that Temin had come to understand were intended to calm and comfort—not that they did anything of the sort. “Why are you *doing* this?” he demanded, however futile it was. It made him feel a little better to vent, at least.

Xexe patted him again, stood and then fetched something down from a high shelf. He placed the object in Temin's hands. To Temin's horror, he realised he was looking at a *toy*. A carved wooden ball with smaller objects inside it—for children to test their dexterity by putting them in the right hole and extracting them.

He flung it from him as far as he could, hitting the wall opposite with a tremendous crash, before it rolled under the desk with a forlorn little rattle. “You *must* be shefting *joking!*” he yelled, humiliated and insulted and not caring if Xexe got angry with him. “I'm not a *kid!*”

Xexe made a sorrowful growl and fetched the ball again, placing it on the bed next to Temin, his paw firmly on it as if to say, ‘don't throw it again.’ He stroked Temin's face and back, lingering regretfully, then straightened up as the door opened and another cat man came in. Temin bared his teeth in anger, recognising

him by a white blaze down his nose as the stupid bastard who'd tossed him out in the snow all those weeks ago. Xexe understood bared teeth were a sign of displeasure and Temin was *shefting* displeased right now. What was that oaf doing in here?

To his dismay, after another gentle pat and encouraging chirrup, Xexe left the room, but DopeyBoy stayed. Temin crawled back on Xexe's bed and swore he'd bite the little shit if he tried to touch him.

But DopeyBoy didn't—all he did was check the leash was tied tight, toss the toy at Temin and then he left.

It was only after several incredibly dull hours—he'd got so spoiled by being taken out every day to Xexe's workshop and being allowed to watch the fascinating process of pot making—that Temin realised that Xexe wasn't coming back that day, most likely. Which meant DopeyBoy was his sitter, and for however long it would take for Xexe to come back, the bed, this room and that stupid, offensive toy were his only entertainment. Bugger. It wasn't as if his days were exactly packed with excitement at the best of times, but Xexe was doing his best, and Temin had become used to being treated well and allowed liberties that he knew perfectly well the monkey creature pets would not be. Temin had decided a while back to treat this enforced period of inactivity as he waited for spring, as a vacation—not something he had much experience of, actually—but a vacation with *some* change of pace in a day was at least bearable. This—this was like being in prison. A luxurious prison, for sure, but even on Nixal they didn't make prisoners wear leashes.

He cursed the fact he'd still not been able to steal anything useful like a knife or scissors, though he'd seen plenty of both in use. Xexe was just too damn tidy and orderly. His room was always immaculate, all equipment and implements put away, and his workshop was also meticulously run, never giving Temin a chance to hide a tool or anything sharp to retrieve later. Still, Temin had hoped to have a chance now that Xexe seemed willing to take him to other places within this house and even outside it. Now he'd have to wait.

He did some exercises, and jerked off—something he hadn't had privacy to do since he was captured—but that made him think of Jeng and depressed him, so it wasn't as much fun as it could have been. He was hungry, having got used to being fed three times a day at the same time Xexe ate. He wondered when DopeyBoy would remember to bring him food.

It wasn't until after dark, in fact, when the bastard turned up with cold food cut into huge chunks—exactly how he'd been fed before Xexe had taken charge of him. DopeyBoy dumped the food bowl on the ground, splashed water into the other bowls (without emptying the stale stuff first), glanced at the litter tray with a sniff that sounded disgusted to Temin's ears, and bolted—taking the candle with him.

“Maybe he’s a dog person,” Temin muttered. And how was he supposed to find his food in the dark?

He left eating until morning, which didn’t improve the indifferent food’s taste. Xexe had got the cutting up of meat and vegetables into manageable portions down to a fine art—all Temin could do with these lumps was gnaw around the edges. The bread was stale, and he wasn’t hungry enough to force it down. He left it all in the bowl and had another go at trying to undo the collar—but it was useless. These cat people had some ingenious locks and mechanisms—whatever anyone could say about them, they weren’t backward. Some of the glazed pottery Xexe’s workshop turned out would fetch huge prices in Venshu for its beauty and design.

He lay on the bed and sighed. It was strange but he missed Xexe, even though they could barely communicate on the most basic level. The big guy was just so...careful and kind, and clearly thought about everything he did before he did it. Not like Temin, who was the planet’s most impulsive idiot, at least since good old Dad died. Xexe was more like...Jeng, actually. And wouldn’t that just baste Jeng’s noodle if Temin ever told him that?

Despite his numerous resolutions not to, he found himself thinking of Jeng, wondering what he was up to, wondering if he was trying to find Temin, even against orders. And what the sheft he would make of what Temin was going through now? Would Temin ever be able to tell Jeng, or anyone, about any of this without being thought insane?

But he was getting way ahead of himself. “Wait until you get out of here to worry about that, you doofus,” he told himself.

By the time DopeyBoy turned up—a little earlier than the previous day, so it was still light outside—Temin had catalogued every square centimetre of the room that he could reach, had done three hours of intensive exercises, had tried to meditate twice (and found he still sucked at that), and was nearly climbing the walls in sheer boredom. He’d have torn off a testicle and eaten it for something to read—*anything* at all to read—or even to have had something to write with. He wasn’t going to be sane by the time Xexe returned—if he ever did, and wasn’t that a chilling thought? But no, why would Temin be confined here in Xexe’s room if he wasn’t coming back? He had to resist letting his fears become ridiculous. There was enough about this situation that was bad for him.

DopeyBoy barely looked at him, and certainly wasn’t going to waste time attempting to play with him or amuse him. He picked up the food bowl, scraped away the old food and left more that looked just as unappealing. He didn’t look at the litter tray or touch the water dishes and was clearly going to leave without topping them up.

“Hey! I need more water!” Temin tugged on the cat man’s tail, and pointed at the empty dish—the other one being what he had been using to wash his hands with. But the creature pulled its tail free and walked out, ignoring Temin’s protests.

“Great,” Temin muttered. He’d drink the soiled water if he had to, but he’d already had two fairly nasty stomach bugs as a result of poor hygiene, so he wasn’t anxious for another. He poked at the food, and his appetite died as he contemplated the stodgy mess. No clean water to wash it down with, so best not to eat until he got some. He could go days without food if he had to, and DopeyBoy would probably bring water the next day. He’d kick up a fuss if he had to—*someone* would have to care if he made a nuisance of himself. The exciting thing would be finding out what they would do if he did.



He was hungry and thirsty and more than a little cranky by the time DopeyBoy came back the next day, but when he spotted the dark shape behind him in the doorway, his heart leapt, his crankiness forgotten...until he realised it wasn’t Xexe, but Xexe’s shefting creepy boyfriend. The irritation was replaced by fear and wariness—this one was dangerous, and Temin deeply distrusted his presence here when Xexe was gone.

But the boyfriend seemed only interested in making sure DopeyBoy did a better job than on the previous three days, watching as DopeyBoy changed the water in both dishes and cut the food up into smaller pieces, though it was still the same crap Temin had been getting. DopeyBoy also dealt with the litter tray, which was good because it was starting to stink. Why the boyfriend had such a sudden interest in Temin’s welfare, he had no idea—he just wanted him to get out.

DopeyBoy put the candle lamp on the table, then hung around the doorway, as if wanting to leave. The boyfriend crouched down by Temin, and seemed to be waiting for him to eat. Temin wasn’t going to do anything for this bastard, so he just sat and stared back, pretending like the thing wasn’t bothering him.

The boyfriend extended a paw and suddenly the claws came out—Temin couldn’t stop himself jumping, and a low growl came from the boyfriend’s throat. He poked a claw through a bit of meat and held it under Temin’s nose. Temin shook his head. He wasn’t going to let him hand feed him—it was bad enough when Xexe did that and he *liked* Xexe.

The boyfriend held the meat for a few more seconds, then flicked it off back into the dish as if he’d got bored. With a screech of pottery against stone, he shoved the bowl away as he leaned in closer to Temin.

Temin scooted back as far as he could on the bed but there wasn't much play in the leash. He tugged at the collar in frustration, hoping maybe it had come loose and by a miracle he'd be freed—but it was secure, leaving him in easy reach of this male. What was the bugger up to?

The boyfriend yowled something and DopeyBoy came over—rather uncertainly, or so it looked to Temin—before crouching down. Then the boyfriend reached over and grabbed Temin's leash, dragging him forward, half-choking him in the process.

“Watch it, you shefting shit!” His protests were ignored as he was pulled off the bed and onto the cold, hard floor, his arse hitting the stone with a painful thump. He found himself shoved between the younger male's legs, then his arms were pulled behind him and held fast by strong paws. The boyfriend took a moment to look him over, and then, movements unhurried, deliberate, he put his paws on Temin's knees and forced his legs apart. The boyfriend growled and then bent to lick at Temin's dick, his rough tongue hot and insistent against cringing flesh, tasting and exploring where he was not welcome. Temin began to struggle, kicking with all his strength against the male's body and legs, and bellowing, hoping someone would come and see what the fuss was about.

But it was hopeless—he could never defeat these creatures even if he was fully fit and big as Jeng. The boyfriend didn't even seem to be irritated by his fighting back—he just sat back and watched Temin wear himself out, paws on Temin's ankles, holding them down. The other male growled, and the boyfriend reached out and grabbing Temin's braid, yanking it agonisingly, pulling his head forward while the rest of him was held back, like he was trying to tear his head off. Temin screamed again, but the boyfriend dragged Temin's braid painfully tight around his head and across his mouth, turning it into a gag. Temin struggled and tried to yell but it was effective as it was cruel—he could swear the bastard snickered as he watched Temin trying to breathe, drooling around the choking obstacle.

I'll kill you, Temin swore, glaring at the male watching him with half-closed yellow eyes. *Just let me get my pistol and you'll be one dead kitty cat, you fucker.*

The boyfriend yawned, exposing frightening perfectly white canines. A warning—as if Temin needed one. Then the boyfriend leaned forward, placing his claws on Temin's belly, the needle-like tips digging in painfully but not breaking the skin. Yet. Temin shivered, his stomach muscles contracting under the creature's grip. He was sure Xexe wouldn't want him hurt, but he wasn't at all sure this animal gave a damn.

I could be killed. For real, right now. And he was utterly helpless to do the slightest thing to even slow them down. He could only stare, breath straining through his nose, teeth jammed around the distasteful mass of hair in his mouth as the boyfriend pinned him down. The flickering candlelight made him look even

more alien, primitive, but this *wasn't* just some dumb animal. It was a creature as smart—maybe smarter—than Temin, and much, much stronger. Whatever it wanted, wouldn't be something as simple as dead prey.

The paw moved down over his groin, and began to knead, claws half-retracted, ready to spring out again in a microsecond. Temin started to struggle frantically as he suddenly realised what was going on, and sheft it, he wasn't going to let this thing molest him again. He screamed through the gag, but the braid was just pulled tighter, forcing his head back against the younger male's chest. The boyfriend chirruped—he was *pleased* at his reaction. *Sick fuck!* Temin yelled in his head.

The candle flickered again, suddenly went out. But cats could see in the dark.

Chapter 2

Free at last, Gredar fairly ran up the stairs. Now he'd done his duty to the clan for a cycle, he could look forward to a nice long uninterrupted time in the settlement—and time with Kirin, whom he'd missed. Funny how a dumb creature could be such good company, and Gredar had got used to his strange, naked features, his odd vocalisations. He was probably getting soft in his old age, he told himself as he went to open his door. But as he put his hand on the latch, he stopped, sniffing at the cloying stench of rot, decay, drifting out from *inside* his room.

He opened the door, and the smell became overpowering. He nearly gagged, his hand over his nose barely mitigating the reek. Kirin lay motionless on the bed and didn't react at all to his arrival. Gredar threw his pack down and dashed over to the bed, seized with fear that his pet had died and been left to putrefy. With relief, he quickly realised that most of the smell was coming from rotting food in the bowl on the ground and from a dirty litter tray, and that Kirin, huddled under his furs, was breathing. But that relief disappeared in moments as he knelt and sniffed—some of the sickly smell was definitely coming from his pet, and that Kirin might be breathing but he was far from well. What the pazniti had happened to him? His face was bruised and swollen, and his skin was....

Gredar jerked back his hand—Kirin was on fire with fever, his breathing ragged and laboured, rattling in his chest. Gredar ripped the furs back, making Kirin whimper, but he had to get him cool. Water, water...the water bowls were empty. Bone dry in fact, and when he dashed into the washroom to check, there was nothing in the ewer either.

"I'm going to get help, little one, don't move." Kirin clawed weakly at his throat—to his horror, Gredar now saw the collar was cutting into his swollen neck, and some of the raspiness in Kirin's breathing had to be because he was close to choking. "I'm so sorry, pretty one," Gredar said, desperately fumbling at the catch on the collar and flinging it aside. Kirin went limp when the collar was gone, his dark eyes staring emptily up at the ceiling—he didn't even seem to notice Gredar was there. "Stay still, I'll be back soon."

"Jilen!" he bellowed as he ran down the stairs. "Jilen! Buhi!" Where was everyone?

Karwa poked his head out. "Uncle Gredar? Grandmother wants to know what you're shouting for."

"Where's your aunt Jilen? I need her, urgently!"

“In the kitlings’ room—come on.”

His nephew took his hand and together they ran up the west staircase. Gredar burst into the bedroom. “Jilen, please, come—Kirin’s dying!”

His twin was holding her youngest kits over her shoulders, rubbing their backs as if she’d just finished feeding them. It was undoubtedly an inconvenient time, but she handed her children over to her nephew to hold without the slightest demur.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as she stood, composed as always.

“He’s, he’s....” Gredar swallowed, still in shock from what he’d found. “He’s feverish, bruised—no water, I thought Buhi was looking after him, Jilen, he looks so—”

“Calm down. Let me get my pack. You better get some clean water. We can ask Buhi later what’s happened.”

His heart still hammering in his chest, Gredar let his calm, confident twin take charge. She got what she needed from her workroom and led the way back to his quarters. No doubt she thought him a fool but she said nothing and showed nothing of censure in her manner. She wrinkled her nose at the smell as she opened the door. “What’s that stink?”

“Rotting food, I’ll clear...Kirin!”

He stopped, amazed to see his pet sitting on the table, swaying dangerously, his eyes glittering with fever, his skin flushed and covered with angry red scratches and marks. He had Gredar’s camping knife in his hand, and as Gredar started to approach, Kirin flung something at him. A rope...no...his braid of black hair, hacked off at the root.

“Kirin, no, that’s naughty....”

Kirin, gaunt and fragile with his ragged hair swinging around his face, held the knife in front of himself threateningly and made an angry sound.

Jilen came up beside him. “Gredar, what’s he done to your desk? He’s damaged it.”

And he had—slashed angry lines into the polished surface, ruining it. Gredar stared at the gouges, then at his pet, in confusion. Why would he do such a thing after all this time? He took a step forward. “Kirin?”

Kirin screamed hoarsely and thumped the marks with his fist, then thumped his chest. Gredar halted—his pet had never behaved this way before, and illness didn’t explain this. Kirin repeated the gesture and his eyes seemed to be asking for something....

Thump on the marks. Thump on his chest, then pointing. Pointing at him, then the desk, all the while

vocalising in his harsh, damaged voice. Almost as if he was trying to tell them something—but what? If Gredar could calm his pet down, they might be able to work out what had got him so distressed, but he could do nothing for the creature like this. He had to catch him up, but carefully.

As he held up his hands placatingly, easing closer, hoping to make a leap for his jopa, Kirin angrily slashed the knife toward him as if to warn him to stay back. Gredar stopped, made soothing sounds—Kirin swung again, but then he suddenly shuddered, the knife falling from his hands as he toppled sideways. Gredar reached him in time to prevent him hitting the floor, Jilen helping him lift Kirin to the bed.

There they could examine him properly, and Gredar, who'd been in too much of a hurry to fetch his physician sister to look before, now stared aghast at the extent of Kirin's injuries. Long claw marks and scratches, many puffy and red, marred most of the surface of his skin, while bruises coloured the flesh underneath, more lurid than Gredar had ever seen on an animal before. Kirin was so badly damaged, and yet Gredar had left him safe, or so he'd thought.

"What was he doing?" Jilen asked, as she began her gentle examination of the small, naked body. She bent and sniffed the angry scratch marks and licking the hot skin, testing its temperature and condition. "Scratching your table like that."

Gredar looked at the marks on the wood, the regular shape to the lines, and his mind replayed the curious gestures Kirin made regarding them. He came to a horrifying realisation. "He was trying to tell us his name," he whispered. "Jilen—he has a name." She looked at him, astonished. "What have I done?"

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Kirin wasn't dying, but he might yet die, and Gredar didn't know if he could bear that, knowing it was all his fault, and that he'd kept something—some *one*—who was aware and very likely as intelligent as himself, captive for weeks and been the cause of his suffering now. Jilen worked to deal with the infection and dehydration that were the most serious problems, cleaning the inflamed scratches and putting salve on the more serious injuries. Gredar helped her, and under her supervision, spooned sweetened water into Kirin's slack mouth as much as he could tolerate. They could do little more than that until he woke properly—Jilen managed to rouse him long enough to make him swallow one of her potent tonics, but he passed out again.

"I need to talk to your son," Gredar growled as they stepped back from the bed—Kirin needed rest now, but he would not be left alone, Gredar swore it. "I want to wring his neck."

“You will not harm my kit,” Jilen said, eyes flashing.

“He harmed....”

She raised her hand. “He’ll answer to it. But his punishment won’t be at your hands, brother, or I will no longer recognise your scent.”

Gredar fought to get his anger under control, but the sound of Kirin’s breathing, catching and struggling, inflamed it with every exhalation. “He damaged what is mine, and worse. Find him. I want to know why.”

“I’ll find him. Now clean out this room, and he’ll need water and more of my salve.”

“Will he live?”

Her expression softened. “I don’t know, Gredar. He’s very ill and jopa physicking is not something I’ve done a lot of. He’s not strong like the wild ones.”

“He’s not a jopa. I don’t know what he is, but he’s not one of them. He has a *name*.”

She gave him a sympathetic look. “Perhaps, but I can only do what I can for him.”

He begged her to stay while he attended to the mess—there was food strewn everywhere, as if it had been used as missiles, but all of it was old and the litter tray had not been emptied for at least a week. Gredar wondered how long it had been since Kirin had had fresh food or water and his anger rose again. Jopa or not, this was torqu, very torqu.

It took him some time to clean to his satisfaction, and though Jilen had other demands on her time, she stayed until he returned with more water and a pot of her wound salve. “Will you explain to Mother?” he asked her as he took her place on the bed.

“Yes, and I’ll find Buhi. If he comes up here first...I warn you, don’t you dare—”

“I won’t harm him,” Gredar swore. “But I demand reparation.”

“You shall have it.” She bent and touched Kirin’s forehead, sniffed at his nose and waited a moment to assess the strength and quality of his breathing. “Keep him cool, keep him quiet.”

Gredar would do whatever was needed, however long it took. Kirin should not have been harmed by anyone, let alone his nephew.

Jilen had suggested keeping Kirin’s face, and as much of his undamaged skin as possible, damp, so Gredar was using a wet cleaning leather to carefully wipe it. There was little enough to dampen—he was scratched virtually everywhere, deeply in places, and it was those which had become infected. His wrists and ankles were badly bruised, as were his hips and buttocks—Jilen said it looked like rough handling over several days, not a single act, but Buhi wasn’t prone to tormenting things. He was more likely to ignore Kirin

than harm him. Why had he done this?

Not long after Jilen had left them, Kirin stirred, eyes opening a slit. As he saw Gredar, he flinched and tried to move back on the bed, but he cried out weakly as his bruises and other pains caught. “Shhh, Kirin. You’re safe. Shhh.”

But Kirin would not be soothed, pushing back at Gredar’s hand and kicking feebly until exhaustion won and he passed out again. Gredar cursed. Trust had been broken, and even if that trust was based on a false premise, its loss pained him. How could he make this up to this creature, whatever he was?

He had arrived home mid-day, and he was conscious that he could not remain secluded in his room forever. Yet the idea of leaving Kirin unattended and so helpless, repelled him. He needed someone he could trust to help him—Filwui, perhaps? Wilna’s twin, Lerin? He would give it two more strikes and then slip out to see who was around, report to his mother and make arrangements for his absence until Kirin was well. But for now, he would work to keep Kirin cool, and hope this fever broke before it killed him.

But it was not even half a strike before his sister returned—with her oldest son behind her. Gredar’s anger flared again and he would have confronted Buhi then and there, except Jilen stood squarely in front of him. “I can’t spend too much time here, brother—I have other patients. You’ll speak to Buhi outside, and calmly, or not at all. Buhi—you will be truthful and meek or you’ll feel my claws. I have spoken.”

“Yes, Mother,” Buhi mumbled, glancing nervously at Gredar, his tail curled unhappily.

“Outside. And quietly, brother.”

She closed the door behind them, and Gredar faced his nephew on the landing. He forced himself to keep his voice even and free of emotion, though he hardly felt calm. “Kirin’s injured, without water, food or clean facilities. I left him in your charge. You’ve failed in your duty. Explain.”

Buhi did so, haltingly and with many attempts to cover his guilt. When he was done, despite Gredar’s promise, he was close to violence, though he was aware that Buhi was simply more a convenient target than the real offender. Buhi cringed back against the wall as he saw Gredar’s expression and his clenching claws.

“You...will find him,” Gredar said, trying to keep his voice down, “and tell him to come to me. Then you will contemplate how you will make reparation, nephew. You’ve damaged my possession, and you’ve harmed a creature who knows its own name. A creature who’s aware and intelligent.” Buhi’s head snapped up in shock. “Yes, it’s true.”

“But he’s just a jopa,” Buhi said, then flinched back as Gredar leaned in.

“He’s not. He knows his *name*.” Even if Gredar didn’t know what that was yet. “Go. You and I are no longer friends, nephew.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle.”

Gredar turned away from Buhi with a snarl, aware he was being harsh, but the tale he’d been told was disgusting even if Kirin had been the dumb animal they’d thought him. Filwui had gone too far, his appetite and greed overriding his common sense.

He waited for Buhi to retreat down the hallway, before opening his bedroom door and entering. Jilen was feeling Kirin’s pulse—she didn’t look happy at what it was telling her. She turned to Gredar as he sat down. “Buhi said Kirin started to attack him, throwing food and emptying the water dishes on the floor. Filwui told him to leave him alone for a couple of days to teach him a lesson.” She wasn’t trying to defend her son, merely stating what he had told her.

“Untrue, or only partly true,” Gredar said. “It’s Filwui’s doing. He involved Buhi, and though I can’t blame the boy for following his master, I do blame him for not telling you or Mother what was going on.” Jilen cocked an ear, encouraging him to continue, still holding Kirin’s small wrist carefully in her hand. “Kirin’s kala...produces a scent which makes a male crazy with desire. It’s quite....” Gredar paused, remembering that afternoon’s crazed fucking. “Filwui thought it was worth exploiting, being so potent. I forbade it, he decided to ignore me and go behind my back.”

Jilen frowned, and he knew why—their rank in the clan made this a serious offence even without the rest of it, but Filwui had clearly decided his privileged position as grooming mate overrode that. “At first, they were just trying to get Kirin to produce more of...whatever it is, his seed, perhaps scent residue...but what they captured went off very quickly, making it useless for trade. So Filwui decided to just enjoy the benefits, with Buhi’s help.”

“That doesn’t explain the scratches, or his condition.” She laid Kirin’s arm down on the bed. Kirin stirred a little, face contorting, before he fell still again.

“No, but Buhi said Filwui got bored. He decided that fucking Kirin would be more amusing—Jilen, he has no taeng. Kirin had to be forced...the other way.”

Jilen growled sharply. “Paznitl! Gredar—help me turn him. I need to check something.”

She had already examined his back, but had concentrated on the deep scratches and bruises. Now she parted Kirin’s tailless buttocks, and swore again as she saw the damage and bruising to Kirin’s anus she’d missed. “Pass me that salve. It’ll get all over the furs....”

“I don’t care about the furs!” Gredar snapped, revolted. “Is it infected?”

She finished applying the salve, then wiped her hands carefully before turning Kirin again so he could lie flat. “Not seriously, but it’ll be painful. No creature is meant to be taken that way.”

“Not by force, at least,” Gredar said. “See? Even jopas have taengs. He can’t be one if he doesn’t.”

“Perhaps not,” she said thoughtfully. “So Filwui caused these injuries?” she said, pointing to the claw marks.

“Some, Buhi said. Most were caused by the female jopas they brought in to mate with him.”

Jilen wrinkled her nose. “Even if the rest of it were explicable, to do such a thing in your bedroom is disrespectful and torgu. Mother will....”

The door opened, and a very subdued Buhi appeared in the doorway. “Uncle, I’m sorry, but Filwui says he won’t come. He says if Kadit—I mean, Grandmother—wants him, she can bid him attend.”

Despite himself, Gredar’s claws started to come out. Jilen laid a hand on his arm. “Then you and I will speak to her, my son. I’m very angry with you. You’ve dishonoured this house and your uncle, and so you’ve dishonoured me.”

Buhi knelt, bent down and placed his forehead on the ground, rump in the air, tail submissively down. “I offer apologies, Mother, Uncle. Punish me as you see fit.”

Gredar looked at Jilen. “I’m too angry to deal with this, and Kirin is the most important thing right now.”

“Then leave it to me and Mother, Gredar. Filwui won’t be allowed in here again until you order it.”

Buhi, still submissive, asked meekly, “Uncle, will he be all right?”

Gredar’s ears twitched in annoyance—did the boy think he was a fool to be placated in this way? Jilen rubbed her head against him soothingly, then got to her feet. “Kirin is no longer your concern, Buhi. Get up, and get out. Wait for me outside.”

The door closed behind him and she turned to him. “Gredar...this passion isn’t like you.”

“I know...I just feel betrayed, and Kirin...I feel as if a kit in my charge had been harmed. I am shamed.”

She raked her claws gently across his shoulder. “Perhaps he’s your kit,” she teased, before becoming sombre. “This is a serious matter. Filwui’s disobedience and disrespect can’t go unpunished. Mother won’t be happy that it’s over a worthless jopa.”

“He’s not a—”

“To her, he is.”

“I’ll prove he’s not,” Gredar insisted. “But Filwui must pay regardless.”

“Yes. I have to go, Gredar. I’ll send Karwa up to help you. You can’t neglect your duties but I think we can spare you two or three sun passes while you attend to this. In that time, he’ll either recover or...he

won't." Gredar stared into her eyes, willing her to give him better news, but she was too practical for that. "I'm sorry for this, brother. I am shamed too."

He twined his tail with hers. "Forgiven, sister. Thank you."

As she left, Kirin stirred, whimpering faintly. Gredar propped him up on one arm and fed him sips of water until he fell asleep again. He looked a little better, surely? But it was too soon for optimism.

*Fight hard, little one. Give me a chance to mend this offence.*

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Temin felt like he'd been trying to wake up forever. Memories of straining to open his eyes, disorienting pain and cold in all his limbs and his head, confusion and fear and exhaustion, of liquid being forced into his mouth, sometimes bitter, sometimes cold and fresh, stretched in his mind for years. He wasn't really expecting to succeed in getting his eyes to open this time, so he was surprised when he did. He raised a hand to protect himself against a hazy bright light off to his left—it was dimmed quickly but not before his eyes had begun to water. He squeezed his eyelids shut to clear them, but pain tears still ran down the side of his face. He tried to wipe them away, but his arm stopped cooperating.

Where was he? The room smelled strange...oh. Recollection of his situation crashed in on him, and he kept his eyes closed. Now he remembered why he hadn't wanted to wake up.

A sound to his left, and he froze. He wasn't alone in the room. A chirrup—one of *them*. He clutched at the fur covering him, pulling it tight against him. He had no other protection.

Something touched his face—a finger. He lashed out, bashing it with a feeble arm, and the finger was withdrawn. Huh—that hadn't worked before. He cracked open one eyelid—a big cat person sat near him. Xexe? It chirruped again, great green eyes shadowed in the candlelight. "Go away," Temin whispered. His voice was still broken from all the screaming, and his throat ached.

Another chirrup. It had to be Xexe—none of the others bothered to 'talk' to him. Temin supposed he should respond like a good pet but he just...couldn't do that any more. Another memory, cloudy, distorted, of him yelling at Xexe...waving a knife at him. He should be dead, Temin thought tiredly. Why hadn't Xexe put him out of his shefting misery?

Xexe chirruped again. "What the sheft do you *want*?" Temin opened his eyes so he could glare at his owner. "Haven't you done enough, you and your thugs?" He shuddered as more memories hit him, physical memories. A shiver ran along his skin, catching on...he forced his mind off those thoughts. He wasn't strong

enough to deal with them, and he was still a captive.

Xexe chirruped, insistently this time. Temin looked at him. “What?”

Xexe seemed to be waiting until he had Temin’s full attention. “All right, I’m listening. Don’t tell me, you want to fuck me too.” His own joke made his stomach roil. He could feel he was damaged. He didn’t dare think of how badly. Maybe he was dying. He felt tired enough to be dying. “Xexe, hurry up and leave me alone, will you?”

Xexe tilted his head, as if puzzled, though Temin doubted that was what he really felt. He raised his hand, and Temin flinched, expecting a blow to land—it did, but not on him. Xexe thumped his chest, and made a strange sound, a ‘grar’. Temin frowned. Xexe did it again. And again. “Xexe...what?”

Xexe repeated the gesture, but more slowly, the sound more...like a two syllable word. Then he pointed at Temin and made another sound which sounded like...’Meen’.

Temin blinked. He raised a shaking hand and pointed at Xexe. “Grar?”

“Grredaaar.”

“Gr’dar?”

Xexe—no, ‘Gr’dar’—touched his own chest. “Gre-dar. Gredar.” Then he laid his hand carefully on Temin’s leg. “Meen?”

“Temin. Te-min.”

“T’meen?”

“Close enough,” Temin said, and laughed, though he felt more hysterical than happy. It had only taken abuse and rape and starvation and illness before these idiots had worked out he had a name. Easy, really.

Xe...Gredar was watching him, clearly waiting for a proper confirmation. “Temin,” he said firmly, and patted Gredar’s arm, before pointing at him. “Gredar.”

“Gredar. T’meen.” Gredar’s tail flicked happily.

“Great,” Temin muttered, rolling his eyes.

He was thirsty, desperately thirsty, but as soon as he had formed the thought, Gredar was leaning towards him with a large cup. Temin was too tired to repress the flinch—Gredar stopped. He said something Temin chose to interpret as ‘May I?’

“Yes,” Temin said with an exaggerated nod.

“‘sss?’”

“Ye-ess. Yes.”

“Ye-ess,” Gredar repeated passably well. He made a sound that was suspiciously like a ‘miaou’, which would have been hilarious coming from that enormous mouth, if Temin wasn’t so pissed off with him, his race and this entire shefting planet. But Temin dutifully repeated it until Gredar was happy, and now they each knew the word ‘yes’ in the other’s language. If Temin could just teach them ‘No’ and ‘Fuck off’, he’d be doing well.

He struggled to sit up. He was in Gredar’s bed again—still. Gredar was sitting next to the bed on a leather cushion. There was no sign of the litter tray or his own bed. What was going on?

He propped himself up against the headboard, and Gredar offered him the drink again. It was probably a child’s cup, he realised, dark blue earthenware half full of water, but it was the size of a small bucket and he wasn’t up to holding anything as heavy as that. Reluctantly he had to let Gredar help him—the water was so good on his sore, dry throat.

He pushed the cup away. “Thank you.”

Gredar waited, not understanding, so Temin waved him away. That, he understood. Ironical it was only because he and Gredar had spent so much time as master and pet, learning each other’s nonverbal cues, that they might have any hope of communicating now. He wasn’t sure why Gredar had worked out there was any point in trying to talk to him, but it was an improvement that had come at too high a price.

Gredar sat back on his haunches, closely watching Temin. Temin ignored him as he started to do his own personal systems check. He felt weak and trembly, hungry but with no real desire for food. How long had it been? His sense of time was all whacked out anyway with the different day lengths, and being confined for so long in this room. His last clear memory was being attacked by a huge angry monkey creature who’d slashed at him with long black claws—the second one they’d brought to him, and definitely the meaner of the two. Fortunately it’d been muzzled or it would have killed him, but it’d managed to do a number on him anyway. He’d already been weak, sick.... He shuddered, not wanting to go down the path of those memories.

But he remembered the monkey slicing him up bad on the arms—blood everywhere, with the boyfriend and DopeyBoy panicking, trying to bind him up with leather bandages, mopping up the mess while he lay on the floor and bled near to death. Those cuts were now more than half-healed, though without treatment from a modern medical facility, he was going to have some horrible scars for a long time.

“T’meen?”

Temin looked up warily. Gredar was staring at the cuts on his arm. “What?”

Gredar pointed at the injuries—very carefully not attempting to touch them, Temin noted—then he

did something which astonished Temin. He bent low, his face to the ground, his tail drooping. He said something Temin couldn't understand. "What?" Temin repeated.

Gredar sat up, said the word again, then bowed low. "You're saying 'sorry'?" Temin whispered, boggled.

He had no way of confirming it, but he couldn't see what else Gredar could be doing. "You think that's *enough*?" he snarled. "After what those bastards did to me?"

Gredar looked at him unblinking, but he reached out a careful hand and touched Temin's leg as he repeated the apology. His tail curled around him so that the tip lay next to Temin's hand. He was waiting for Temin to answer.

What was he supposed to do? Just...let it go? Pretend it did matter he'd been beaten up and raped and.... Temin covered his mouth, suddenly nauseated, choking on his hate and anger towards the ones who'd hurt him. But this male...Gredar...had never hurt him. Was, to be truthful, the only thing close to a friend he had here. His only ally, certainly. If Gredar turned against him, Temin would be dead very soon after, because there would be nothing stopping the others continuing the abuse.

So, for selfish reasons he should make a show of forgiveness, but...sheft it! Gredar had left him at the mercy of the other two! And he could have tried to talk to him earlier—they all could have. Temin had tried and tried to make them understand, and none of them had been able to work out the obvious signs that he wasn't just some stupid pet!

Anger was making him breathless, and Gredar made a chirrup of concern, leaning forward. Temin held his hand up and Gredar retreated at once. So...this respect, this regret was genuine. And he *had* missed Gredar.

He made a decision, and laid his hand on Gredar's tail tip, stroking it. Sheft it, it was such a beautiful thing to touch. They were all so beautiful, but so cruel with it.

Gredar tugged his tail out from under Temin's hand—but as Temin looked up and frowned, Gredar flicked his hand with it again. Gently. Playfully. Wanting...to mend their friendship and having no other language to do it with. It was in Temin's hands, literally.

He caught the tail tip and pulled carefully. Gredar chirruped, and tugged his tail away again. Temin gave him a look, and wagged his finger at him. At once, Gredar lay his tail across Temin's leg as if to say, 'here it is, all yours.' More submission—more apology. So he did understand this was no small thing, and maybe he also realised that Temin was in a vulnerable situation where forgiveness was always going to be based a little on expediency. Who knew?

He petted Gredar's lovely tail for a while longer, letting the familiar action calm him. He wasn't safe, and he wasn't home. This was all he had for now. It either had to be enough or he'd end up going crazy. He wasn't going to let the ones who'd attacked him have that satisfaction.

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Gredar nodded at Karwa as he left the bedroom. "He's asleep. I'm going to call in at the workshop and also Martek's house. If he wants something, you'll have to find me."

His nephew agreed, though it would be a nuisance for him. It was the only compromise that worked—T'meen refused to have another male come near him. If his paznit former grooming mate ever showed his cowardly face again, Gredar was going to inflict some necessary pain in revenge for the mess he'd made. But Filwui was lying low, and Gredar's mother had decided to leave the question of reparation until T'meen was recovered and Gredar could be spared from his side. That time was fast approaching. T'meen was healing quickly, and apparently determined not to be helpless any longer than he needed to be.

He had been neglecting his work for nearly ten sun passes—three since T'meen had woken properly, his fever gone, though he was still weak and tired. Gredar only felt a little guilty for avoiding the pottery—not much was going on there. Deep winter, when firewood was needed for heating and could not be spared for the kilns, was their quiet season, fortunately. The flurry of gatherings that came after snow melt, would see them frantic, but that was some time away. There was always work, but now was the time for designing new patterns, trying out ideas for new pieces. His constant attendance wasn't needed. He stopped long enough to see Larat's plan for a household pattern, intended as trade goods, and made some minor suggestions, then he trudged through the new snow down to Martek's house.

Their historian greeted him with surprise as Gredar shook his fur clean and wiped his feet at the door. "I expected you some time ago, young Gredar." Gredar smiled at the 'young'—still, Martek was fourteen cycles older, he was entitled. "I've heard strange things about your pet jopa—I assume you've come to talk to me about him, or are you finally ready to plan the singing?"

"The singing has to wait, Martek, and he's no jopa. Can we sit?"

Since he'd been a kitling, he'd always loved this house with its many books and curious artefacts. It had been the house of the clan's historians for more than two hundred cycles, and was nearly the oldest building in the settlement, the work of many hands, the treasury of many memories. Gredar had known Martek all his life, had been his grooming mate at times when other company had not been tempting—

Martek was an undemanding lover, but for his age, still sprightly and satisfying.

Martek served them hot pkite in mugs of Gredar's own making, a subtle compliment that was typical of him. "Jilen told me what happened while you were away. A sad business, though I suppose it doesn't surprise me. Filwui has been ruled by his appetite since he was born. She...ah...said that your jopa...speaks?"

"He's not a jopa. I don't know what he is, but yes, he speaks. He and I have already learned a few words of each other's tongue, just in three sun passes." Martek sat back on his haunches in surprise. "That's why I need your help. I can barely pronounce his words, or him, mine. But he can write, so I presume he can read."

Martek shook his head. "Read? Write? An animal? Are you sure you're not letting your fancy run away with you?"

Gredar growled. "No, I'm not."

"Perhaps I should come examine him myself."

"Yes, eventually. Right now, he won't allow it. Filwui and Buhi have terrorised him too thoroughly. He'll let me assist him, a little, and he'll allow Jilen to tend him—no one else."

"I see," Martek said, sounding slightly offended. "And what of Kadit?"

"She's leaving it to me. She's aware the situation needs careful handling. Martek, you can believe me or not, but all I was after was some paper, a slate, and some instructional books, if you can spare them."

"I'm not sure I should let a jopa..."

Tired and distressed from days of watching T'meen suffer, Gredar lost his ability to stay calm. His ears flattened in real anger and he barely stopped himself from hissing. "Does he look like any jopa you've ever seen? He doesn't have a tail or a taeng, or fur—he doesn't even sound like them!"

Martek's ears flattened a little as well. "Respect me, kitling."

His tail tapped angrily, waiting. Gredar pulled in his temper. "I apologise. I'm...tired. Martek, I'll happily let you speak to him but he's still unwell. I promise you he won't harm the books," he said, hoping T'meen wouldn't decide to take out his anger on them as he had Gredar's table.

"Hmmm. I'll hold you to that. Wait there." Martek left the room, presumably to the small classroom where Gredar had himself learned his writings, as had generations of daiyne before and after him. Gredar sipped his pkite and wondered how he could convince Martek that he wasn't deluded. Jilen still doubted, even though T'meen had gravely introduced himself and repeated her name after she said it. Some jopas had a gift for mimicry, and she thought that was all it was. But she hadn't seen T'meen as much as Gredar had, seen him intelligently and logically deal with his present situation and illness, and how he had tried to talk to

Gredar in his own tongue. A frustrating business for both of them, but worse for T'meen since he was just one and Gredar had his whole clan to support him.

Martek was away some time, and Gredar had drunk another mug of pkite before he returned, laden with items he set on the table before Gredar. "I had to search for chalks small enough for your jopa...oh, don't look at me like that, what shall I call him? He's not a daiyne."

"His name is T'meen. I don't know what he calls his race."

Martek nodded. "Very well. I needed chalks small enough for *T'meen* to use, and I'm a little short on working paper so don't waste it—we can get no more until snow melt." Gredar nodded. "Here are the books I judge best for a beginner. If he gets on with them, then we can see what he should move on to, but I won't hand over another until I meet him."

Gredar smiled. "As you wish. You'll have your curiosity satisfied soon enough. Just give him a little time to recover his confidence."

"Was he very badly hurt?"

"It shames the clan. A daiyne treated thus would require a blood punishment. I have no idea what Mother will order."

Martek rocked, nodding. "A sad business, and so pointless. Now, you might as well take these to him, since they're no use to me." He shoved over the strange objects T'meen had had with him when he was captured. Gredar had seen them before—some dark red, some green, some white, they were made out of a soft material Martek had never come across, not leather and not paper. "If he really isn't a former pet, they belong to him."

Gredar could only suppose they did, though whether T'meen would want them was another question. "Any advice on how to learn his language?"

"Since you've done it and I have not, young Gredar, that makes you the expert. Normally I would have no need to counsel patience, but you seem...less patient than usual."

Martek's blue eyes peered at him, looking for the answer to the unvoiced question. Gredar sighed. "It's been very trying and...Filwui's betrayal shocked me. My very home was violated, and my pet. I'd rather they'd attacked me."

Martek's tail curled around Gredar's ankle in comfort. "I understand, kitling. But let me counsel this instead—we don't know anything of your T'meen, or how long he might live. We daiyne are long-lived, compared to jopas and other creatures. Don't become too involved."

It was wise advice and kindly meant, but the idea that T'meen was somehow less important because

he might be short-lived, was not one Gredar could accept. “Right now, I just want to make him well, and find out where he came from. If he has a home, then it is right he should be returned to it. If not, then he has one here.”

“If Kadit allows it, you mean.”

“Why wouldn’t she? We allow strangers to visit all the time.”

“And then to leave, yes. Fertile males aren’t the same thing as a troublemaking pet, Gredar. I hope no female can be done up by him.”

“If fertility is the only measure of worth, old one, you and I are in trouble.”

Martek chuckled. “True, true. Which reminds me it’s been too long since you spent the night. I don’t get the offers that our clan head’s elbart son does.”

Gredar leaned over and licked along Martek’s muzzle, tasting his rich scent. “If I wasn’t in such a hurry, you’d get an offer. I’ll come back soon.”

He scooped the books and other things up into his arms and stood, as did Martek. “Your T’meen would be as welcome as your kala. Either will entertain me.” Gredar whacked him with his tail for the cheekiness, which only made him chuckle again. “But you have a singing to give, and soon. Kadit will be furious if we don’t keep them up because of your pet.”

“Before ten sun passes, I’ll give my singing, I promise.”

“Then get along with you, and treat those books with care. I expect a full report along with your kala.”

Martek’s laughter followed him out of the room. It occurred to Gredar it had been too long since someone had made him smile.

Karwa had deserted his post, Gredar was annoyed to find, and Jilen was in his room without his permission, though physicians were notorious for assuming they could go anywhere at any time. T’meen was lying on his side, his eyes open, but he didn’t react to Gredar’s arrival which, Gredar suspected, was his way of covering up the fact he was distressed. “How is he?”

Jilen knelt at the bedside. “Better, though he needs to drink and eat more. Is the food not to his liking?”

“Not much. He has a delicate stomach.”

“Then best find something he can tolerate soon. You’re better at that than me,” she said, covering T’meen again with the fur. She stood and noticed what he was holding. “What’s all that?”

“It’s for him. Wait a bit, will you?” He selected the strange objects, and knelt. “T’meen?”

T'meen glanced up at him without much interest, but when he saw what Gredar was holding, he sat up—rather too quickly because he swayed. He knocked away Gredar's helping hand and grabbed for his things—Gredar allowed the rudeness because seeing T'meen so animated was better than his apathy.

“What are they?” Jilen asked as T'meen, ignoring them both, began to paw over the strange material.

“No idea...wait, is he...are they like a fur?” Gredar said as T'meen began to drape the stuff over—no, wrap himself in them.... He looked at his sister, lacking the words to describe what he was looking at. “Have you ever seen anything like that?”

T'meen was now looking at them both with an unmistakeably happy expression, his body covered with the strange things. He sat on the edge of the bed and began to drag what looked like leather buckets onto his feet. It had been over a moonsweep since Gredar had seen him so lively.

“They make their own fur?” Jilen said.

“Still think he's a jopa?”

She shook her head. T'meen was searching inside his 'fur', into what looked like sacks attached to it. He seemed distressed about something, and pointed at the empty interiors of the sack as if something was missing. Gredar got it. “Sister, did Karwa give everything to Martek that he found with him or not?”

“I have no idea. I'll ask him when I go downstairs.” She seemed mesmerised by T'meen's new covering. “I guess that explains how they survive without fur. But how do they make it? And where are the rest of his kind?”

“That's what I need these,” Gredar said, hefting the books and slate, “to find out.”

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Temin couldn't stop grinning. Clothes! Boots! He was independent again—well, he would be when he could stand up without passing out. He was amazed that none of it had been damaged, though he wished he had the scanner and his handheld—probably lost forever. But now he had the basics he needed to get out of here.

If they'd let him, that was. Gredar was watching, looming over him from his great height. “Thank you,” Temin said loudly, repeating the words in Gredar's tongue. They'd got a few basic terms down between them—‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘good’, ‘like’, ‘thank you’, ‘may I’ and ‘sorry’, and a couple of nouns. The rest of the time it was all down to sign language, and whatever Gredar learned by sniffing him, which he did from time to time. The other one, J'len—she tended to lick him, which was weird, but as she seemed to be their

medic, he supposed that was normal. Whatever was in her ointments was pretty good stuff. He could easily be dead, if not for her. And for Gredar.

He sat down again, and took everything but his shorts and shirt off, folding it all neatly. Gredar made no move to touch it when Temin laid the items on the table near the bed. There was just no way to explain that Temin needed to keep the clothes for when he wanted to go outside, since there wasn't any way of replacing them.

Sheft it, he was dizzy. And there was Gredar again, crouching down, waiting to steady him. He batted away the helping hand and pointed at the other stuff Gredar was holding. "What's that?" He'd decided to talk as much as possible, because Gredar had already picked up a little bit from him doing that. Gredar found pronouncing Standard very difficult, which was only fair since cat language made Temin's sore throat ache.

Gredar sat properly and handed Temin what turned out to be a book. A book! "Ye-sss?" Gredar asked.

"Yes!" Temin shouted, and reached out to hug the guy, forgetting for a moment who Gredar was and where they were. Gredar froze, obviously confused as sheft by Temin's action, then one big arm came carefully around Temin's back, holding him close but gently. A low purr began to rumble in Gredar's chest, and for a few seconds, Temin held on, just...wanting to thank him, and to be held, even if Gredar wasn't even the species Temin longed for, let alone the person.

It was Gredar who broke it off, pushing Temin back onto the bed, and pressing the book into his hands again, opening the worn leather cover and turning the first page.

"Oh," Temin said. He should have expected it really, with the gorgeous pictures on the walls and the decorations on pottery and the furniture but.... "It's beautiful." He'd never seen book illustrations of such delicacy before—hand-coloured, and incredibly detailed. The oddly thin paper pages were thumbled and curled slightly in the corners from long use, but the book hadn't been mistreated, and the colours were still vibrant and gem-like.

"Good?"

"Yes. Good."

"May I?"

"What? Oh. Yes." Gredar sat down next to him, and waited politely. *Hey, we just had a conversation*, Temin thought. Actual dialogue. That was pretty cool.

But that wasn't what was on Gredar's mind. He wanted Temin to look at the page. He pointed to a small symbol—intersecting lines and a circle—next to an exquisitely rendered picture of a young cat person.

“Day-neh.” He repeated it, then pointed to his own chest. “Day-neh.”

“Day-neh?” Understanding dawned. “J’len, day-neh?” Gredar nodded. “Temin, day-neh, no?”

“Day-neh.” Gredar pointless at himself. “No day-neh,” he said, touching Temin’s leg.

So that was the name of their race. Temin was going to turn the page, to see what else he could learn, but Gredar wasn’t done. He picked up a huge slate and sat it on top of the book, then pushed a white stick into Temin’s hand—chalk. “T’meen,” Gredar said, pointing at the slate.

Temin wrote his name, and under it, another word. “Temin,” he said. “Human.”

“‘Mun?”

“Huu-man.” Gredar always had problems with the first parts of words, or maybe they were nearly always close to silent in day-neh speech.

“T’meen, huu-man, ye-esss?”

“Yes. Good!” Gredar chirruped, and his tail curled around Temin’s waist. He didn’t mind that at all.

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Gredar had transformed Temin’s life. A few minutes ago, he was just a helpless victim, without any resources. Now he had power, independence, entertainment at his finger tips. The hour or so the two of them spent going carefully through the book, looking at the pictures with Gredar patiently pronouncing each word, waiting for Temin to transcribe them (with a pencil! And real paper!), was possibly the happiest he’d spent since he was five, making models of spaceships with his Mum and Dad out of scrap metal cut-offs. It was only a children’s book, but it was just what he needed—it gave him the building blocks of the language. Gredar, too, made notes, because the process wasn’t one way—he was trying to learn Temin’s language as much as Temin was trying to learn his. It was that willingness to see things from the other point of view which made Gredar so unusual. And such a good owner, of course. Was Temin still a pet? Could he put his boots on and walk out the door, and have no one stop him? Maybe today wasn’t the best time to try that.

Besides, he was enjoying himself and that had been rare enough lately that he just wanted to savour the experience. Gredar was still as comfortable and kind as ever, and the fact that his ‘pet’ had suddenly developed a brain didn’t seem to bother him at all. The main change was that he now tried to ask Temin what he wanted, rather than making intelligent guesses. His guesses hadn’t been too badly off before, and once Temin got over his resentment that it had taken them all so long to work out he could *talk*, he couldn’t really fault Gredar’s treatment. Except for what had happened in Gredar’s absence, and Temin would bet a year’s



salary Gredar had been as shocked by what had happened as Temin was. It probably wasn't fair to blame him for the failure of people he presumably trusted, and just now, when Temin was feeling warm and happy and hopeful, he was inclined to be generous. He liked Gredar and Gredar seemed to like him. In an alien landscape, among an alien race, that was no small thing.

He was starting to get tired—well, more tired—and he thought his brain, which hadn't had to learn another language before, was getting to its limit for the day. He closed the book, faked a yawn, and pointed to his mouth. "Tired." He mimed going to sleep.

Gredar repeated the word, said the day-neh version until Temin got it, and then put the book and slate up on the desk. He took Temin's hands in his big paw and stared into Temin's eyes with what seemed concern. "Temin good," Temin reassured him.

"Ye-esss."

"Thank you." Then Temin laughed as Gredar tickled him under his chin with his tail, repaying him by scratching the fur on his stomach in a way Gredar seemed to like.

He heard a yowl from the door and his guts turned to water. He froze, his hand clenched in Gredar's fur. "No. No!"

Gredar enfolded him completely, letting Temin bury his face against his chest, his big arms covering his back. Temin heard him speaking, the vibrations deep in his chest. He sounded sharp, maybe not enraged, but annoyed. Temin tried to control his shivering and the nausea, and wished whoever it was, would go the sheft away.

Silence, but still Gredar didn't let him go. Waiting for him to calm down, Temin realised. But Temin couldn't—the shivering was getting worse, and he was glad his face was hidden because he'd already shown enough weakness to these people.

After a bit, he heard a quiet, "T'meen?"

He looked up as Gredar loosened his hold a little. "Temin good," he lied.

"T'meen tir-ed."

"Yeah. Yes." He pulled away, though Gredar kept his tail curled around him, and rubbed his eyes. "What?"

Gredar patted him, then got up. Without his thick, superheated fur, Temin felt rather cold, but Gredar was only fetching something from the doorway. *Great*, Temin thought. *Having a freakout because of a delivery.*

The freakout was forgotten in seconds as he realised what Gredar was carrying. "My pack!" He made

‘gimme gimme’ motions, and Gredar put it in his lap, before settling down next to him again and winding his tail around Temin’s waist. Temin appreciated the gesture but he only had eyes for his belongings—scanner, handheld, even the food, everything was there, including some spare underwear, the weapons and the knife.

“Good?” Gredar asked.

“Good. Very good!”

“Vaaaary?”

That was the limitation of the book and gestures. Adjectives and verbs, anything remotely abstract were almost impossible to convey. “Good, good, good. *Very* good,” he repeated, holding his hands out wide to denote a vast amount.

Gredar nodded solemnly. “Vaaary,” he said. “Meni.”

“Meni? Many?” They had the same word? Wow.

Gredar touched the scanner. “Whaat?”

“Um.”

“Ummm,” Gredar repeated solemnly.

“No, no....” Temin sighed as Gredar cocked his head in puzzlement. They just weren’t up to that level of conversation yet. He switched the scanner on and crowed as the screen powered up—and the symbol for the podpod showed up a mere ten clicks away. Suddenly escape was possible!

“T’meen good?”

“Temin happy. Happy!” He pointed to his grin and waved his arms around excitedly. “Happy!”

Gredar patted his head, lingering a little over the jagged end of his hair where the braid used to be. “Gredar haapy T’meen haapy. Good.”

“Thank you,” Temin said, hugging him again. “Thank you, Temin happy.”

Gredar began to purr as Temin stared down at the scanner screen, and the tiny white mark that represented hope—and possibly freedom. He really might get out of here after all.

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Karwa whined a little when Gredar found him and sent him up to stand guard at his door. “How long do I have to do this for, Uncle Gredar?”

“As long as I say, kitling.” Karwa swiped at his ear, pouting. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise. We shall hunt together after snow melt. Just you and me.”

His nephew perked up immediately. “Really? To hunt big game?”

“Yes, big game. So guard him well.”

“I will!”

Gredar smiled to himself as he went down the stairs. Karwa would never completely be happy living in the house. He belonged on the plains, hunting and exploring. He would never be tamed as Gredar was.

“Gredar.”

Gredar paused on the stairs and looked down. “Yes, Mother?”

She didn’t look very pleased with him. “I wish to speak to you. My room.”

He followed her to her workroom, and sat as she bid him. Her hands were folded neatly on the desk in front of her, the claws hidden—for now. “Jilen tells me the jopa is recovered, more or less.”

“More or less,” Gredar agreed. “He still tires easily, and isn’t completely healed. But he’ll live.”

“I should hope so, since he’s tied up so many of my household for so long,” she said, sounding less than happy. “But that’s not why I asked to speak to you. I wish to convene the surat tomorrow to deal with Buhi and Filwui. You will attend?”

“Yes. But T’meen should too, since....”

“Who?”

“Uh...Kirin. His real name is T’meen.”

Her ears twitched. “There’s no need for it to be there.”

“Mother, the offence was against T’meen as well as me.”

“It’s an animal, Gredar. You may as well bring one of your pots to sit in judgement.”

“He’s not an animal. He’s a huu-mun. Huu-man.”

She hissed a little in irritation. “I’m tired of it, whatever it is. The surat will also decide its fate. It’s already caused far more disruption than it’s worth, however elsert it is, or was. My feeling is that it should probably be destroyed.”

“Mother, no!”

She flattened her ears at him. “Gredar, remember your place.”

“I’m sorry...but he’s not a thing. He has a name, feelings—a home, somewhere. Please...I beg you, as your kit, don’t kill him.” He bowed low in submission. He’d never begged his mother for anything in his life, but he’d never wanted anything before as much as he wanted this.

“Get up, dear. I’m prepared to listen to argument, but what I’m not prepared to do is have this house run to its beck and call.”

“He was injured in this house, Mother. We brought him here. He’s done nothing wrong.”

“I never said he had,” she said crossly. She got to her feet. “I wish to see him.”

“Uh...he’s asleep.”

“Then wake him up. I’m busy, and he and you work to my convenience, not your own. Don’t forget that, Gredar. You’re both only males.”

He bowed again. “My apologies.”

She curled her tail over his shoulders in forgiveness. “Let’s go.”

At the doorway, he asked her to wait, which didn’t please her. “He gets startled very easily, Mother. It’s not his fault.”

“Go on,” she said, tail flicking in impatience. Karwa, wise kit, kept silent and away from the two adults. Gredar hurried—it was T’meen’s life hanging in the balance and he couldn’t afford to make her angry.

There was no easy way to wake T’meen these days and Gredar had his assurances ready as T’meen thrashed and forced himself to remember where he was—it always made Gredar so ashamed, seeing this, knowing he was responsible. “Shhh, shhh, T’meen. You’re safe.”

The huu-man understood the sentiment, if not the words, and calmed. “Whaat?” he asked, blinking slowly. He looked so weary, Gredar couldn’t resist stroking him under the chin. T’meen leaned into his touch. “Whaat?” he asked again.

And that was where Gredar was stuck because he had no words to explain to T’meen what his mother wanted. He sat down and put his arm around T’meen, coiling his tail in the little huu-man’s lap. “Good,” he said, meaninglessly.

“Whaat?” Then a string of words, obviously asking him what was going on. Gredar could only pat him and hope T’meen would show the good sense Gredar had come to expect from him.

“Mother? Come in, but slowly, please?” He tightened his grip on T’meen, but flicked his tail against his chin, hoping he would send a message that there was no danger.

T’meen tensed like a strung wire as Gredar’s mother came in. “No,” he said quietly.

“Ye-esss. T’meen good.” The look he got at those words didn’t seem happy, but at least T’meen wasn’t struggling.

His mother knelt in front of them both. “Paznitl!” she swore, looking at the ruin of T’meen’s appearance. “Did Filwui cut its hair like that?”

“No, T’meen did that—he wasn’t in his right mind. Buhi said...Filwui used it against him. As a gag.”

She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “And now it’s torgu. I don’t really want it in my house.”

“Mother, please—he’ll heal, and it’s not his fault. Why don’t you introduce yourself?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Tell him your name.”

“It’s a....” But she looked at Gredar’s expression, and stopped. “This is such a waste of my time.”

“Please, Mother?” Gredar stroked T’meen’s cheek with his tail tip. “T’meen good,” he said, hoping his friend would understand the need to cooperate.

“Ye-ess,” T’meen said, to Gredar’s relief. He seemed to be waiting for further instructions.

Gredar nodded to his mother, who sighed. “I’m Kadit.”

Gredar pointed at his mother. “Kadit,” he repeated for T’meen’s benefit.

“Kadit. Daiyne.” Gredar nodded. T’meen pointed at himself as he faced her. “T’meen. Huu-man. Kadit Gredar mother?”

Gredar blinked. “Yes, I’m his mother,” she said, looking surprised. “How much does he speak?”

“Not much, but see—he’s writing it down.” He showed her the notes the two of them have been making, and without prompting, T’meen correctly identified the words ‘female’, ‘mother’, and hovered over ‘clan head’, looking up for his mother to confirm.

“Yes,” she said. “Clan head.”

T’meen repeated the words, and then pushed Gredar’s arm and tail off him, struggling to his feet. To Gredar and his mother’s astonishment, he bowed from the waist, saying something neither of them understood, before he added, “Thank you,” in the daiyne tongue.

“Thank you? For what?”

“For letting him live, I suspect,” Gredar said. His mother flicked her tail at him, but she didn’t seem annoyed.

She reached out to touch T’meen, and though he flinched, he allowed it. “What are these things?” she asked, fingering the material that T’meen had on his body.

“Cloze,” T’meen said, guessing her question.

“‘Cloze’?”

“Jilen and I think the huu-man make them, to compensate for the lack of fur.” Gredar showed her the rest of the things that he had retrieved from Martek, though he decided the other mysterious sack could wait until later. “We could learn a lot from him.”

“If he learned our language.” She sat back on her haunches. “Very well. He can come to the surat, and

he can stay in your room *if* he causes no trouble, and there's no more disruption. If there is...then he'll have to leave."

"I understand."

She stood, and T'meen bowed again. "He certainly has learned manners." She patted him on the head. "A pity about the hair. You think he feels ashamed of what was done to him?"

"I think he was just very angry, Mother. I don't blame him."

"No. Filwui will answer for that, I promise you. Now, I'm sending Karwa off to his duties. No more special arrangements to be made. T'meen can walk and fend for himself, and you are all he needs. He'll have to get used to us, or leave."

"Yes, Mother. Thank you."

She nodded and left without another word. Gredar put his arm around T'meen's waist. "Oh, my little friend, you have no idea how close that was."

T'meen turned and peered into his eyes. "Good? Haapy?"

"Ye-ess. Vaaary."

T'meen rubbed his head along Gredar's jaw, a habit he surely picked up from the daiyne. Gredar wished he knew how huu-man expressed affection and happiness, so he could reciprocate, but he had only his own ways. So he just wrapped his tail around T'meen's waist and held him carefully close, and after a little bit, put him back to bed and watched over him until he fell asleep again.

They had only won a reprieve tonight. His mother could change her mind at any time, and she would always put the clan before T'meen, her own interests and that of her daughters and granddaughters before any male creature, as was only right. There had to be a permanent answer to the problem of his strange former pet that didn't involve banishment or death.

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Temin was getting sick of waking up terrified, but it didn't look as if it was going to stop anytime soon. At least he knew what to do now, which was to lie still and wait for his heart to stop pounding. Gredar, lying next to him as he'd started to do once more, was a reassuring, warm bulk Temin needed this morning. He felt heavy, as if he'd slept nearly a whole day—thinking about it, he realised he'd slept at least sixteen hours, and hadn't eaten for nearly twenty.

He burrowed into Gredar's thick fur, and under the generous coverings he'd finally been given. What

the sheft had that all been about last night? It had been something important to Gredar, that was for sure—the big guy had been vibrating with stress, and all those repeated requests for him to be ‘good’, weren’t normal. His mother...she was the big boss around here. Was she upset with Gredar? With him? Gredar had been spending almost all his time with Temin the last few days—maybe she didn’t like that, but wasn’t he old enough to organise his own time?

He yawned. He needed a piss and he needed something to eat. He’d have to wait until Gredar woke up before he could get any food—he had no shefting idea what the day-neh in the kitchen would do if Temin just turned up and asked for stuff, but he suspected it wouldn’t be friendly.

He relieved himself and washed his face—Gredar had not only arranged private toilet facilities in the closet where Gredar’s own were set up, but also placed a small basin, jug and cleaning leather inside his bathroom just for Temin’s use. Temin was still a pet of sorts, but that was probably inevitable until he found a way back to the podpod.

Gredar was awake and looking for him when he returned, chirruping happily at the sight of him. “Happy to see you too, big guy,” Temin said, and rubbed his face against Gredar’s arm because Gredar liked it.

“T’meen good?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his stomach and pointed to his mouth. “Hungry.” He pretended to pick up something and put it in his mouth. “Food?”

“Foood? Harsa.”

“Yeah, harsa. Food. Temin hungry.” Now everything was a language lesson, but it was a lot better than being treated as if he was dumb.

Gredar stood. “Harsa. T’meen gajit,” he said, patting the bed.

“Sit? Stay? Temin stay?”

“Gajit.”

Then he said something else, the only word of which Temin recognised was ‘food’ but he understood. “You’ll get breakfast, I’ll stay here. Temin happy.” Gredar flicked him with his tail, but his eyes were elsewhere. He seemed...a bit distracted. Something on his mind. His mother, most likely.

Temin dressed fully while Gredar was off getting the food. He felt stronger today, and was sick of the bed and this bedroom. He wanted to make progress towards getting out of here, and that meant getting a map, or making Gredar understand what he wanted. That could take a while.

There was no one guarding the door, strangely, and Gredar had left it wide open. Temin could leave if

he wanted to, if he could avoid any of the others...but it was still winter, and shefting cold, and he still didn't know where he was, exactly. He'd been in a sack between being captured and brought to the house, so he'd seen nothing of the landscape. For all he knew, there was a shefting great mountain between here and the podpod. No, he would wait a little. He suspected Gredar would help him, if he could just find a way to ask.

Gredar returned with a tray, setting it on the table, and pulled up a cushion for Temin to sit on. Of course the first thing Temin saw was his own name, carved into the table, stark white gouges in the reddish brown surface. The top was ruined—they'd never polish it out, and he regretted that because it was a lovely piece. He only vaguely remembered doing it, no recollection of why he'd felt he should—just of the rage and fear and desperation he'd felt that night. "Sorry," he said, a little shame-faced, looking up at Gredar.

"T'meen," Gredar said, touching the marks. Then he touched his own chest. "Sorry," he said in his own tongue. Temin reached over and patted his hand. There wasn't anything he could say, even if he knew how.

There was fresh bread (it still amazed him that the day-neh ate bread, but then he kept thinking they were cats when they were more like dogs in their appetite, and the way they lived together), and well-cooked meat, cut up small. Also water, and some smelly hot tea stuff that Gredar obviously loved but which had made Temin sick to his stomach when he'd tried it. The diet was very boring, but at least Gredar knew what was safe for him, and how to serve it, which was good because the last thing Temin needed was another stomach bug on top of the rest of it.

Gredar was in no hurry to clear the food away. He definitely had something on his furry mind, and kept giving Temin these long, thoughtful looks, until Temin couldn't stand it any more. He pushed his plate away and folded his arms. "What?" he demanded, fixing Gredar with a hard glare.

Gredar sighed and stood. He beckoned Temin to follow him, and led him over the wall opposite the end of the bed, pushing a cupboard aside so more of the pictures behind it were revealed. Then he fetched the word lists they'd been making, Standard into day-neh and back.

During the time Gredar had been nursing him back to health, and during the hellish time before that, Temin had had a lot of time to look at these pictures, and knew them all intimately. He still didn't know what they meant—he figured that was what Gredar was going to tell him now, though why, he had no idea. He waited patiently for Gredar to explain.

Gredar walked over to a picture to the far right of them. "Day-neh no good." He pointed to the figure of a small one of his kind.

"Day-neh...bad. No good—bad."



Gredar tested the word, and nodded. “Baad. Wasa. Ye-ess.” He drew his fingers along the image of a path, and Temin suddenly got it. The story was in sequence—but he was reading it in the wrong direction. The bad day-neh was being taken somewhere—in front of another group, all seated, all portrayed as much larger than the bad guy. “Surat.” Gredar drew a finger around the group.

“Surat. Court?” Gredar gave him a look of confusion. “Never mind. What?”

Gredar indicated that the court made a decision on the bad guy—a criminal, Temin supposed. The last image showed him being cast out by the court, and he was last seen walking out of the village, a small figure on a long road. “Good?” Gredar asked.

“Yes.” But why...?

Gredar slapped the middle day-neh in the group, the one drawn the largest of all. “Kadit.” Then he said a word that Temin had heard used last night.

Temin hastily looked it up. “Clan head?” he said in their tongue. That made sense—the clan head was in charge of the court. “Yes.”

“Surat harek,” Gredar said, pointing to the floor—no, *downstairs*.

“A court is here today?” Temin walked over to the first image of the criminal. “Temin bad?” he asked, pointing to the figure, his blood going cold. They meant to try him?

Gredar shook his head. “No.” He brushed his fingers gently over the healing cuts on Temin’s arms, then across his newly-bared nape. “Filwui. Bad day-neh. Day-neh wasa.”

“Bad day-neh—Filwui?” What did that mean?

Gredar pointed again to Temin’s wounds, then held up two fingers. “Day-neh.” Two of them...oh. Gredar sketched the shape of a big day-neh, pointed to a golden yellow flower, then to his eyes. “Filwui.” He held his hand a little lower, pointed to a green leaf, then to the eyes again. “Buhi.”

“Filwui, Buhi, bad day-neh?”

Gredar nodded, and pointed to the picture of the criminal to emphasise the point. “Filwui, Buhi, surat.” Then pointed to the floor again.

Temin swallowed. “Yes,” he whispered. They would be in the house again. Gredar was warning him, which was kind...but no, there was more to it, because now Gredar was pointing to the two of them, and then to the pictures on the wall again. Ah...there were people to the side of the surat, and one of them had his mouth open. Talking. “Witnesses.” *Shefting shit*. “No. No, Gredar, I can’t. I’m....” *Afraid I’ll fall apart*.

He backed away and Gredar made no move to stop him. He just made a sad little yowl, and his tail crept around from behind him, towards Temin, as if trying to entice him to stay. “No! Filwui bad! Very bad!

Meni wasa!”

Gredar crouched down and peered at him. “Gredar jersai T’meen.”

“Jersai?”

Gredar pantomimed holding something small—maybe like a baby—close to his chest with one arm, and held the other up in a clearly defensive gesture, his lips suddenly peeled back revealing his enormous teeth. He growled, and clawed at an invisible attacker, looking entirely primitive, and nothing like the genial, gentle cat-man Temin had begun to trust again. Then he looked down at his imaginary child. “Jersai docal.” ‘Docal’ was a young day-neh. He looked straight at Temin. “Jersai T’meen.”

“Protect. You’ll protect me? Gredar protect Temin?”

Gredar nodded. “Meni. Vaary. Temin happy. Gredar jersai T’meen.” Then he made the little chirrup yowl that Temin had learned long ago was ‘please’—coaxing the obdurate pet to do something he didn’t like.

“Filwui bad. Very bad, meni bad.”

Gredar bowed low again. “Sorry.”

Temin sighed. Gredar blamed himself, but it was Filwui and Buhi who’d done the deed. He just didn’t know what he could do, since he spoke just a handful of words. “Temin no happy,” he said, to make the point.

Gredar lifted his head. “Gredar jersai T’meen meni meni meni,” he said, and growled fiercely.

Temin lifted his hands in surrender. “Okay, you win. But you owe me, big guy.” *And you better be ready to use those shefting teeth, because that Filwui is one mean fucker and I wouldn’t trust him further than I could drop kick him.*

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Gredar was grateful for T’meen’s bravery and intelligence over this matter. That didn’t mean he was looking forward to the surat any more than he had since his mother told him about it. A full surat presided over by his mother, was a rare thing, and bound to cause talk and disharmony. For everyone’s sake, he profoundly wished Filwui had chosen some other way to entertain himself during his absence. Still, the thing was done. His concern now was to end it cleanly and with as little harm to T’meen as possible, while offering the little huu-man some reparation for all his suffering. His mother had declared him torgu, and though Gredar didn’t agree with that assessment, it was true T’meen wasn’t as elsart as he had been. His perfect skin was going to be scarred for the rest of his life, and he was still thin and ill-looking under those strange things

he was wearing around himself.

It was time to go. “Surat,” he said to T’meen.

T’meen held up his hand and said something—what was he doing? Oh—he had a small knife in the sack. Gredar held his hand out. He had to make sure it wasn’t going to be used against his mother or the other females. T’meen passed it to him—it was sharp but not very big, the blade about five farkens long. It would certainly cause an injury if jabbed straight in, but would probably be deflected by a daiyne’s fur. He handed it back. “Kadit no,” he warned. “*Filwui* no.”

T’meen nodded. “No.” He tapped his chest. “T’meen protect T’meen.”

Well, that was fair, he supposed. It wasn’t like Gredar had done such a good job until now, and T’meen was sensible. That he was frightened of *Filwui* was only to be expected.

Filwui was waiting outside the meeting room, lounging against the wall. “Hello, Gredar,” he said, baring his teeth. “How’s your little pet?”

T’meen stood rigid at Gredar’s side, but didn’t show any other emotion. Gredar growled a threat. “Safer for not being anywhere near you, *Filwui*. I will not know your scent any more.”

“Suits me. You’re a bit old now. I’ve moved onto fresh territory.”

Presumably that was Buhi, lurking, terrified, a little distance down the hall. Gredar felt sorry for his nephew. *Filwui* could be so very charming, and had the weight of seniority and authority to back it up. Gredar hoped his mother would be merciful towards a young, easily influenced kitling.

He wasted no more time on *Filwui* and his jibes, and went into the meeting room. His mother and sisters were already seated there, as well as his two aunts, their adult daughters and three of his nieces. Jilen came over to him as he told T’meen to sit on the cushions set aside for them. “You brought him? Was that wise? You know we’re going to talk about his fate today.”

“I thought mother had already decided that.” Gredar laid a protective hand on T’meen’s head.

“She left the final decision to us.”

“And what do you think we should do, sister?”

She glanced down at T’meen, but wouldn’t meet the huu-man’s eyes. “I think there comes a time when it’s more practical to put animals down, Gredar.”

“But you helped make him well!”

“And what of his future? The only one of his kind, always being stared at, always at risk of attack?”

“I can protect him!”

“You didn’t this time. And now my son’s involved, the family’s in uproar, your time’s absorbed with

T'meen and not with your proper responsibilities—this can't end well, Gredar. It's not that I dislike him. I can see he's fond of you and you of him, and...what was done to him was torgu. I don't blame him for that, but I believe you have to take a longer view."

"I have to take—"

"Jilen! Gredar! The surat has not started," his mother snapped. "Take your seats."

They both sat down in their respective places, Jilen at their mother's side, Gredar beside T'meen to the right of the long table. Gredar's other nieces came in at that point, and then his mother gave a signal for Filwui and Buhi to be sent in.

Filwui wasn't cowed in the slightest by the presence of all the clan's senior females, throwing himself casually down on the floor as if he had been invited for a meal. Buhi stood, stiff and terrified. Gredar kept his arm close around T'meen. The huu-man was shivering, his eyes fixed on his tormenters. This had been a bad idea. Too late now.

His mother put her half-clawed hands on the table in front of her. "Filwui, the accusation is of disobeying a senior male's order, of damaging his property, and violating his private quarters. You've also violated the hospitality of my house and my orders that Gredar's property should be kept safe. What say you?"

"Property, Kadit? I thought he was supposed to be intelligent. That's what Gredar's been telling people. So how can he be a pet? I fucked him, sure. I fucked Gredar too. That didn't damage him."

"You let a wild jopa in with him!" Gredar shouted.

"Gredar!" his mother snapped.

Filwui smiled. "Yes. You left the poor creature without any entertainment. Things just got out of hand, and I had to dress his wounds. Accidents happen, you know that."

"You disobeyed my orders to leave him alone!"

"Gredar, be silent or leave," Jilen growled.

"Answer him, Filwui," his mother said.

He turned to her, his ears suspiciously innocent and erect. "What orders? Did anyone else hear him give an order to me?"

"Are you calling my son a liar, Filwui?"

He sat up, letting his impressive musculature display itself, his sleek, healthy fur proof of his youth and fertility. "Are you going to seriously punish me over a *jopa*, Kadit? Do you have any idea how foolish that will make you look?"

“He’s not a jopa!” Jilen shot Gredar a look for his interjection but he wished *she* would do her job and point these things out herself.

Filwui only glanced at him. “Then how can I have damaged your property, Gredar? Either it’s a stupid jopa and too trivial to be concerned about, or it’s intelligent and you have no case. I don’t remember any orders. Ask Buhi if he does.”

“Buhi?” Jilen turned to her son. “Did Gredar order you not to touch his pet?”

“No, Mother. He told me how to look after it, but it started to act crazy so I was scared to go near it.”

“Because you hurt it and frightened it,” Wilna said quietly. At least one of his sisters was taking T’meen’s side, Gredar thought.

“It wasn’t me, it was Filwui!”

Filwui sprawled back and looked at Gredar’s nephew. “Tut tut, Buhi. You’re old enough to accept responsibility for your own actions.”

Gredar looked at his mother, pleading. Filwui was making a mockery out of the whole proceedings. “Enough,” she growled. “Filwui, I don’t believe you for a moment when you say Gredar didn’t tell you to leave his pet alone. But regardless, you brought wild animals to his room in his absence and without explicit permission and thus put everyone here in danger, and you most certainly violated my orders that the pet was to be kept safe. Buhi, you heard those from me directly, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Grandmother.” Buhi’s voice was barely audible.

“And was Filwui aware of them? Did you tell him?”

“Yes,” he mumbled.

“Little liar,” Filwui said. He was no longer sprawling, perhaps finally aware of the danger.

Gredar’s mother bared her teeth, her ears flattened almost down to her skull. “That’s two of my family you’ve insulted today, Filwui. I suggest you don’t repeat the offence.” She leaned over to Jilen, and all the females began a whispered conference together.

At Gredar’s side, T’meen was shivering more violently, probably upset by all the shouting and threat postures. Gredar hugged him close to him, and wished he was closer to Filwui so he could hit him with a clawed hand—it was all he deserved. He wished he could explain what was going on to T’meen, but maybe that would only make things worse, hearing Filwui’s lies. *Bad blood*. Filwui’s father must have been a rogue male. His mother, Atrin, had been nothing like this.

Finally the surat broke apart and his mother spoke. “Filwui, Buhi, the offence against me and this house is proven. Filwui, you are banned from here for a cycle. Buhi, you will sleep and work in the kitchen

when not employed, until snow melt.” Gredar opened his mouth but she glared him into silence. “As for the offence against my son, I choose his word over yours, and I will allow him to decide the penalty.”

Gredar shut his mouth, and nodded. T’meen looked up at him, confused and worried. “Since the greatest offence is to the huu-man, T’meen, I order that Filwui and Buhi apologise to him, here and now.”

Filwui exploded. “I won’t! Not to that paznit thing!”

“You would prefer to be banned from the settlement itself?” Jilen asked, her tail swishing. “Third offence against my family in this room. If you don’t want your throat torn out, choose your next words very carefully, son of Atrin.”

Filwui looked at the massed ranks of senior females, some of whom had their claws on display, and at Gredar, who was also baring his weapons. “It’s a *jopa*,” he muttered.

“Then you admit your guilt,” Gredar said, sneering in his former mate’s face. “Apologise. Both of you.”

He nudged T’meen to his feet, but kept a hand on him. “Will protect,” he said quietly, stroking his arm.

The two males in front of them looked at each other. Buhi moved first, bowing down deeply and properly. “I apologise to Kirin, pet of Gredar.”

Gredar looked at Filwui. “Choose, and quickly.”

Filwui’s ears flattened and Gredar wasn’t sure at all what he would do. But then, with resentment in every erect hair, he bowed. “I apologise to the *jopa*.”

“His name is T’meen. Say it—and stay down until I tell you to move or *I’ll* tear your paznit throat out!”

“I apologise to the *jopa*, *T’meen*.” Filwui managed to make it all sound like a curse, but he’d said the words.

T’meen looked at Gredar and then at the bowed bodies. “Sorry,” Gredar said, pointing from them to T’meen, hoping he understood.

T’meen nodded, and took a step forward. “T’meen?” Gredar asked, worried at his intentions.

He pushed Gredar’s arm away. “T’meen good.” He walked over to the two males, and Gredar saw he had his little knife in his hand. T’meen glanced back. “T’meen good,” he repeated. Gredar hissed in a breath, but stayed quiet.

“What is he doing?” his mother demanded.

“Not sure. But you said I could choose, Mother. I choose this.”

All the females were on edge, their eyes fixed on T'meen as he walked forward. When they saw the knife, there was an intake of breath—but no one spoke.

T'meen stood now at Filwui's side—Gredar held himself ready to leap to his rescue should Filwui attack, but Filwui did nothing. T'meen walked around Filwui, and then Buhi, as if considering. Then, suddenly, he bent, and with one quick slice, he removed a large patch of fur from Filwui's mane. He repeated the action with Buhi, put the knife away and then stepped back. Once he was at a safe distance, he signalled to Gredar that he wanted the two males to sit up, which he ordered them to do.

Once he had Filwui and Buhi's attention, T'meen held up the bunches of fur he'd cut from them. "Filwui very bad. Buhi very bad." He dropped the fur to the floor, spat on it, then wiped his feet on it. He turned around and walked back to Gredar, back straight, his face stiff and revealing nothing but his obvious contempt.

Filwui's tail quivered in rage, his ears still flat, and a growl started in his throat. Gredar's mother cut him off. "You'd better not, Filwui," she warned, even as Gredar prepared to shove T'meen behind him and defend. "Both of you, leave my sight. Filwui, if you make any attempt to attack any of my family—or T'meen—I'll have you torn apart and eaten. Get out."

Buhi nearly fell over, running for the door. Filwui attempted to saunter, but his anger merely made him look clumsy. Gredar exhaled as they left the room. That had been worse than he'd feared, in some ways.

"I sincerely hope there won't be a need to repeat that," Wilna said, still quietly. The others nodded. "Mother, are we to discuss the other matter now?"

"Mother, you told me T'meen could stay for now," Gredar said.

"Yes, I did, and that's my vote. But the surat is to decide, my son. Today we have seen how disruptive T'meen's presence is, how destructive." She held up her hand. "I admit we have also seen his restraint and his intelligence."

"And his readiness to use a weapon," Jilen said.

"I saw a readiness to refrain, Aunt Jilen," Wilna's oldest daughter, Nea, said. "I want to see more of what injuries he suffered."

Paznitl. T'meen could have no idea how important it was that he did what they asked. Gredar could only make a show of him baring his arms and showing the injuries—to his relief, T'meen got it at once, and stripped off his cloze down to the waist. He stood still and obedient, allowing the females to stare as much as they wished. The cloze caused as much comment as his many scars—at least the family had had plenty of chance to see what he'd been like before, and knew what a torqu thing it was to have mutilated him thus.

Gredar explained why he thought T'meen had cut his own hair off, and how the lack of a taeng made what had been done to him much worse. Through it all, T'meen stood silent, trembling, but when Nea indicated she'd seen enough and Gredar told him he could put his cloze on, T'meen walked to Gredar's side and pressed hard up against him. Gredar could only wrap tail and arm around him and wish this was over.

"You're fond of him, Gredar?" Wilna asked. "And he's fond of you?"

"He seems to be. And yes, I consider him a friend. He's forgiven me for my failure towards him."

"If Filwui had done that to me," Nea said, "I'd have cut his kala off, not his paznit fur." There was a general snickering, and Halit whispered something to Wilna which made her grin.

Jilen wasn't smiling, though. "He doesn't belong here," she said, her tone flat. How could she betray him this way? Gredar felt like she'd stabbed him in the heart, but she avoided his eyes. "This is the home of daiyne, not any creature who wishes to settle here."

"He was brought here. Not his choice. I believe he wishes to go home, but I've barely had a chance to find out where that might be. You know yourself why that is, sister."

"He's caused bad blood between this family and another. Filwui's family are useful to the clan."

"Filwui's been pushing his luck since he was born," Gredar's mother said dryly. "If it wasn't this, it would be another thing. I predict he'll be ejected within a cycle, if I don't have his balls removed." Gredar winced. She meant it too. "What we saw today wasn't caused by T'meen, however much I wish it was because then we could solve it easily. Daughters, I went to Gredar's room last night, and saw a torqu creature, scarred and naked. But then I talked to T'meen, and he bowed to me as clan head, thanked me. I believe a creature capable of such acts may be worth preserving, if only for a while. I suggest we allow him to stay one cycle. After that, he must leave, either on his own, or with Gredar if he won't abandon him."

"Mother!" Jilen's voice was sharp with alarm. "We can't afford to lose Gredar. If it comes to that, I say we have it destroyed, and soon. It's only a male, and without more of its kind, we can't even breed from it."

"It's not my decision, daughter. Convince the others, if you wish. I've said my piece."

Gredar stared at his mother, pleading wordlessly, but she would say nothing more. Jilen and the others held a huddled conference while T'meen, trusting Gredar to protect him, held tightly onto him. *I'll fight them if they try to kill you, little friend, but I don't think I can win*, he thought, stroking T'meen's head carefully.

It took nearly half a strike before the females were done. At last, Jilen turned to him, her eyes unblinking and cold. "Very well. We agree to what Mother suggests, but with the additional condition that if

T'meen causes any more trouble, innocently or not, he must leave or be destroyed without argument. We have spoken." He nodded, accepting the judgement. But she wasn't finished. "Gredar, I'll kill him rather than have you leave the clan on account of him."

"If you do, sister, then I'll leave anyway. I've promised to protect him, and I can't stay if I'm shamed again."

His mother heaved a huge sigh. "Are we finished? I have so many other things to do. Gredar, Jilen, stop glaring. It's over. Gredar, you better keep out of Filwui's sight for a while."

"He should avoid *me*, Mother."

"I doubt he has that much sense, my son. And take T'meen to Martek as soon as you can. If anyone can find his home, Martek can."

"Yes, Mother."

Jilen gave him a long, not unsympathetic look, but Gredar wasn't feeling generous, so he only stared coolly back. She had her reasons, he just didn't agree with them. Perhaps later they would talk when they were both calmer, but she didn't try to speak to him as she and the other females left the room.

When they were gone, T'meen dared to look up at him. "T'meen good?"

"Ye-ess. Gredar haapy."

"T'meen tir-ed."

His hands shook badly and he reeked of stress. "Yes, I bet you are, little friend. Let's have a rest, and then you can go visiting with me." It was over, for now. Why didn't he feel better about the whole thing?

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Temin thought he was doing okay, until he stood up. His vision whited out, and his legs turned to jelly underneath him. He found himself swept up in Gredar's strong arms, and though it was deeply humiliating for an adult man, he was simply too dizzy and nauseated to care. He closed his eyes for the entire journey up the stairs to Gredar's room, but once he was set down carefully on the floor, he bolted to the toilet room and vomited up everything in his stomach—breakfast and probably three meals before that. He hung limply over the side of the toilet tray, until he felt a cold wet washing leather on the back of his neck. He grabbed it and wiped his face with it, then allowed Gredar to help him out to the main room and set him down. "Water," he croaked, pantomiming what he wanted, and Gredar helped him with the too big cup, so he could swill out his mouth, and wash the sickness away.

He struggled out of his flight suit and his boots, and the effort left him panting—he guessed he wasn't as over the whole infection thing as he thought, and he was glad to lie down. He couldn't stop shaking, his stomach cramped, and he was so cold, even with all the furs on him and half his clothes. He grabbed a fistful of Gredar's fur, and tugged him to lie down.

*Sheft it.* How was he going to get out of this place if he couldn't get himself under control better than this? It was a miracle he hadn't actually puked in front of all those females, and he'd really have to be a stupid monkey not to work out that things hadn't gone as well as Gredar hoped. Were they going to kill him later? What had all that arguing been about? And why did they need to see his scars?

Gredar wrapped himself comfortably around Temin. If Jeng could see him now, he'd probably laugh himself sick. Temin wouldn't even mind if he *could* just see Jeng now. Shefting shit, he wanted to go home.

Gredar was talking to him...no, not talking, just shh'ing him, like a child. "Not a *kid*," Temin said, jabbing him in the ribs. "Temin no dacal. I'm not a kitling."

"T'meen good," Gredar said softly, his hot breath on the back of Temin's neck. "Shhhh."

"Shhh yourself, you big pussy." Then he started to laugh at his own joke, laughed until his eyes were watering, and his gut was cramping up, until he was hiccapping and crying and.... "I'm going crazy, just so you know."

Something rough and warm touched the back of his neck. "Are you licking me?" A low purr was his only answer. "Gredar, I'm not a kitten."

Gredar didn't answer, which only went to show he was a lot more sensible and sane than Temin was. The licking went on, against his neck, up into his hacked off hair, down along his shoulders. It should have felt creepy, but it was just...nice. Gentle, like almost everything Gredar did, unless he was pissed off with rapist ex-boyfriends. *No, don't think about him. Think about....*

Ahhhh.

It was like when he had an itch he couldn't reach and Jeng managed to hit the spot, only Gredar was hitting about a dozen all at once. All the tension coiled in Temin's gut, slowly unwound. The deep, loud purring vibrated through him, through his backbone and into his hips. Into his groin too. As he felt himself getting a little hard, he began to panic—what if, what if Gredar...?

"Shhhh." Gredar's rumbling voice was a sibilant rush of air against his ear, his cheek.

Temin forced himself to just...enjoy. Gredar's big tongue was licking all the stress out of him, over and over and over...it was so hot, and just this side of too rough, like a towel that had been used for too long. A massage with a thousand tiny fingers.

“Pay big money for you to do this on Nixal,” he mumbled. “You and your tail.” The tail was wrapped around him again, the tip against his chest, so he had soft, luscious fur in front, hot, damp, rough muscle behind. Gredar’s licks pushed him against the fur, the tail pushed him back against the firmness of the tongue, rolling him between the two in a gentle rocking motion, seducing him into sleep. “Not tir’d,” he tried to say, but his mouth was strangely uncooperative.

*Sheft it.* He’d be a manly man later.

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### Chapter 3

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In the end, he didn't doze for long. He woke calmer, with a headache and a renewed determination to get out of this place. Gredar seemed to want to do whatever Temin wanted to do, which annoyed Temin a bit—Gredar had a life and work to get on with. Still, Temin was heartily sick of being kept cooped up in this room like the damn pet they still thought he was, and he still needed Gredar's help, however humiliating it was to admit that.

"Temin go *out*," he said, sitting up and looking directly up at Gredar.

"Out?"

He grabbed the slate and drew a house in the best representation of their curiously curved roof style, and a street, and pointed to the exterior. "Out."

"T'meen...no tir-ed?"

"Temin *good*," he said, though he still felt off-balance, weak. Too much conspiring against his recovery, but he just couldn't sit around and wait for things to happen any more. He didn't know what had happened in that surat but something was up—his position was too vulnerable. "Temin go *home*." Gredar flicked an ear at him. Temin pointed at the house picture, waved his arms at the room. "What? Name?"

"Najil?"

"Gredar najil? Gredar's home?"

"Kadit najil. Mozzer najil."

Right—it was his mother's house. "Temin go Temin najil. I want to go to my home."

Gredar pointed at the picture. "Weet? T'meen najil weet?"

"Weet? Where?" That was tricky. "Out," was all he could say. He hunted for the pack and grabbed the scanner. "Temin najil. My home," he said, pointing at the dot. Not strictly true, but it would do for a start. "Out."

Gredar looked at him for a good few moments. "Ye-ess," he said, but he sounded less than enthusiastic. He laid his big paw on Temin's back and rubbed in a kindly way. "T'meen good?"

"I'm fine, big guy."

He snuck part of an energy bar while Gredar went downstairs to do something or other. His stomach was still queasy and the idea of day-neh food revolted him, but he needed to eat something in this climate.

When Gredar returned, Temin was fully dressed and wearing his pack, into which he had also put the dictionary lists they had started to make. “Temin go out,” he insisted.

He was surprised all over again at how big the village was, but he guessed he shouldn’t have been—it was all on day-neh scale. Huge stone houses with the distinctive curved roof tops, all heavily caked with snow, stood separate, without front gardens. There were a couple of day-neh walking slowly along the snowy street, but the sensible ones were inside, he presumed. A fat few snow flakes fell from the leaden sky as he looked up. The cold was brutal, the air dry and breath-stealing, and the snow, while trivial to a creature of Gredar’s height, came up to mid thigh on Temin.

Gredar, who was of course unbothered by either the cold or the snow, looked down at him. “Gredar bezir Temin?”

“Bezir? Oh, lift. Yes.” *Sheft it.* Gredar hoisted him up onto his shoulders, and Temin tried to pretend this was a perfectly normal way to travel. “That way,” he said, using the scanner to guide him.

Gredar chirruped and then began to lope down the long main street. The few day-neh out and about stared at the unusual sight of a human riding one of their own. Gredar was apparently unconcerned at their frank curiosity, though Temin felt like a complete idiot. It was still liberating to get out of Gredar’s room, even if it only proved the difficulties he faced in getting back to the podpod and off this planet.

Suddenly, he yelped and clutched at Gredar’s head. “What the *sheft* is that?” he yelled, pointing at the gigantic...thing...bird...that was coming straight at them down the middle of the road. “Gredar, run!”

He struggled with his pack to get the pulse pistol out, but then felt Gredar squeezing his calf painfully hard. “T’meen good,” Gredar said urgently, then a string of words, the only one of which Temin could pick out was ‘keriv’.

“Keriv?” Temin warily eyed the shefting thing. He had to hope it was flightless. The red and yellow beak on it was larger than Temin’s leg, but now he looked closer...was that some kind of harness among the black feathers? Then a day-neh rushed out from beside one of the houses, shouting. He grabbed what were clearly reins, yelled at the keriv, and then swung up onto its back. Temin blinked—their pack animals were birds?

Keriv and rider passed them, the rider giving Gredar a friendly wave and Temin an unreadable stare. Gredar patted Temin’s leg. “T’meen good?”

“Yeah. Yes.” This was weirder than finding out from Gredar’s picture books that the day-neh laid eggs.

Within minutes they were out of the settled area, and out into open countryside. Gredar’s furry feet

were adapted perfectly for the snow, and even with carrying Temin on his back, he moved easily through the bleak landscape. Temin was starting to wish he'd grabbed a couple of the sleeping furs before they'd left—he hadn't been thinking all that clearly—but at least he could huddle against Gredar and shelter behind his massive head. Gredar's long legs were eating up the distance, and he seemed unconcerned that he was walking out into the wilderness at the direction of a creature who barely spoke his language, and without any idea of how far they were travelling. Maybe this was just a quiet stroll for him—Temin had no way of asking.

They had travelled for just over an hour when the scanner told Temin the podpod was close. "Stop!" he yelled, and Gredar understood the tone if not the word. Now the moment of truth—Temin hit the uncloak command...and there it was.

And then he was flying through the air, before hitting the ground in a slushy thud. "Hey!" Temin spluttered, from his sudden new position sprawled in the snow. "What the sheft did you...Gredar! It's okay, you're safe!"

Sheft it, he should have realised...Gredar crouched in the snow, ears flat, lips peeled back in a snarl, hissing at the podpod. "Gredar! Good, it's good!"

Growling menacingly, Gredar glanced at him but his posture didn't change, his mane erect and his claws fully extended. Temin struggled to his feet and ploughed over to him through the snow.

"Good! Good! Gredar, it's safe...shhh, safe. It's okay." He reached out a tentative hand to touch Gredar's shoulder but Gredar hissed at him angrily. Temin stepped back, heart thumping. "Gredar. It's okay. Safe. Good. Good. Meni good."

Now what should he do? He didn't dare get in front of Gredar, and he was terrified to move until the day-neh calmed down. He could only use his voice and he hadn't had a lot of practice at calming crazy animals before. "Shhh, shhh. Gredar. Gredar good. Temin good."

Slowly, all too slowly, Gredar relaxed, his mane flattening, his ears going up. He straightened up, and Temin swore he was embarrassed as he swiped at one ear. "Gredar sorry."

Temin came closer and patted his huge bicep. "It's okay. I know it's scary. Temin sorry." He bowed to show his regret, then he pointed at the podpod. "Good."

"T'meen...najil?"

"Uh...." He pointed up at the sky. "Temin najil. My home." Then to the podpod. "Temin go najil. I go home."

Well, that was interesting. He didn't know Gredar could look that sceptical without hardly moving a

muscle. It was probably just as well he didn't know the day-neh word for 'liar'. He mimed 'wait', and then he trudged over the podpod, hitting the entry code. Gredar growled as the hatch opened.

"Good," Temin said, wishing he knew how to say 'safe'. 'Wait', he signalled again.

From the handheld, he'd worked out he'd been a captive for nearly three standard months. The podpod looked exactly as it had when he'd left—the signal beacon was still operating, so was the charger. He did a quick systems check—nothing had got worse in the interim, which was fortunate. He checked the systems logs and nearly had a heart attack as he realised there were incoming communications logged. He turned on the message bank, fast forwarded through to the last calls, and sat, heart in his mouth, as Jeng's voice came clearly through the speaker. "Pyr Temin, please respond. We are in geosynchronous orbit and ready to come to your position. Please respond."

But it was three weeks old—and the final message was simply, 'Farewell'. Frantically, Temin replayed the messages, hoping they had given some instructions, something to give him hope...but nothing.

He slammed his fist against the console and screamed. "Jeng! I'm here, I'm here, you could have...." *Three weeks*. It had been that close, and now....

"T'meen?"

Gredar. He'd forgotten. The big guy was looming at the hatch, too tall to come in, of course. "Um...I'm...." He held up his hand—'wait, go outside'. Gredar backed away and disappeared from his sight.

Temin stared at the list of messages. He'd had a chance he'd never in a million years expected, but it was gone, and now he was.... "Never going home," he whispered, and though he'd promised himself not to cry any more over any of this, tears filled his eyes. "Jeng...I miss you. I.... I miss you."

He stared into nothing for...a while. Then he scrubbed his face and blew his nose, snapping into pilot mode. He rerouted all power from the heating and life-support systems to the beacon's signal, boosting it some more, and then he recorded a message on loop to be sent with the signal, dispassionately recording that he was alive, well, and taking shelter some ten kilometres from the podpod, which was likely beyond repair, but which he would attempt to fix when the weather improved. "I'll take the remote receiver with me, and monitor incoming calls. If...if this is received too late, then I want to send the following messages to Pilot Misan Jeng, to my mother and family, and my commander."

He recorded what he wanted to say—no, what they would want to hear—added the date and time, and then started the broadcast. Then he scavenged what he could from the podpod, disconnected the remote radio receiver and two of the battery packs, and then closed everything up again.

He found Gredar sitting in the snow, waiting patiently. "T'meen good?" he asked.

Temin shook his head, chest too tight and painful to speak. He cloaked the podpod, startling Gredar again, but without provoking the aggressive reaction of before. “Go?” he asked as he hoisted the two packs onto his shoulders, and came over to his friend.

Gredar peered at him anxiously. “T’meen go najil?”

Temin bit his lip. “Temin no go najil. No najil. I can’t go home.” His eyes started to fill up again. *Jeng, your timing sucks, lover.*

Gredar put a paw out and drew Temin close to him, so his face was level with Temin’s. “T’meen ganaa.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Temin muttered, too dispirited for more language lessons.

“T’meen ganaa. No good.” Gredar leaned forward and licked at Temin’s cheek, tasting the salt. “Ganaa.”

“Sad? Yeah, I’m sad. Leave me....” But Gredar ignored his desire to be left alone, wrapping his tail around him. He licked Temin’s face, even knocked off the makeshift head covering to lick into his hair and down his neck. “Hey, that’s cold, big guy.” It was kind of nice, though. Ticklish and strange, but still nice. Comforting.

“Hmmm. T’meen good,” Gredar rumbled, as he tugged Temin onto his lap. “T’meen go Kadit najil.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think your mother likes me,” he muttered, snuggling into the thick fur of Gredar’s chest. What the sheft was he going to do now? He would have to wait until the snow melted before he could do any serious repairs, but even then he would only be able to possibly repair the sublights, which meant he’d be marooned up in space and not down here, where, for the time being at least, he had access to food and shelter.

Gredar seemed content to pet him and hold him, and as Temin contemplated the wreck of his future, there were worse places to be. But then the big guy shifted, and growled. “Martek.”

“What the sheft is a martek? What?”

“Martek day-neh....”

“No!”

“Martek day-neh *good*. Martek basne T’meen.”

“Look, Gredar, I’m tired, I’m cranky, I’m cold....”

Gredar stroked Temin’s cheek. “Martek basne T’meen.”

‘Basne’ could be anything from ‘eat’ to ‘heat’. “Okay. Yes. Whatever.” It wasn’t like he had other plans.



Gredar picked up the head covering he'd knocked off with his tongue and tried to place it back on Temin's head. Temin gave him an exasperated look as he fixed it in place. "You can't help yourself, can you? Shame you can't have kittens. You'd make someone a wonderful mother."

Gredar chirruped, apparently happy Temin was in a better mood, even if he had no idea what was being said, then he hoisted Temin up onto his shoulders, and strode off. Temin refused to look back at where the podpod would be visible, if it wasn't cloaked. He needed time to think about what the sheft he was going to do with the rest of his life.

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His huu-man friend was having a hard day, Gredar thought as they walked back to the settlement. He couldn't begin to understand what it was he'd just seen, or why it had upset T'meen so much, but he knew this—going out, T'meen was fairly bouncing with impatience, waving his ummm around, and now he didn't seem to care about anything. If Gredar had understood his words correctly, T'meen had no home to go any more, or no way of getting there. Gredar's family had granted him a bare cycle of tenuous safety, and after that Gredar would have to help T'meen find another answer. The one Gredar had always turned to for help in his youth—and afterwards too—had been Martek, and he hoped his old friend would be able to offer some solution, or at least comfort, where Gredar had neither wit nor experience to.

There were more daiyne around now, many returning to their homes for the midday meal, and T'meen was attracting more curious and some hostile looks. Filwui would have been quick to put his version of events out, but he was at a disadvantage if he wanted to stir up serious discontent about Gredar's mother. He had influence among the younger males, but little among the females where it counted—he wasn't sought after as Gredar was to care for young kitlings, to train youngsters up and guide them in the necessary skills of hunt and chase. One day it would be Filwui's turn, or someone like him, to be the prominent male in the clan, but without female support, Filwui could do little to change clan thinking. Gredar would have to protect his little friend from possible revenge attacks but Filwui would have to be stupider than Gredar judged him to provoke Gredar's mother further. Filwui was greedy but no fool. Killing or harming T'meen would not benefit him.

More worrying was Jilen's attitude. Gredar doubted she was behind any of the overt hostility, little though it was, but she was more important for T'meen's long-term future. Right now, she could only see the possible harm the little huu-man might bring. Somehow, Gredar had to convince her that T'meen could offer

something to the clan. What that might be, Gredar didn't know but T'meen was quick-witted and generous. Surely they could make something of that.

Martek was surprised to see him, but his tail quivered with delight as he saw T'meen on Gredar's shoulders. "Finally!"

T'meen clung to Gredar's head, and the vibrating tension in his thighs and the anxious, painful grip on Gredar's fur told him Martek's enthusiasm had frightened his little friend.

"Quietly, Martek. He's still nervous of us, especially males. Introduce yourself, he understands that."

"Of course, foolish of me." He pointed to his chest. "Martek."

T'meen made it clear he wished to be put down. When he was on the floor, he pointed to himself. "T'meen. Huu-man."

"Paznitl! He really speaks!" T'meen flinched back at Martek's shout of delight. "Ah, sorry, little huuman." Martek made soothing gestures T'meen apparently understood, though he approached no closer. "Come in, you can have something to eat."

T'meen stared at Martek's main room, hands behind his back as if he was afraid to touch anything. Gredar was only slowly beginning to read T'meen's more subtle body signals—the lack of a tail and his subdued scent, made it very difficult—but he had come to understand his naked face was important in signalling emotion. Wide eyes were a sign of either alarm or surprise, but there was nothing about the way T'meen held himself to indicate fear. "He likes your books," Gredar said as Martek watched T'meen walk around, examining the walls and the many, many artefacts and records of the clan. "Already we've started to make a list of each other's language."

"You have? I must see those...." Martek suddenly recalled his manners. "Please, come and sit, let me feed you. What does he eat?"

Gredar motioned T'meen over to the cushion Martek indicated, and the huuman sat down neatly—Gredar still found his movements so elsert, though he would never tell his friend that. "He won't drink pkite—water, in the smallest cup you have. Bread, and fully cooked meat sliced very fine—his teeth are weak."

"If he wasn't so very rare, kitling, I would say he's a lot of trouble for a pet."

"Martek, he's not a pet!" T'meen went rigid beside him. Gredar patted his leg gently to reassure him.

"Sure about that, are you, Gredar?" Martek said with a wry twitch of an ear. "I won't be long. You may let him look, if his paws are clean."

T'meen sat politely, waiting for Gredar to tell him what was permitted. Still behaving like a pet, certainly, but was that so very surprising in his situation?

Gredar thought he should explain Martek's role in the clan, but how could he...? Ah, yes. He beckoned T'meen over to the stand where the book of Kelara stood, and pulled over a stool for him to stand on so he could see. Gredar remembered the first time he had stood here, when he was no taller than T'meen, and Martek had explained his position in the illustrious history of their clan, which was one of the oldest in Ptane. He opened the book carefully. "Kadit," he said, pointing to her name. "Jilen, Gredar." He traced the names of his younger siblings, and their offspring, and then his mother's siblings, and her mother. "Martek," he said, running his fingers carefully down the page. "Martek records."

T'meen tilted his head. "Martek...?" He leafed carefully through several pages, and then swept his hand around the room.

"Ye-esss. Martek is a historian.

T'meen repeated the word slowly, having difficulty with it, and then said another which Gredar assumed was the same term in his tongue. Of course, he could never be sure that they really did understand each other, but T'meen was very clever, so Gredar hoped they did.

He showed him other books, and a couple of the artefacts that had been dug from the ground many years ago, close to the coast. One of Martek's predecessors had traded for them, who knew why, and historians never, ever threw anything away, however apparently useless or puzzling. Gredar was impressed by the reverence and care T'meen took in handling the objects. He seemed fascinated, spending quite a long time on a long dark box that was fashioned from material Martek had never been able to identify.

"Now, now, here's a feast for my guests, I hope," Martek said, setting a tray down on the table he used when entertaining small groups of friends or visitors—those whose manner he trusted. "Gredar, why are you showing him those things? Surely he has no interest in our history."

"I think he has an interest in everything. He's very bright. T'meen?" He reached for the box. T'meen seemed reluctant to give it up, but did so, allowing Gredar to put it back on the shelf. "Come sit."

T'meen still seemed rather wary of Martek, but then he had no way of knowing if their historian was as big a rogue as Filwui. Martek, for his part, and despite his teasing, was delighted to be able to examine T'meen more closely, fascinated by the cloze and the way T'meen spoke, though he considered the loss of the hair and the damage Filwui had caused to T'meen's looks to be a great pity. "Will it grow back, do you think? And how long would it take?"

"I have no idea, and we haven't covered time measurement. I was hoping...you might take him on."

Martek's ears twitched. "As a pupil, kitling?"

"That—and perhaps you could learn more about where he came from. He seems to think he can't get

home now.” Gredar decided to leave a description of the frankly astonishing sights of the morning until T’meen’s language skills were stronger and he could explain it all to them. “Mother and the surat decided he could stay a cycle, no more. I don’t know how long huu-man live, but if he lives longer than a cycle, he’ll need a home.”

Gredar poured some water for T’meen as Martek sat back on his haunches to consider the suggestion. “Hmmm. Well, if Kadit agrees, and it won’t interfere with my duties, I can’t see why not. His arrival should be recorded. Can I count on you to make some pictures for my words?”

“Yes, though I wish I’d drawn him before.” He stroked the back of T’meen’s neck with his tail, which seemed to amuse him. “If we can find a role for him, a use, then Mother might permit him to stay longer.”

“Perhaps. Don’t get your hopes up, Gredar. Better to find a proper place for him to live. If you say he’s not a pet, and he’s no daiyne, then what can he do here? He’s too small and weak to work—you could never use him in the pottery—and without our tongue, how can he help someone like me? There must be more of his kind around.”

Gredar, who’d heard the voice of another huu-man from inside the amazing appearing and disappearing structure that morning, agreed, though he didn’t explain. “I haven’t asked him about that.”

“Then eat up, kitling, and then we can interrogate him properly. I’m looking forward to it,” Martek said, chortling a little with anticipation. Gredar started to feel a little sorry for his huu-man friend—Martek could be very persistent.



They’d been at it for hours, and Temin was beginning to feel about as alert and useful as a burned out diode. On the one hand, it was a welcome distraction from his depressed mood to watch Gredar and this other male—clearly a friend and some kind of librarian—talk so happily and animatedly together, and to be brought in as much his limited language skills allowed. Sitting in this huge room with the treasures and records of a hundred generations of day-neh was a lot more interesting than being stuck in Gredar’s room too, even if it made Temin a little homesick. It reminded him a lot of the Museum of Terran Culture that his family used to visit when he was a kid.

On the other hand...Martek seemed to want to learn all about humans and their culture and their language without any delay, and certainly without any concessions to Temin’s convalescent state, though Gredar had several times clearly told his friend to back off and let Temin catch his breath. Temin was starting

to lose his voice, though he doubted they could tell the difference in tone.

But it had been worth it—his understanding of the day-neh had grown exponentially, and he now had a huge sheaf of notes, word lists and observations. He knew how to tell time, measure distance, weight and volume in day-neh, and learned some fascinating stuff about day-neh physiology, including the fact day-neh males had a pseudo-vagina called a *taeng*. (They pitied him for not having one. Temin couldn't begin to explain how weird the idea was to him. Not as weird as the egg thing, but still.) He'd learned Gredar's clan was very old and one of the most respected in the whole land, which they called Ptane, that Gredar was about forty-one standard years old and that Martek was about sixty. Gredar had been shocked to find Temin was twenty-eight—when Temin asked him how old he'd thought he was, Gredar had said 'six cycles'—about eight standard years. They'd had to have a break then until Temin stopped giggling.

They'd had another break when Temin had tried to explain where he came from, and that his race could fly across space and time. Martek had expressed his opinion of the credibility of such tales at length and with a good many hand gestures Temin didn't need an interpreter for. Gredar, strangely, hadn't said much at all. He certainly didn't chime in with the fact he'd seen the podpod, and Temin, taking his cue, had decided not to show Martek the scanner or handheld just yet. He wasn't sure how Martek would react. It was insulting that Martek thought he was a bit touched, but that perception might come in handy in the future. Better to be thought mad rather than bad, after all.

What he hadn't learned was why Martek had several pieces of elderly Terran electronic equipment on his shelves—stuff that dated back to the colonists for sure, and which had to belong to that first expedition. It was obvious Martek had not connected the things he owned with Temin at all, so he wasn't familiar with humans or their technology, and from what Temin had learned from the central database records, the colonisation site was a good fifteen hundred kilometres from here. So what was this provincial librarian guy with the insatiable curiosity, doing with those objects?

He just didn't have the language skills yet—and maybe never would—to ask. His vocabulary had increased ten-fold since arriving, so he now had hundreds of nouns, adjectives and verbs written down, although he couldn't clearly pronounce more than a quarter. But conversation was still incredibly frustrating for him, and, he thought, Martek. Gredar just seemed happy that Temin was being occupied—was he interested in this stuff? Gredar worked with his hands, was artistic, practical. How much of this cross-cultural questioning did he care about? Temin realised that of all the secrets and information he had yet to learn, it was what was going on in Gredar's mind and heart that he really wanted to know. And that, he wasn't much closer to.

Finally Gredar held up a paw and said ‘Stop’ in both languages, and gathered Temin close to him, his tail wrapping tightly around him. “T’meen tir-ed.”

“Yes,” Temin agreed though it hadn’t been a question. “Temin go here soon?”

“Ye-ess,” Martek said enthusiastically. “Grueni.”

“Tomorrow? Sure. Yes. Gredar happy?”

For an answer, Gredar rubbed his massive head carefully along Temin’s face. “Gredar haapy. T’meen meni good.”

Martek delayed them a little longer, but Gredar had to insist on them leaving as it was getting dark and he wasn’t carrying a lamp. They walked—well, Temin rode as Gredar walked—through the snowy twilight, the high windows of the houses showing bright spots of lamplight through the high glass panels. It was shefting cold, but the evening stars above—so strange, so beautiful—were close enough to touch in the moonless, cloudless sky, and Temin couldn’t hold back a deep sigh, knowing he’d never fly again or see the stars of his own planet. “T’meen ganaa?” Gredar rumbled quietly.

“Sad? Yeah. Puti. A little.”

“Leetle ganaa. Leetle sad.”

“Yes.”

“T’meen no go najil, leetle sad?”

“Yes,” Temin said, after he’d deciphered this. “Temin little sad not to go home. Puti ganaa. Gredar good anwa Temin.” Learning the word for ‘to’ had been the biggest breakthrough of the day, he thought, stroking Gredar’s soft ears affectionately. “Gredar pana happy.” And ‘make or to do’ had been the other big one.

“Gredar haapy. Temin pana Gredar haapy.”

“Good. I’m glad I make you happy.” He wrapped his arms around Gredar’s head and hung on tight until they reached the house again.

He was too tired to eat, and was content to doze under a pile of furs in the room while Gredar went off and presumably ate and socialised with his family. There wouldn’t—couldn’t—be many more afternoons like this, and though Temin was afraid of being left on his own in the house, the idea that Gredar might be forced to get rid of him because Temin was a shefting nuisance, stopping Gredar from getting on with his job, was a risk he couldn’t afford.

But what was *Temin’s* job now? He’d never been good at waiting or sitting still. Even at flight school, he’d filled up any free time screwing Jeng and playing sarfab to nearly pro level, before he’d broken his arm

and lost too much training time. Vacations were spent with Jeng, travelling around the planet by aizin, trying to cram in as much sight-seeing and excitement as possible. Pilots lived knowing they ran a much higher risk of dying young than almost any other profession, and even a milk run to Nixal could end up killing them—as he had come so close to finding out. They learned early not to waste time, and he’d taken that lesson to heart. He’d always had a goal, something to do, something to get out of bed for—now that was gone, for good. Even if they let him stay here forever, what was he going to do with his days—ride around on Gredar’s shoulders? Chew the fat with Martek? He was a young guy—he could have sixty or seventy years ahead of him, living like this. How could he make any useful contribution in a society where even getting a cup of water was a major operation?

With only these miserable thoughts to console him, he fell into a troubled light sleep, dreaming he was awake until the door shutting loudly snapped him out of his fugue and into reality. His heart was still trying to jump out of his chest when he heard the quiet “T’meen?” and saw the soft glow of a candle lamp.

He slumped back onto the furs. “I’m awake, big guy.”

Gredar chirruped, but didn’t come to the bed immediately—he had business to do in his bathroom. The day-neh kept themselves as clean as their houses, but if their sense of smell was as good as a domestic cat’s, then Temin figured bad breath or dirty fur would be a lot more offensive to them than to him. It reminded him that he hadn’t had a full bath in weeks, though he’d been wiped down repeatedly while he was ill, and he probably stank to Gredar’s sensitive nose. He didn’t know the word for ‘bath’. Something else to learn from Martek.

Thinking about his smell made Temin realise that his underwear would be even more gross—he slipped out of his boxers and undershirt, folding them neatly and putting them near the bed. He would have to find a way to wash them too. He only had one spare set. What he’d do when they fell to bits, he had no idea but he suspected it would involve creating a weaving industry from scratch.

Gredar wasn’t gone long, and returned to place the lamp on the side table, and then sit on the bed near Temin. He ran a gentle paw down Temin’s side. “T’meen tir-ed?”

“Yeah.”

“Naschi?”

Temin shook his head. “No. Not sick. Puti ganaa, meni tired. A little sad, very tired.”

Gredar nodded with a little growl which Temin now realised meant he understood. Listening to him talking with Martek had taught Temin a lot about tones and body language, and things he’d assumed were vaguely hostile or disapproving, were as benign as nods and ‘uh huh’ in human speech. He had to wonder

how much of his own expressions and gestures Gredar was getting wrong, but Gredar was so shefting smart. He picked up nearly everything on the first explanation, and what he didn't know, he worked out.

"You're something else, you know," Temin said sleepily.

"Whaat?"

"Gredar meni good. You're great. Temin happy."

Gredar patted him, his hand lingering on Temin's bare shoulder. "Cloze? No cloze?"

"Dirty." He held his nose and mimed a bad smell.

"Duuuurty." Gredar leaned down and sniffed at Temin's neck. "T'meen no duuurty. T'meen good."

"You're just saying that." Temin smiled as Gredar's tail curled over his shoulder and delicately tickled his chin. "Temin want," he said, plucking at the furry tuft near his face. "Temin want Temin tail."

Gredar gave the curious yowly chirrup that meant he was amused—laughing in fact. "Gredar taaayl. No T'meen taaayl."

"Yes, Temin tail," he teased, tugging at it. "Temin meni want tail." He hugged it to his chest, grabbing for it as Gredar tried to whisk it away. "Gredar make Temin sad. Temin tail."

Gredar yanked it out quickly, but only so he could stroke Temin's face with it. Temin closed his eyes with pleasure—he'd never been one for fluffy things, even material with a nap didn't do much for him, but Gredar had turned him into the biggest fan of cat fur in the galaxy.

Gredar seemed content to sit there and stroke him for as long as Temin would allow it—but the big guy had had a stressful day, with the family court thing and the surprises Temin had given him. "Bed?" Temin said, pointing beside him.

Gredar slipped off his beautiful medallion and set it aside. Temin had learned that afternoon Gredar had designed it himself, and it had been made by his younger sister from a coppery-red alloy which was very light but strong. A very talented family, and famous for it. Gredar's designs and pottery were traded all over Ptane, Martek had told him proudly. Males had to be useful, Temin had worked out from what he'd been told and what he'd observed. They had no status. Gredar could be kicked out at a second's notice and not a member of the clan would stop it happening—not that it would, Temin thought, but in theory....

"Filwui go?" he asked as Gredar lay down beside him.

"Go? Weet?"

"Where? Out. Ptane."

"No. Maaaybe." That had been one of Gredar's big new words. "Filwui pana baaad guu, Filwui go Ptane."

‘Filwui do bad twice, Filwui go Ptane.’ So if Filwui fucked up again, he’d be out on his furry backside. “Good.” He pointed at the lamp. “Stop?”

“T’meen fraa.”

‘Fraa—‘want, need’. Gredar could see well enough in the dark to move around if he wanted to—Temin couldn’t. “Thank you. Good.”

Gredar tugged Temin close against his chest, and Temin wondered why it didn’t occur to him to object to the handling. Maybe it was because Gredar never presumed it was okay—Temin knew if he gave the slightest hint the embrace was unwelcome, Gredar would have let him go and probably slept on the floor, as he had done the first few nights after his return, until Temin, cold and lonely, had invited him back. Being with Gredar was about safe as Temin could allow himself to feel in this alien world and...the big guy was so warm and soft. It was easy to forget his lethal side. Gredar didn’t know Temin had a lethal side too, in theory. Temin hoped there would never be a reason for him to find out.

“T’meen?”

“Just thinking, big guy.”

“Guuuy? Whaat?”

Sheft. How to explain a nickname. “Maybe grueni. Maybe tomorrow.” He should make a list of words he needed to translate with Martek.

“Ye-ess.”

Temin snuggled in. He was lying with his face against Gredar’s broad chest—the dense, ultrasoft chest and belly fur was paler than the rest. In the dim candlelight, it glowed white, though in fact it was a rich cream. They were so handsome.... He suddenly had a flash of someone hunting Gredar down, killing him for his fur, so they could put it on a bed just like this. The idea make him almost retch. If humans discovered the day-neh, they would hunt them. They would shoot Gredar, skin him and never know what they’d destroyed

He shivered, horrified by his own thoughts, and Gredar’s big paw cupped his head, protectively. “I’m okay, big guy. Temin good.”

“Ye-ess. Shhh.”

Temin had to grin at cat people and human-people having the same sounds for hushing an unruly pet. He jumped a little as something touched his face, until he realised he was being licked. Something else he’d got used to, strangely, like the drill-like sound of Gredar’s purring. He buried his fingers deep into Gredar’s fur and began to knead—his fingers could barely get down to skin level, the fur was so thick, but Gredar liked it anyway, judging by the way the purring became almost deafening. The vibrations were incredible—

his whole body felt like it was being massaged from within.

The licking was getting more insistent—now Gredar was tonguing his chest, which felt a bit odd. Temin pushed back without thinking and Gredar stopped. “T’meen no hal?”

“Yes, hal. I like it a lot. Meni hal. Just....” He didn’t know the word for ‘strange’. “Pana? Do it again?”

Gredar hesitated, his green eyes inscrutable in the flickering yellow light. “Good?”

“Very good.”

Gredar made a grumbling growl, deep in his chest, and then started licking Temin again, nudging him to make him lie flat, to give him better access to Temin’s body. Temin froze—it was suddenly too much like....

Gredar lifted his head. “Filwui,” Temin whispered, his gut clenching, his body remembering that...demanding, unstoppable touch. Claws on his hips, teeth at his neck.

Gredar’s sharp ears heard. “Filwui wasa. Filwui baaad.” He stroked back Temin’s hair from his forehead, and his great tail came around to lie flat against Temin’s stomach. “Gredar stop?”

Temin fought to breathe, to get his shivering under control. Gredar wasn’t Filwui. Gredar had *protected* him in public, from Filwui’s threats. But he was so big...and his tongue was just like....

He reached out and grabbed a handful of Gredar’s fur, dug his fingers in. Gredar didn’t move, except for his tail, moving gently back and forth over Temin’s belly, not in irritation, not flick, flick, flick, but...slow, even, a soothing rolling motion, as if he knew exactly how luxurious it felt on naked skin. What was going on behind those huge eyes? The lack of expression in a day-neh’s face was the most frustrating thing about them. Did Gredar even understand what the problem was?

Yes. Yes, he must do, because he was waiting. Waiting for Temin in his own bed, not touching, not pressing. Listening for what Temin was telling him, even if he didn’t use his voice. “Filwui....” Temin mimed being held by his hips. “Pain. Naschi.”

Gredar slowly extended a paw—then turned it over so he was presenting the furry side to Temin. “Gredar no pana T’meen naschi.”

“I know you wouldn’t hurt me, big guy. It’s not you.” Temin reached out and stroked the back of Gredar’s hand. The tendons that controlled those deadly claws were tight under the fur, so much power, controlled, waiting. It was terrifying but...it was something else too, something that made him a little ashamed after what happened. How could Gredar turn him on and frighten him at the same time, after what the other one had done?

Gredar leaned closer—Temin stiffened, but Gredar didn't do anything. Not at first. Then that big pink tongue emerged from between his dark lips, the terrifying teeth still concealed. Temin held himself still, waiting, the cold air of the room chilly on his moistened skin, making his nipples stand out almost painfully. Then Gredar bent just a little, and his tongue touched Temin's shoulder. Temin shuddered, but as Gredar stopped, Temin tightened his grip on the handful of fur. "Yes," he whispered, hardly believing he wanted this.

The tongue touched him again, and then rasped down over his chest, across his peaked nipples. Temin bit back a gasp, but he shivered as Gredar did it again. There were no words for what this felt like—there was nothing in his experience like that damp, rough muscle, the feel of it against his flesh. No human tongue could offer this sensation. No human had ever known this, before him.

Still trembling a little, he pushed off the covering furs completely and spread himself, arms wide, legs apart. Exposed, terrified.

"T'meen?"

"Temin fraa...Gredar." His voice shook. "I want you. Temin fraa Gredar," he repeated more firmly. Sheft, he was cold. "Please?"

Gredar growled and all the hairs on Temin's neck stood up—he couldn't help it, and when Gredar planted one enormous paw in the middle of his chest he nearly yelled in fright.

"Shhhh. Shhhh." Gredar stroked Temin's chest lightly with his open hand, claws fully retracted, so one would never suspect they were even there. The skin of his palm—the hand of a potter, an artist—was rougher than a human's, and hot, so very hot on Temin's cool skin. Power in every fibre, in every muscle. A hand that could crush or caress with the slightest effort. "T'meen good?"

"Temin good." He clenched his fists and spread himself wider. "Fraa Gredar. I need it, need you." Gredar stared at him so long Temin started to feel like an idiot. He started to draw his legs together but stopped with a shiver as Gredar growled again. "Please?"

The massive head tilted as Gredar considered him, then the paw on his chest moved slowly down, on his belly...down further. "Ye-ess?"

"Yes," Temin whispered, even though he was screaming 'No!' in his head. He didn't want to be afraid of this. He didn't want Filwui and his stupid accomplice to make it impossible for him to enjoy being touched...and he had come to love this gentle power even before the one who controlled it knew who and what he was touching. Was it a sign of madness? To want his owner to do this? Did it even matter any more, when Temin was the only human on this planet and the only one ever likely to be? "Yes. Please. Just do it,

big guy.”

Gredar kept staring, his hand stroking slowly up and down Temin’s belly. A low sound started, so quiet, that Temin, concentrating as he was on not freaking out, didn’t realise what it was at first. Then he knew—Gredar was purring again. He *liked* touching Temin’s skin. Temin laid his hand over Gredar’s. “Temin good?”

“Ye-ess. T’meen elsart. Nam elsart.”

“Elsart...beautiful. What’s ‘nam’?”

“Meni, meni, meni, meni...meni tretu.”

“A hundred times beautiful? No. Temin no elsart.” He smiled at Gredar’s exaggeration.

“T’meen nam elsart,” Gredar insisted, a long finger drawing a delicate line along his jaw and down the centre of his chest. He bent forward and licked where he had traced. “Elsart.” The sibilance hissed loud in the silent room. Outside, the house was still active, doors shutting, day-neh talking, a crash of metal maybe from the kitchens—but in here, just Gredar, his muffled, gentle touch and his strange, strange voice.

“Gredar elsart. You’re the most amazing thing I ever saw.”

Gredar kept licking him, the purr louder, coming in long waves, soft, loud, soft, loud. Temin’s hand on Gredar’s belly clenched, unclenched in rhythm with the vibration, in and out. *Touch me, please*, he begged, even though he was terrified that Gredar would. He really was losing his mind.

The sweep of that huge tongue got longer with every pass—nipple to chin, edge of the ribs, navel...edge of his pubic hair. His dick, which had been half-hard for a while now, suddenly went all the way. Gredar stopped, backed away. “No! Gredar...Temin fraa Gredar. Need you.”

“No...wasa. Pana wasa.”

“Bad...make bad...you think you’ll be like him? Please...Gredar, touch me, please....” He slid his hands down to the base of Gredar’s belly, kneading, begging. His own belly was heavy with the wanting, the desire he’d been sure he wouldn’t feel again, hours of being touched and petted and licked, foreplay for what he wanted now, washing away, over, past his fears. “No Filwui. Gredar good.” He spread his legs wider, put his hand over his dick and looked up hopefully. “Please? Temin hal. I like. Meni hal. I really like it.”

He was ashamed to be so needy and yet he wanted that tongue on him so much he thought he might scream if Gredar backed away again. Gredar didn’t. He leaned in, nudged Temin’s hand away with his nose, and then that hot toughness was on him. “Sheft! Yes, please, please, hal, hal!” Temin babbled, his hands on Gredar’s head, clutching and tugging the heavy mane—this was nothing like...what the others had...it was just heavy and hot and all around him.... “Oh...oh sheft it....”

Gredar was making these weird high-pitched noises at the top in his throat, but Temin barely noticed them above his own begging, all sensation narrowed to what was happening between his legs, and when Gredar yowled, horrifyingly loud, Temin only felt it as more delicious vibration. He came, hot and fast and so urgently it was like he was trying to expel his shefting *balls* out his dick. Gredar kept licking and licking until Temin had to push him away, panting. “Oh...crack. Shefting crack.” He let go the fur he was pulling so viciously, and opened his eyes, too limp to speak.

Gredar sat up. He was still making those keening sounds—every few seconds, he’d growl. His ears were flat against his skull, and he didn’t seem to be looking at Temin at all.

“Hey, big guy....”

He put his hand on Gredar’s arm—and Gredar let out a howl of pure pain.

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Gredar didn’t dare move. He was having trouble even breathing normally, and when T’meen touched him, he couldn’t help himself, sound ripped from him against his will. Temin cringed back, but he didn’t run.

*Please, little friend, you need to run. Get away from me or I could hurt you.* He clenched his hands right, and tried not to think of the fire in his belly, the urgent, desperate need in his groin, his kala, his balls. “Please.” It came out as a thin whine, and frightened T’meen again. He was sorry for that. He didn’t want to hurt him.

“Gredar sick?”

“No. T’meen....” He had to get out of here, find a willing....

“Gredar...T’meen help Gredar. Temin help. Shhhh.” Then more words as his little huu-man’s hands pushed at his belly, trying to....

“No! T’meen!” But as he moved away, T’meen followed him, grabbing his fur and refusing to be set aside. Gredar would have to physically force him away and he so very much did not want to do that.

T’meen stared up at him with those dark, elsart eyes. “T’meen make good. Stop.” He shoved and shoved until Gredar had no choice but to lie down, and then this strange creature climbed on top over him, on his thighs. Despite himself, a yowl left Gredar’s lips, startling T’meen—but his huu-man didn’t get off him. Instead, he pressed down at the base of Gredar’s belly...so good, so....

With a tremendous effort of will, Gredar forced out a protest. “No. Bad.”

“No bad. Very good. Shhhh,” T’meen kept kneading and pressing and all the while staring into

Gredar's eyes.

Gredar wished he had more words. More words to persuade the huu-man to stop, more words to tell him what he needed...so desperately...needed. T'meen had no taeng. He couldn't give Gredar what would ease this torment. "Please...no? T'meen...Gredar need taeng."

"T'meen no taeng." He held up his hands. "Good? Like?"

Gredar could only stare. Would hands be enough? A daiyne's were too big, but T'meen had such small, elsart hands.... He took one as gently as he could, and guided it to below his kala. "Push. Hard."

T'meen didn't know those words, but he understood...how, Gredar had no idea because huu-man balls were so different...ah.... "Ahhh! Good! T'meen, good! Gredar like!"

T'meen chuckled, keeping up the delicious, perfect pressure up over the nerves under the kala, and even around the sheath, which made Gredar squeak in an undignified way, and T'meen jump a little. "Good. Good! No stop!"

"T'meen no stop." And then he did it again, as if he knew exactly where to touch Gredar, to ease the fire.

His kala shuddered and he spent, his balls twitching and clenching so hard, he thought they would break. T'meen didn't seem to notice, his clever touches suddenly too much—when Gredar pushed him away as carefully as his trembling hands could manage, T'meen struggled a little. "No. T'meen make...."

"Very good. I'm finished, T'meen." Then he understood. Huu-mans expelled when they spent, so T'meen didn't know Gredar had. "Gredar vaary vaary good. Haapy."

T'meen knelt back and looked at him. "Very good?"

"Ye-ess." He reached over and pulled T'meen close, and his little huu-man came willingly, sitting on Gredar's still twitching lap. He felt a purr rise up inside him, the natural reaction to a forceful spending. "Very good," he whispered. "T'meen haapy?" he asked, nuzzling the top of T'meen's head.

"Truly haapy." T'meen wrapped his arms around Gredar as best he good, his face pressed close to Gredar's chest. Gredar put his tail around T'meen, since he liked it and because it was one way to show affection that didn't frighten his huu-man.

It was getting late, and he knew T'meen had to be tired, as was he, but he didn't want to break this peace between them, sated and calm and affectionate. He hoped he had eased something in T'meen, as T'meen had eased him. "Gredar will protect T'meen. Protect with all my ability."

T'meen pulled away a little so he could look up. His face in the candlelight was shadowed, but Gredar could still make it out. "Thank you," he said in his own tongue, then repeated it in daiyne. He snuggled close

again, and not long after, a little to Gredar's surprise, he fell fast asleep, not rousing even when Gredar laid him down on the bed and covered him with the furs again.

"I'll protect you," Gredar whispered, as he lay down beside his huu-man and wrapped tail and arm around him. "I will keep you safe, little friend. I promise you."

The question was—how difficult would it be to keep that promise, and for how long would he need to?

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Temin was warm and comfortable and being cuddled. "Mmm, Jeng?" he murmured, rolling over—then he opened his eyes, found he was facing a wall of creamy fur and the memories of the night before came crashing in on him. What had he done? He'd had sex with an alien—worse, he'd *begged* for sex with an alien—and cheated on Jeng. Hadn't even *thought* of Jeng. Jeng, the man he would never see again. A species he would never see again.

What the sheft was wrong with him? He squirmed out of Gredar's insistent clutches and struggled to the edge of the enormous bed. Had he forgotten all his dignity when he'd been made a pet?

Pale light streamed in through the roof panels, over the bed and across Gredar's sleeping form. Temin stared down at him and just for a second or two, he hated the day-neh for what his kind had done, even what Gredar himself had done. But as he watched Gredar's tail lazily twitching, like the big guy was dreaming, maybe, he knew it hadn't been anything Gredar had done. It had been himself, all him—needy and lonely and trying to prove....*What, Temin? That you can still screw?*

He shivered in the cool air—he had no idea why Gredar didn't heat this room, but right now he wished he did. He wanted a bath, so he could wash away some of this strange feeling in him, on him. He'd had sex with a giant cat...person. Was something broken in his head that he'd enjoyed it, even after what that Filwui had done?

He sat on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands. He was still just a shefting pet, totally dependent, and he couldn't realistically see that changing any time soon. He thought of those bits of equipment in Martek's library—was there any chance that some of the colonists survived? There might be a hint of that in Martek's records, but he needed to be discreet. He didn't want Gredar and the others connecting him to the colonists just yet, if at all.

But if the colonists hadn't survived...then what? He could fix the podpod well enough to fly—were

the day-neh the only sentient creatures on the planet? Of course, even if they weren't, it didn't mean Temin would be any more welcome or better treated by another race.

"T'meen?"

Temin forced a smile on his face as Gredar's tail snaked around him, and he turned. "Hi, big guy."

"T'meen good?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Fraa harsa. Need food. I'm hungry."

Gredar gave a small growl of assent as if accepting that explanation, but as he sat up, he put his nose at Temin's neck, sniffed delicately, then slid his arm around Temin and hugged him close. "T'meen ganaa?"

How did he know? "Puti. A little sad."

"Fraa...huu-man?"

"Yes," Temin whispered. "Need humans."

Gredar urged him to turn around, and stared down at him with those luminous green eyes, so unlike a human's but still compelling. "Gredar no huu-man. T'meen ganaa?" Temin could only nod, too choked to speak. "Gredar sorry."

"Not your fault, big guy," he made himself say, patting Gredar's chest. "I...Jeng...human like Martek. Jeng, human, Temin najil. Friend in my home." He mimed hugging his missing lover. "Want him. Fraa Jeng. Fraa Temin mother. Want my mother. I miss my family, my lover."

"Hmmm. Gredar basne T'meen, go T'meen najil?"

"Help me go home? I wish you could. No." He shook his head emphatically since Gredar was confused.

"Gredar basne T'meen?" One great paw descended with exquisite care on his head and Gredar began to stroke him gently, down his hair, down his back.

"You can't help me. You don't know how. I don't know how. I just miss Jeng and everyone, and I don't know how to be useless."

Gredar cocked his head, not understanding a word of the stream of Standard, but it didn't matter. "Breakfast?" Temin asked, putting his self-pity aside as the pointless exercise it was. "Food. Harsa?"

"Ye-ess. T'meen cloze?"

"Yeah. Give me a minute."

To his surprise, Gredar wanted him to go downstairs to eat, not stay in the room. Temin got the distinct impression this was some kind of test for him and Gredar's kin, so he grabbed his pack and notes, and then walked down the huge stairs as proud as he could at Gredar's side, trying very hard not to look like

a pet or anything like as scared as he felt among these giants. Everyone they met took a good long look at him. Some stopped to talk to Gredar, a few licked and rubbed heads. No one tried to talk to Temin, which didn't surprise him. Gredar didn't push the issue, but when he walked through a doorway into a large dining room where at least twenty day-neh were seated at breakfast, Temin balked.

"No."

"Gredar jersai T'meen. Good harsa," he added encouragingly.

Temin didn't care how good the shefting food was, Gredar's mother and scary relatives were all staring at him and a couple were flattening their ears. Gredar ignored them, yowled and chirruped cheerfully as he found a spot at the long table on which the usual mix of meat, vegetables and bread were placed in large, elegant bowls.

Temin perched uneasily on a cushion next to Gredar as the conversation, which had briefly paused as they walked to their seat, resumed. Gredar's sister, J'len, was a little distance away—Temin smiled brightly, but she didn't react. Sheft—what had he done to offend her? He couldn't exactly ask Gredar right now. Gredar's mother, after glancing at her son once and acknowledging his greeting, hadn't paid them any more attention.

"I don't know what you're up to, big guy, but I don't like it," he muttered, forcing a smile as Gredar offered him some freshly cooked bread. "They look like they think I'm their next course."

He could wring Gredar's neck for this.

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Gredar couldn't remember a time when he'd felt so nervous, and so determined to hide it. He half regretted the impulse to bring T'meen to breakfast, but when the little huu-man had spoken of his sadness over the loss of his home and his family—and a grooming-mate? Gredar wasn't sure who 'Cheng' was exactly—he had thought the best remedy was to start on the process of integrating T'meen into the household. Martek was sceptical, but Gredar still thought it was possible that if his family got used to T'meen being around, when the cycle ended, they might simply not bother to ask him to leave.

But his family—certainly Jilen—didn't feel the same way, at least not yet. His reception was decidedly cool, although he couldn't blame T'meen for that—his manners, as always, were impeccable. Ah well, it was only the first morning.

Things relaxed a little as the meal continued—more open curiosity, particularly when Gredar spoke to

T'meen and was answered, less studied hostility. At least, less from all but Jilen. He needed to talk to her, but today, he really had a lot to do. He had duties in the household he could no longer neglect, he had to go to the pottery, and Martek had been most unsubtle about Gredar's lack of preparation for the singing. T'meen would have to be left with Martek and Jilen...would have to wait until they both had time.

Sparing T'meen's feelings, Gredar didn't linger, though it had been a while since he'd been at a family breakfast and he had catching up to do. T'meen stood with perhaps a little too much eagerness once Gredar indicated he was done, but he waited politely for Gredar to tell his mother of his plans and to bid her good morning.

"T'meen, let's go."

But T'meen held up his hand, and then walked over in front of the table—right up to where Gredar's mother was sitting. Gredar held his breath—what was his huu-man up to? His mother sat back and Jilen placed her hands on the table—unclawed for now, but the threat was obvious to Gredar, if not to T'meen. "Food good," he said clearly in his peculiar voice. "Thank you, Kadit." And then he bowed.

His mother glanced at Gredar in surprise before answering. "You're welcome, T'meen. Please come tomorrow."

"Thank you."

And with another bow, he turned and walked back to Gredar. Gredar exhaled, and then put his hand on T'meen's shoulder. He didn't say anything, but he was pleased, very pleased. His mother appreciated politeness and respect—and if anything would show T'meen wasn't a mindless animal, that surely would.

T'meen turned and looked up at him. "Gredar very very bad. Bad daiyne."

Oh. Another expression for Gredar to learn—narrowed eyes and thinned lips meant very annoyed. Or worse. "Gredar sorry."

T'meen folded his arms. "Gredar no sorry. Gredar bad."

Well, he supposed his huu-man was right to be a little angry—Gredar had sprung it on him. "Let's go to Martek's house," he said, hoping to distract T'meen. He curled his tail around T'meen appeasingly—for a moment he thought his friend might push it off, but with a loud vocalisation that might have meant exasperation, T'meen allowed it, and started to walk on.

"Gredar?"

T'meen froze as Gredar turned to face his sister. "Jilen, good morning. How are the kitlings?"

"Fine, not that their uncle ever bothers to visit them any more." Her tail was flicking. "What was the meaning of that display in there? Are you trying to annoy the family?"

“No, sister, quite the opposite. Did T’meen annoy anyone? I thought he behaved perfectly.”

A low growl rose in her throat. “*His* behaviour isn’t the issue. Since when do pets come to our meals?”

“Since when is he still a pet?”

T’meen cringed as she advanced towards them—Gredar didn’t move. She bent and sniffed his human friend, and then Gredar. “He reeks of your scent. You reek of each other—what have you been *doing*?”

“Nothing that hurts the clan, Jilen. Why do you hate him so much?”

She curled her hands as if about to extend her claws—Gredar began to prepare for an attack, unheard of as it might be for her to hurt him even in play. “I do *not* hate him. I...am afraid, Gredar. Afraid for my kits, afraid for my clan—afraid for you, my dear brother. What is he? And where are the rest of his kind? What is he doing to you that you forget us, forget to come and visit my kitlings, that you drag him to our meals as if he’s a guest?”

“Jilen.” He approached her and rubbed his face against her—she recoiled a little at the unfamiliar scent on him but he persisted. “If he’s not a pet, T’meen must be a guest. He has no home to go, he has no friends he can call on. He’s harmless—any of our kitlings could slice him to shreds....”

“No, that can’t be right.” She backed away from him. “Maybe he has no claws but all animals can defend themselves. That’s what worries me, Gredar. How does he protect himself? Is it through...causing confusion? Clouding your mind? His kala does strange things to a male daiyne. I don’t like it. I work with facts, with science. He’s not of our world, our knowledge—and I wish him gone.”

“The surat allowed him to stay.”

Pointing that out made her ears flatten. “Then I want him kept from me. Don’t bring him to the meals again, Gredar. He doesn’t belong.”

“Are you laying the law down, or asking me as my sister?”

He was putting her up against it. She had authority over him, incontestably. But if she did this, it would be a breach between them, and she’d always relied on his help and support more than her other siblings, more than most siblings would even offer. The question was—which was more important to her?

“No,” she said finally, her tail drooping. “I’m only asking.”

“Jilen...he can’t feed himself here, or manage anything on his own. I can’t even tell him to fend for himself outside because of the weather. Please...give me until snowmelt. I can take him with me to the gathering, and perhaps we can find another place for him. Don’t make me drive off a friend, when I still can be brother and companion to you and yours.”

She eyed T'meen suspiciously. "But how can he be a friend when he barely speaks a word of our tongue?"

"He...manages. He's learned a great deal such a short time. Maybe you're right, maybe he's like my kitling." She raised the faintest smile at that. "But I haven't meant to neglect yours, Jilen, and I'm sorry. Do you want me to come to you today?"

His appeasing words had some effect, as her posture softened. "Please? Before lunch would be such a help. You have a way with those two that no one else does, not even Mother."

"Then I'll be there. I just need to take T'meen to Martek, check in at the workshop, and then I'm at your disposal all day. I miss you and the kitlings too, you know. If Filwui hadn't been such a bastard, I'd have come to you days ago."

Reminding her—subtly—that her own son was responsible for some of this situation, seemed to take more of the fight out of her. "Is he...recovering?"

"Almost all healed. I was going to arrange a bath tonight with some of your disinfectant wash. It bothers him not to be clean, and he needs to wash his cloze, though I don't know what to use."

The appeal to her scientific nature worked, and she relaxed a little more. "The wash should work on them too. At least he has clean habits. He smells strange, though."

"I think it's the lack of fur," he said, careful not to argue with her. He found T'meen's scent welcoming, but female senses were always more acute. "We should find him a task—perhaps in the kitchen, or the dispensary. He has such small, nimble hands."

"Not the dispensary," she said, flatly rejecting the idea. "But in the pottery, perhaps. He could make items for trade. The fact a jopa made them will add to their novelty."

He refused to bridle at her deliberate misidentification. "True, true. He seems to have some aptitude for drawing. I'll be with you within a strike." He stroked her with his tail, and she allowed it, though she still looked at T'meen with distaste. As a mother, perhaps she would always take a more conservative line on such things. Gredar just had to hope time and T'meen's behaviour would convince her he was harmless.

She passed them, and then Gredar tapped T'meen on the shoulder. "Let's go."

"Jilen good?"

"Ye-ess. T'meen good, Gredar good. Come on."

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## Chapter 4

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Temin's knees knocked as he walked out of the house with Gredar, and for once, he had no problem with Gredar lifting him up and carrying him. He didn't need to speak a word of day-neh to know Gredar's sister was seriously angry with her brother—or to know it was because of him. The court thing seemed to have made things worse—was she a friend of Filwui's? She was Buhi's mother but Temin could have sworn she'd been pissed at the little bastard too—and she'd been so gentle with him while he'd been so ill. What had changed? And how could he find out? He needed more vocabulary.

It was much colder today, and even huddled against Gredar's fur, he was feeling it—as if he needed another reminder how unsuited he was for survival in this landscape. By the time they got to Martek's house, all the other end of the village, Temin was miserable—frozen to the bone, still coming down from the terror of seeing J'len just about ready to rip someone's throat out, and despairing of ever having something resembling a normal life again. He didn't usually feel this crappy after a night of good sex.

Martek greeted them enthusiastically at the door of his house. Temin was used to him by now, but he was still jittery enough that the older male's loud cries made him want to cringe, and Gredar look at Temin anxiously. Temin was sick of saying 'Temin good' when he wanted to let fly with some decent explanation, so he just shrugged. Martek bustled into his front room and didn't notice anything was wrong.

Temin couldn't help the clench of anxiety in his gut as Gredar said goodbye to them both, but the problem with faking a smile was that he wasn't sure Gredar couldn't just *smell* the terror on him. The big guy was way too intuitive about Temin's feelings, so either he had to be getting a non-verbal clue from somewhere, or the day-neh had secret powers of telepathy. Which he doubted, so smell was the most likely thing.

Gredar left with just a quick reassuring pat. Martek wanted to get to work immediately, and an hour later, Temin understood why. It turned out he was the local teacher as well. Ten young day-neh of varying ages turned up and Temin was taken to a smaller library room. He got a lot of looks and pointing fingers, before he was left on his own to explore. Easier said than done when so much was stored well above his reach, but Martek had said he could look at any of the books he wanted. He detached the imager from the handheld, and went hunting.

It took him nearly an hour, but in the end, it was surprisingly easy to find, once he'd worked out

Martek's record system was generational. Then it was just a matter of counting back along the tooled leather spines of the fat books—he thought it was kind of ironic that a civilisation that could make paper so durable that it could last hundreds of years without yellowing, and so thin that a thousand pages were no more than two centimetres thick, had never got around to inventing cloth of any kind. But then the day-neh valued writing and didn't know what clothes were, so that was that.

The day-neh were really good artists. Realistic, accurate. He wished they'd been a lot less competent at their renditions. The story was horrifying enough without the blood and the decapitated bodies. The other thing they were, was thorough. It was all there. First contact. The hunting parties. The slaughter of hundreds of unsuspecting individuals. And finally...the annihilation of the enemy, and the destruction of all that they held dear.

Mechanically, he took images of each page before he put the book back in its place. He flicked through the stored pictures in the imager, his stomach roiling as each flashed up. *Humans* had done this. Arrived on a supposedly empty planet, discovered a large predatory species, and started to eradicate them. The day-neh had had no choice but to amass together and launch an all out attack. No humans had survived. And so the colony had died.

Temin hugged himself and stared up at the light panels in the ceiling, wondering where this left him. Martek might not have read that book in years—he had hundreds—and even if he did, he wouldn't necessarily connect the colonists with Temin because they were drawn in battle armour. Temin's colony had been populated from what had been the Greater Asian Confederation on Terra. The colonists on Ptane had been from the European Alliance, and looked rather different from Temin's people, though not as different as day-neh did from humans. If Temin drew Martek's attention to it—which he shefting well wasn't going to—the connection would be easily made, but it was likely Martek wasn't even that interested in events hundreds of years ago, or had any idea the electrical equipment he owned was anything to do with it.

If they knew, they would kill him, and he couldn't even blame them. To have met a highly evolved race only to have tried to wipe them out—to wipe out people like Gredar and Martek—the colonists deserved all they got, if the drawings were even halfway accurate. There was probably a bit of propaganda, but the enemy was gone by the time those pictures were drawn. Temin hadn't been able to detect much in the way of exaggeration for effect—why would they need to?

The attack was so far back in their history, it wasn't something that came to mind when they'd captured him. He was probably safe enough—safe as he ever could be here. He was probably lucky that being alone and considered weak by their standards, he wasn't considered a threat.

But there was more than his safety to consider here. He was no philosopher or historian. He was just a flyboy, and all he knew about old Terran cultures had been what he'd been made to study at school before he'd made good enough scores on his exams to get into the academy and qualify as a pilot. When he was a child, he'd eagerly read the stories of those first spacers—their bravery, their losses, how fantastical dreams of a life beyond the stars had become reality with the development of faster than light technology. He'd also read, for amusement, the predictions of the future by Terran authors, who had got so much wrong, and yet had got the wonder of it all just right. What he'd stumbled across had been part of myth and imagination for thousands of years, never once experienced. It was potentially the most important discovery ever made in this galaxy—the first non-human, non-Terran sentient race. It was his job—his duty—to tell that story.

His discovery of the day-neh might never be known in his lifetime. He would certainly never be able to tell his story in person, but he could still record what he was seeing, what he was learning. He could transmit his data in a loop, once he'd got it together. It only had to be picked up once, and the podpod could transmit, in theory, until this planet's sun collapsed in on itself in billions of years' time. It might take him a lifetime, but he had that time to spare, and it would be something useful, meaningful. He would make sure that humans knew sentient, unique lifeforms lived here—and that they were not helpless, or defenceless. That the day-neh deserved respect, and to be treated with dignity. This was something he could do, still be useful for.

The thought cheered him a little. He intended to get on with things as quickly as possible, but he ended up spending a lot more time staring into space and thinking about what he'd just learned than getting on with looking through the clan's records.

When Martek bounded into the room some time later, he snapped Temin out of a semi-doze. “T'meen tir-ed?” he demanded, his fur on end with suppressed energy, his thick tail swishing happily. It was hard to remember that he was supposed to be an old man by day-neh standards.

“Puti. A little. Martek...?” Temin hastily looked up the word for ‘finished’.

“Ye-ess. Domdom harsi.”

‘Domdom’—‘time for’, thus, ‘time for food’, Temin worked out—and carefully wrote it down as Martek ran out again to get them something to eat. He should try to record Martek and Gredar speaking—but it would be difficult to do that without revealing his equipment. He'd have to rig something up—at least he could image his language notes.

Martek called him into the main room a few minutes later, and Temin was served meat and bread as he had been the previous day. Martek ate little, but drank mugs and mugs of the disgusting tea he liked so

much. He kept looking over at Temin as he ate, until Temin laid his bread down. “What?”

“Temin getip Gredar suun.”

“Yeah? Is that right?” Temin folded his arms. “What? Getip, what? Suun, what?”

Martek made a little growl of impatience. “Suun, suun....” He sniffed extravagantly. “Gredar suun. Temin getip Gredar suun.”

“Smell? Scent...I have Gredar’s scent on me?” It took a little bit of miming before he confirmed the meaning of ‘getip’. “Gredar suun wasa? Scent bad?”

“Nooo, nooo. Gredar jilalim Gredar suun *anwa* Temin.”

“Gredar something his scent to me...gives it?” He picked up the bread and made a show of handing it to Martek. “Jilalim—give.” Martek nodded. “Okay—Gredar gave me his scent. So?” He shrugged. What was the big deal?

Martek leaned over and poked him hard in the shoulder.

“Ow! Don’t do that, you shefting thug. What?”

“Gredar jilalim *suun*.” And then Temin swore the old bugger *waggled* his eyebrows—or where his eyebrows would be—at him.

Temin’s cheeks flushed hot. “Are you asking me if we fucked?” Martek cocked his head, his tail swishing. “I am not talking to you about my sex life, Martek.” It was bad enough he’d had sex with an alien, he wasn’t going to talk to the alien’s best friend about it.

Frustrated by Temin’s refusal to talk (and the lack of any means to do so if he were so minded) Martek dropped the subject, though Temin very much doubted he’d stopped thinking about it. Instead, he apparently decided it was his duty to cram as much day-neh language into Temin’s skull as possible. He wasn’t as patient as Gredar, nor as kind—but he *did* have a lot more books, and experience at teaching children, so it went faster than Temin was expecting. He still wanted to stab the bastard a little after a couple of hours of it, when his head pounded and his hand cramped from making all the notes, but he now had a list of all the most useful verbs and prepositions, some worthwhile adjectives (so he now knew a lot more than ‘good’, ‘bad’ and ‘tired’), and a slightly clearer idea what ‘elsart’ meant.

He’d thought ‘elsart’ was just beautiful, and ‘torgu’ was ‘ugly, and they were, but it was more than that. There was almost a religious aspect to the concepts, which was weird because the day-neh had no religion or gods at all, not that Temin could see any evidence of. When Gredar called him ‘elsart’, he wasn’t just saying he was handsome or pretty—he was saying that that looking at him was spiritually uplifting. It was their highest compliment. *Shefting* embarrassing.



The other thing he learned was that they didn't *have* the concept of evil or good. It took a bit of teasing out, but Filwui wasn't considered bad to the bone because he'd raped Temin—his offence had been his disrespect for the clan head and her family. The rape and injuries had offended because they'd damaged Temin's appearance—not because it violated his rights or privacy or anything like that. Rape as a crime barely existed, and was never committed within the clan. But what had happened to Temin wasn't considered rape, just property damage.

He had to get up and walk around for a bit after Martek had explained that because he was so disturbed. It seemed such a materialistic way to live, even to someone raised strictly secular—yet day-neh society seemed ordered and cultured and capable of kindness. How could that be, when all that their civilized behaviour was based on nothing more than loyalty to the clan and an appreciation of beauty?

"T'meen okaaay?"

That was one of Martek's new words. Temin shook his head and explained as best he could that he...had a lot to think about.

Martek nodded. "Ye-ess. Meni woords. T'meen do good."

Temin smiled tiredly, appreciating Martek's attempt to encourage him. "Gredar come? When?"

"Soon." Then he made a little yowly chuckle. "Gredar soon suun."

Temin stared. "You just made a pun."

"Pah-nnn?"

"Martek wasa day-neh. Bad day-neh. 'Soon suun'. No srar. Not funny."

"Ye-ess. Meni srar." And he chuckled again, his tail flicking in delight at his own cleverness. Temin rolled his eyes. *Spare me.*

Gredar arrived just minutes later, shaking snow off himself and sounding a little out of breath. He gave Temin a hug and licked Martek's face, and Temin couldn't believe how good it was to see the big guy again after a few hours apart. Something about Gredar made all the strangeness of Temin's new life, and especially what he'd learned today, seem more...manageable, like he'd be able to deal with it because he had Gredar to help him. But then Temin thought back to the argument that morning with J'len and wondered if he was fooling himself. Gredar might not be allowed to be around him for much longer.

He'd expected they would leave then and there, but after Martek made some fresh, nasty tea for Gredar and himself, it became clear Gredar had things to do unconnected to Temin's presence. Temin sat back with a cup of water and watched, slightly stunned, as Martek and Gredar began to trade the most appalling yowls, while Martek slapped the table in time to a rhythm only he understood. Every so often

Gredar would stop, and Martek would write something down, or yowl something that Gredar repeated. The noise was giving Temin a bigger headache than he already had, though it was strangely fascinating.

After nearly half an hour of this, Gredar stopped, sipped his smelly tea and then seemed to remember Temin's presence.

"What Gredar do?" Temin asked in day-neh. Gredar said a word Temin didn't understand, but then he found it in Temin's word list. "Singing? Why?"

The two day-neh looked at each other. It was Martek, speaking slowly, who tried to explain. "Gredar teach. Learn hjuiri...uh." He made a movement with his hands—Temin shook his head, not understanding.

"Learn make...." Gredar found the word. "Pots. Hjuiri. Clan learn make pots singing."

Temin twisted the sentence around in his head a bit. "You teach with singing. Teach how to make pots." He carefully found all the words and repeated them, pointing to each on his list as well.

"Ye-ess. Teach hjuiri."

"Okay." He didn't understand, but maybe it would make sense later.

Martek tried to explain a little more, laboriously picking out words and fetching a map to show Temin. Gredar had been to a meeting of other day-neh—other clans, Temin figured—at a place where the borders of four day-neh territories intersected, about four hundred clicks from the village. This was apparently something he did a lot, something that most of the males did at least once a year, many more often. The reason for this wasn't clear until Martek made a surprisingly filthy hand gesture, pointed to Gredar and then to Temin, then hugged himself as he chortled at his joke. Gredar's tail flicked, though with annoyance or amusement, Temin couldn't tell, and just said the words for 'female' and 'fertile'. The clan meetings were some kind of regular orgy, apparently, when the women came to be impregnated.

"Hjuiri?" Temin asked helplessly, wondering when they'd got from pottery to fucking.

"Gredar learn...Gredar teach." He gestured as if to say, 'I don't know how to explain it'.

But Temin understood, or thought he did. Gredar had learned something—a new pottery technique, maybe?—and was going to teach it to the others. It didn't really explain why it had to be by singing, but that wasn't the oddest thing Temin had learned that day, so he accepted it. "Okay," he said, nodding vigorously. "Temin go Kadit najil? Go home?"

"Sooooon," Gredar said, and then gave Martek a puzzled look as his friend collapsed laughing again.

"Ignore him." Temin reached out and tugged Martek's tail in reproach, which only made him laugh harder and Gredar look at Temin in surprise. "Martek meni wasa. Very bad. Wasa day-neh. Bad day-neh."

"Maybe," Gredar agreed. He reached over and stroked Temin's face. "Tir-ed?"

“Yeah. Meni. A lot.”

“Temin go Martek najil grueni?”

“Yeah, I’ll come to his house tomorrow, if he behaves.” He pulled Martek’s tail again. “Martek good, Temin go Martek najil. Martek bad, Temin no go.”

“Ye-ess,” Gedar said slowly, and then chuckled. He said something to Martek Temin didn’t catch, and then stood. Temin hastily gathered all his notes and got up too. “Thank you,” Gedar said in day-neh.

Temin repeated it, and Martek, now on his feet, patted his head. “Temin good. Good suun.”

“Shut up,” Temin said, wagging his finger.

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“Martek, what are you doing to T’meen?”

“Nothing, my friend—perhaps I should ask what *you’re* doing to him. He smells of you. Are you sleeping together?”

Gedar didn’t react to the innuendo. “He shares my bed, of course he does. He can’t cope with the cold otherwise.”

“Of course,” Martek said, flicking his ear in a sceptical manner. “Your lesson is far from perfect, Gedar. I need you to return to practice tomorrow.”

“I’ll try but Jilen wants my assistance and I’ve already neglected her and the kitlings far too long....”

Martek picked up on what he didn’t say. “She objects to the time spent with him, doesn’t she?”

“She’s afraid of him, afraid because he’s so strange, and because we know nothing of his background.”

“Hmmm. I see her point. But at the same time, he’s obviously harmless.”

“She says,” Gedar said, hating himself for betraying T’meen this way, “that he can’t be that harmless or he wouldn’t have survived. He has a knife.”

“Which he’s not used against any of us, and he’s had more than enough provocation,” Martek said, nodding at T’meen, and the all too obvious marks of what that bastard had done. “I’ll keep looking through our records, see what I can find. I’ll speak to Jilen too—she’s a reasonable person. It’s just the new kitlings—they always make females overprotective. She’ll calm down when they’re older.”

“I don’t think we have that kind of time. She’s given me until snowmelt, and then she wants him gone.”

Martek nodded again. “Only to be expected. Don’t despair, kitling. We’ll find an answer. I like your little huu-man. He’s funny. How does he feel when you fuck him?”

“I don’t know,” Gredar said tightly. “I don’t plan on finding out. He’s not my grooming mate—and I won’t force him as Filwui did.”

Martek looked down at T’meen, holding onto Gredar’s tail and petting it gently—a habit so familiar now, Gredar hardly remarked it. “I doubt there’d be any forcing, kitling. His is an affectionate kind, it seems. He’d make a remarkable pet...if he’d allow it,” he added, as Gredar bridled. “He’d be welcome to stay here, if being at Kadit’s house is the problem.”

It might help, Gredar had to admit that, but the idea of T’meen not being...where Gredar could easily protect him, made his stomach cold with worry. “Perhaps. But I must go. I’ll bring him tomorrow.”

“And you, kitling. Practice.”

“Perhaps,” Gredar said with a smile.

T’meen seemed...confused, was the only word for it, Gredar thought as they walked through the twilight back to the house. He’d been at ease in Martek’s house, but with an underlying edge of unease. Now he was uninterested again, clinging to Gredar’s shoulders, but not talking and not looking around. Perhaps he was tired—Martek did take some getting used to. And he was still getting over his illness—Gredar had to remember that huu-man were not as strong as daiyne.

“T’meen is hungry?” he asked as they entered the hall.

T’meen hesitated, then shook his head. “Tir-ed.”

“T’meen wash? Want bath?”

His huu-man looked up at him, blinking, his whole posture drooping. “Ye-ess, much want. But T’meen is tir-ed.”

“Leave it to me,” Gredar said, and T’meen, nodding again, understood the tone, if not the words. Gredar offered his arm again, and T’meen allowed himself to be carried up the stairs—Gredar wondered what it was like for the little huu-man, living in a world where everything was the wrong size for him. It had to be worse than for jopas, who had their tails to help. Living without a tail must be very strange too.

He couldn’t help tighten his hold a little, as he might a nervy kitling, as he felt the fine tremors running through T’meen—he hadn’t meant to leave him with Martek so long, but re-establishing trust and friendship with his twin would benefit T’meen in the long term. Gredar’s own position was secure enough, for a male, and he had no real expectation of being exiled, but T’meen was a different matter. It was difficult to balance his responsibilities to family and friend, but it had to be done.

“Wait. Rest,” he told T’meen. “I’ll come back soon.” He left his friend taking off his foot coverings—shooz, that was the term—and preparing to lie down.

He suspected that T’meen may not have been entirely honest about not feeling hungry—perhaps he thought Gredar was going to inflict another family meal on him, which in hindsight, may not have been the wisest thing he’d ever done. He would find something light and tasty for his friend, though he also suspected none of their food appealed particularly. He had to ask Martek to make more of an effort to find out about huu-man society and preferences. His elderly friend was more than nosy enough for the job.

But the bath should be a treat too, and Gredar had been making plans since that morning for this. Now he went to the kitchen to find Luilan. His nephew was alone, washing pots at the sink—Gredar briefly wondered why Buhi wasn’t helping, but perhaps he’d been given a worse chore.

“Hello, Uncle, are you ready for the water?”

“Yes, and the bucket and other things. Is there any of the berry bread left?”

“A little,” Luilan said, setting down the tray he was scrubbing.

“I only need a little.” He fetched it, and sniffed it—it was a bit past perfect freshness, but the fruit retained much of its flavour, and yes, this might tempt a weary huu-man. “If you could bring the water and the rest of it up when you’re ready, I’d be grateful,” he said, twining his tail with his nephew’s.

“Uncle Gredar, can we talk to your jopa?”

Gredar was taken aback, a little. “Of course. Give it a couple of days—he’s still somewhat unwell. But...why do you want to?”

Luilan grinned. “Well, it’s something to tell people about, isn’t it? When I go to the gathering? A talking jopa! No one else has ever heard of such a thing. It’ll make the clan famous.”

“We’re already famous, you know. You realise T’meen’s a person in his own right. He’s not actually a jopa.”

His nephew shrugged. “He’s not a daiyne, that’s all that matters. You should take him to the gathering, put on a singing with him. I would, if he was mine.”

“He’s not....” Gredar made himself stop. Emphasising T’meen’s independence might not help, and in any event, it wasn’t the issue here. “Perhaps. If he wants to. He can do what he likes.”

“Then why doesn’t he go home?”

“He just can’t. Thank you, Luilan. I owe you for this.” He was going to owe a lot of people before the issue of T’meen and his permanent residence was sorted out.

T’meen was sitting on the bed, cross-legged, going through things in his personal sack—he hastily

stuffed everything out of sight as Gredar walked in, as if he was afraid Gredar would steal them. “I brought you some food.”

“Thank you.” T’meen started to get up, but Gredar waved him to sit down. Gredar himself sat on the floor near the bed and held out the plate. “You no want food?”

“Later, maybe.” T’meen nodded. “Eat?”

T’meen picked delicately at the berry bread and was careful not to get crumbs on the furs. Though he was no longer a pet, Gredar couldn’t help but remain fascinated by the graceful movements of small fingers, the mobile, naked face. He really should make some sketches.

“Whaat?” T’meen demanded.

“T’meen is elsart.”

His friend carefully put the bread he was holding back on the plate. “T’meen no is elsart. Filwui make T’meen torgu. Martek say this.”

Gredar winced. “T’meen is not torgu.”

“T’meen no *worry* T’meen is torgu. T’meen...” He waved his hands in the air as if frustrated, then grabbed his sack of belongings and pulled out his word lists. He spent a little time finding the words he wanted, and then he pointed at them, jabbing at the paper as he said the words aloud. “T’meen is young, clever, brave, good lover. *Tall*,” he added, glaring at Gredar and daring him to argue. “T’meen no worry T’meen no is elsart. Gredar understand?” he said, hands on his hips and a set look to his lips.

Gredar chuckled and stroked T’meen’s hair. “Ye-ess. Good lover?”

“Ye-ess. Very good.”

“I bet.” Gredar wrapped his tail around T’meen’s ankle. “Eat. Bath is coming.”

He had carefully instructed Luilan to leave the water and bath things outside his door, but T’meen still jumped with fright when he heard the thunk and clatter of metal on the stone floors. “Sshhh. Safe.”

“Ye-ess.” But T’meen put the bread down again and made it clear he didn’t want to eat any more. “Bath?”

There was a communal steam and bathroom downstairs, but Gredar had known from the first that T’meen could never use it, even if the family would allow it. Instead, he’d arranged to borrow a small tub used for bathing youngsters, which would allow T’meen to sit and be washed as clean as he liked. T’meen eyed it distrustfully as Gredar hauled it and the first bucket of hot water into the washroom.

“Is thing for kitling,” he said flatly.

“No?” T’meen tapped his foot. “Ye-ess,” Gredar admitted. “But is good.”

“Is thing for *kitling*.”

“Gredar sorry. T’meen no want bath?”

“Ye-ess,” he said, as he began to undress. Gredar thought he heard a muttered ‘kitling’ but he let it pass.

Whatever T’meen’s objections to the origin of the tub, there was no mistaking his pleasure as he sank into the hot water—it seemed huu-man loved their baths as much as daiyne. “Good?” Gredar asked.

“Very good. Not cold,” T’meen added, shuddering.

Gredar nearly asked what he meant, but then realised—pet jopas were bathed in cold water, because they were used to it. “Hot is good for T’meen,” he said, and T’meen nodded enthusiastically. “Use wash?”

“Huh?”

He demonstrated, sprinkling some of the disinfectant powder on the water and making it foam a little. “Clean better.”

“Oh—ye-ess. Wash is good.” T’meen splashed some of the foam onto himself. “Is sope.”

“Sope?”

“Ye-ess. Wash—huu-man say ‘sope’.”

“Okay.”

He picked up T’meen’s cloze, intending to soak them, but his friend sorted them into two piles. The smaller of the two, T’meen permitted to be cleaned with the wash powder. Before putting them in the water, Gredar took a surreptitious sniff—T’meen’s scent on them was rich, clearly old, but not unpleasant. Fortunately it didn’t have the same effect as his kala, though.

“Gredar?”

He turned away from the soaking cloze. “I’m okay. Gredar clean T’meen hair?”

T’meen looked up, blinking. He took rather a long time to decide, then he nodded. “Okay.”

Gredar handed him a cleaning leather for his use, then poured some water out of a dipper onto T’meen’s black hair, fascinated by the way it wet so differently from jopa fur. T’meen went still as he did so, and was unusually quiet as Gredar gently applied some of the wash to his hair, then rinsed. The texture of the newly clean hair was...coarse, squeaky under his fingers. Strange.

T’meen was still not looking at him, rubbing slowly over the healing wounds on his arms with the leather and more of the wash.

“T’meen is good?” Gredar asked, as he picked up another leather and began to wipe T’meen’s back for him, wanting to make sure he and his injuries were properly cleaned.

“Martek say...make funny Gredar give T’meen Gredar scent. Is funny? Is...bad? Bad for Jilen?” He looked up with his strange, dark eyes. “Is bad T’meen have Gredar scent? T’meen is bad?”

“No. T’meen is no bad. Gredar give T’meen scent...T’meen is Gredar friend.”

“Friend,” T’meen repeated, in the same way he’d questioned the tub. “Martek say funny T’meen is Gredar friend. No.”

“Ye-ess. T’meen is Gredar friend. Martek...is silly.”

“Jilen no is silly. Jilen....” T’meen sniffed loudly, then pretended to smell Gredar’s hand. “No is funny.”

Gredar stared at him helplessly. How to explain the etiquette of scent exchange when they were barely communicating? “T’meen is Gredar *good* friend. Gredar give scent to good friend.”

“Jilen no like?”

“No,” Gredar admitted. “T’meen is not daiyne. She does not like. T’meen not *worry*. Gredar protect T’meen.”

“Ye-ess.” T’meen looked up again. “Gredar no is huu-man.”

“No. T’meen worry?”

“No,” he said slowly, wiping his arms again, staring at the surface of the water. “Is strange.”

“Ye-ess. No bad, though. Gredar want to clean T’meen. May I?”

“Clean?” T’meen sounded wary.

“Ye-ess.” He mimed wiping him with the leather. “Help T’meen.”

“Okay.” He sat back and spread out his arms, resting them on the rim of the tub. “Okay.”

But he was trembling again. Gredar sat properly on the floor, and cupped his friend’s face in his hand. “Gredar no hurt,” he said quietly. “T’meen is elsart. Gredar like T’meen much.” He bent forward and carefully licked some of the water from T’meen’s face, before very deliberately rubbing his head—and the scent gland near his eye—over T’meen’s naked skin. “Gredar give T’meen scent.”

T’meen touched his cheek, then sniffed at his fingers. “T’meen no smell.”

“Nose too small,” Gredar said, tapping the organ and chuckling. “No strong.”

T’meen made a movement with his eyebrows that Gredar suspected was sarcastic. “T’meen have T’meen scent?”

“Ye-ess.” Gredar sniffed under his ear, before carefully licking his neck. Under the taste of the disinfectant and bathwater, T’meen’s skin was faintly earthy, warm and smooth as fine grain leather, his pulse a rapid, muted thud under Gredar’s exploring tongue. “T’meen scent is good.”

“T’meen is dirty. Need clean.” He reached out and poked Gredar. “Gredar clean T’meen, Gredar say. Do.”

“Yes, master.” T’meen looked puzzled at the word. “Martek say tomorrow. Gredar tir-ed. Many words.”

“Ye-ess. T’meen head....” He mimed his heading bursting at the seams, and Gredar laughed. “Many, many words.”

Gredar nuzzled him. “Poor T’meen.” He rubbed scent on him again, just to make sure it took, then picked up one of the cleaning leathers and began to wipe down T’meen’s bare skin. He’d have rather used his tongue, but he thought his little huu-man might get huffy again about being treated like a kitling. Besides, this way he could watch the expressions cross T’meen’s mobile face, even if he didn’t know exactly what lay behind them. “Stand up. Clean legs.”

Though T’meen obeyed without hesitation, the trembling, which had eased a little, returned. “T’meen no like? Scared?” Gredar was careful to keep his hands to himself.

“Little. No Gredar. Filwui. In here.” He pointed to his skull.

“Filwui no hurt T’meen. Gredar protect. T’meen belongs to Gredar.”

T’meen repeated the word with a confused cock of his head, and Gredar thought it best not to explain too much. “T’meen is Gredar friend. Gredar protect.”

“Oh. Gredar no scare T’meen.”

“Good.” Gredar slid the leather down the fine, hairless limbs. They were straighter than a jopa’s, but shaped nothing like a daiyne’s either. He recalled his sister’s remarks about wanting T’meen’s skeleton when he died, and he shivered—he didn’t want to think of T’meen like that, just bones and dead meat. “Gredar *protect*,” he promised.

T’meen took Gredar’s head between his small hands. “Ye-ess. Understand. Gredar T’meen friend. T’meen Gredar friend. *Good* friend.” He rubbed his face against Gredar’s, then let go. “T’meen is clean.”

“Wait. Sit.” While T’meen sank back into the hot water, Gredar quickly rinsed his cloze, checking by smell that they were clean. If huu-man wore such things all the time, they had to spend a lot of time maintaining them—such a nuisance. He hung the wet items on the rack he used for cleaning leathers, and the other things he set neatly aside on the sink. He wondered how durable they were, and how they could be replaced. If T’meen stayed for a long time, the issue was sure to arise. But for now, getting him dry and warm was enough to deal with.

When he turned around, T’meen was out of the bath and wiping himself down with one of the

leathers, his movements slow and clumsy—his injuries were still troubling him, or perhaps it was just fatigue. Gredar helped him, and then T'meen insisted on cleaning his teeth with the odd tool he had retrieved from his sack for the purpose. Something else that would need replacing, but how they could when the very material of construction was unknown, Gredar didn't know. The tool was made of something hard, a little like wood, but smoother and more flexible. Too warm to be metal, too bendy to be pottery. The brush-like shape was familiar, though the tufts were also of unknown material. Yet another mystery about his huu-man friend.

Gredar did his own clean up, and then, finding T'meen was shivering as he waited, simply scooped him up into his arms and carried him into the bedroom. "T'meen no is kitling," he grumbled, even as he burrowed into Gredar's fur. Gredar ignored the complaint—huu-man had their pride, but T'meen was cold, and that was more important.

Gredar laid T'meen down on the bed and covered him with a pelt, then reached over and turned the lamp down as low as he dared, leaving just enough light so T'meen could find his way around in the dark. T'meen stared up at him as Gredar sat down. "Okay?" he asked, laying his hand carefully on T'meen's belly and rubbing a little, mindful of healing bruises and claw marks.

T'meen patted the bed in invitation, and Gredar needed no other. He lay down beside his friend, who immediately attached himself to Gredar's side, much to Gredar's amusement. "T'meen cold?"

"Ye-ess. Gredar *warm*."

"Good." It was nice—like having a kitling to care for. It seemed quite natural to urge T'meen to climb on top of him, so Gredar could hold him close, wrap T'meen firmly in his arms. But his huu-man hesitated, digging his fingers into Gredar's fur. "T'meen?"

"Is...okay? Gredar want...sex?"

Gredar blinked. T'meen's vocabulary really had advanced. "T'meen want?" He hadn't really been thinking about sex at all, but then he hadn't *not* been thinking about it. It was just background to his thoughts as it always was.

T'meen lifted his head and said something Gredar couldn't understand. He waited to see if T'meen would explain, but all he did was start to stroke Gredar's chest fur in a rather distracted way. Gredar got a feeling that T'meen wanted to talk about something but didn't have the words or facility with the language to do so—a feeling Gredar knew well, lately. "What T'meen want?" he prompted, cupping T'meen's rump and massaging it—T'meen squirmed but didn't try and move away.

"Gredar...have taeng. T'meen no have taeng. Worry...no." He corrected himself. "No...question?"

Taeng is like...?”

“Ah.” His huu-man was curious—only natural. Gredar spread his legs. “T’meen look?”

“Is okay?”

“Very okay. Is good. Gredar want.” Yet T’meen still hesitated. Gredar touched his cheek. “Is okay,” he repeated quietly, curling his tail over T’meen’s back. “Look.”

T’meen leaned up and rubbed his face against Gredar’s chin, then slid down Gredar’s body, creating delicious pressure against Gredar’s kala, though probably unintentionally...or was it? His huu-man looked up as he wrapped one small hand around Gredar’s kala and stroked, his stare unflinching and unreadable. “Ahhh...good, good?”

“More?” T’meen continued stroking him.

With an effort, Gredar kept his voice steady. “No...look taeng. Touch taeng. Is more good.”

“Oh.” Probably didn’t occur to him, Gredar thought, not having one. He spread his legs a little more, inviting T’meen to explore, cocking one to give full access. T’meen had only bare, blank skin where his taeng would be if he had one. Gredar had some dark suspicions about how huu-man males fucked, but he didn’t like to think about it. It would have to be painful—not to mention dirty. Not something he considered T’meen would like at all, since he was so fastidious. He should really try to find out more about it. Martek probably already had, the lusty old man.

T’meen had settled himself between Gredar’s legs, and his fine hair was a curtain across his face as he looked down at Gredar’s body. He pressed one hand beneath Gredar’s kala, and whether by design or accident, it was a most pleasurable sensation. Gredar’s kala began to stiffen within its sheath, and he willed it to stay hidden—T’meen was still skittish.

Delicate fingers began to hesitantly circle the outer edge of his taeng, teasing and tickling, and a tiny yowl left Gredar’s lips, despite his effort to stay controlled.

T’meen looked up “Okay?”

“Ye-ess. Very.”

T’meen’s lips curled up—a huu-man smile—as his fingers became more assured in their movements. Gredar’s taeng was getting wet, eager for more, and when T’meen pushed his fingers inside, a purr rose deep in Gredar’s belly. Ah, this was good, very good, the other hand still pressing over those sensitive nerves, his balls tight and hard below them. He cocked his leg more, trying to subtly hint that more of the same would be appreciated. T’meen’s smile grew wider, teeth white in the gloom. “Gredar like?”

Little wretch—he knew perfectly well. “Very much. More.”

“Ye-ess.”

Oh, yes. He didn’t know how T’meen know how to manipulate him so skilfully, but the waves of pleasure radiating out from Gredar’s taeng were making him boneless as he surrendered to them. Every time T’meen took his fingers away, Gredar nearly whined from the sensation of emptiness. He liked being filled. He was so rarely fucked these day, his status demanding he be dominant, but he liked it both ways, given his own preference.

He had an idea. “T’meen...make sex? Fuck Gredar?”

T’meen pulled his fingers out and sat back, arms folded and Gredar realised he’d made a terrible error. He reached out to try and touch T’meen’s face but the huu-man was too far away. “Gredar sorry. T’meen no....”

T’meen held up his hand to stop him. “No...is okay. Is....” He tapped his head. “Word...forget word.”

“Thinking?”

“Ye-ess. Thinking. Gredar want T’meen fuck? Truly want?”

“Ye-ess. Truly want. T’meen kala is elsart. T’meen is elsart.” T’meen whacked Gredar’s thigh in reproach, but Gredar only grinned. “Truly. Kala is truly elsart.”

“Gredar say *silly*,” T’meen said firmly, but he was smiling—and his kala, which had drooped a little, now perked up. Strange to see its moods all on display, without a concealing sheath. No wonder huu-man loved their cloze so much. “Want this strike? Uh...want now?”

“Ye-ess. Please?” He added a little pleading yowl on the end of his words. It’d worked before—it was worth trying.

T’meen was still susceptible, to Gredar’s profound and increasingly desperate gratitude, and got himself into position, stroking his kala thoughtfully. He looked so slight, undersized, compared to Gredar’s usual partners. T’meen was clearly thinking the same thing. “T’meen kala is small.” He sounded unsure.

“Kala good. You’ll see. Do. T’meen fuck Gredar now.”

T’meen smiled and muttered something, as he took himself in hand, and edged closer—his kala was so big in relation to the rest of him. Was he abnormal for his race? Why did they need such large organs? Did their females have fur so thick they had to penetrate past it...?

Oh.

Gredar stopped thinking then because T’meen was inside him, and it was...so very good. His kala, thick and hot and so very, very smooth, fit Gredar’s taeng like it was meant to.

“Is good,” Gredar sighed, curling his tail around T’meen’s waist. “Very much.”

“Ye-ess.” T’meen grunted, pushing hard into Gredar, his face contorting with effort, his hands gripping Gredar’s hips, more points of pleasurable pressure. His scent was now stronger, deeper and broader in flavour—arousal, Gredar guessed. The smell made Gredar’s balls tighten to the point of pain with the need to spend, and only the delicious slide and slick in his taeng distracted him enough to stop him whining, high in his throat, to beg T’meen to move faster.

But something else...something most strange...was happening as T’meen, lost in concentration, kept up a tormentingly careful, deep thrusting. Gredar’s taeng...no, his entire...his balls and kala...began to...heat...such warmth, such.... He growled suddenly, uncontrollably as the fire in his loins spread suddenly through his belly, even up into his chest, like he was lying on hot metal, only inside...like the feeling he’d had when he’d tasted T’meen’s spending, only...concentrated...it was *inside* him, inside his taeng. Unbidden, his claws emerged, and he gripped the bed furs, raking them up into mounds in his frustrated need. “T’meen! More! Ye-ess!”

Surprised at Gredar’s shout, T’meen stuttered in his movements, glancing up to Gredar’s face, but his wide, dark-pupilled eyes weren’t seeing him, as T’meen resumed his measured aggression, too caught up in his own need to care much about Gredar’s concerns. His thrusts, his fucking, were not polite now, not hesitant, somehow making the size difference between them of no consequence. T’meen was taking what he wanted from Gredar’s body, with care, with skill, yet with an essential male selfishness that Gredar found oddly thrilling. Hot, rolling sensation from taeng and balls rippled through him, sweeping him away with wave after wave of deep, throbbing pleasure, like a spending that went on forever...but when he did spend, what had gone before that was a mere foretaste, because this was almost pain, it was so strong, so...his body vibrated, trembled uncontrollably, his lips issued a base howl of raw victory, and his tail, wrapped around T’meen’s slowly moving body, tightened convulsively. He was unable to hold back his response, and could only let his climax wash through him.

With a deep groan, T’meen, having spent himself, flopped down on top of him, and Gredar managed to make his hand and arm work so he could pet his friend’s back. “Good,” he croaked. “Very, very good.”

T’meen only snuffled, his face buried in Gredar’s stomach, and Gredar grinned. His huu-man had spent very forcefully, it seemed. His essence was just as powerful inside as it was out. What lusty creatures the huu-man must be, with their oversize kalas and their maddening scent.

Under his hand, T’meen began to shiver a little, and Gredar realised he was covered with a fine film of moisture—was he still wet from the bath? Gredar hastily dragged a fur over his friend and covered him with his tail too. When they had both recovered, he could urge T’meen to move up, but right now, his arms,

his body, felt like wet leather, and he felt amazingly comfortable, drifting off in sated warmth, his body still gently thrumming from a deep and satisfying spending.

He was half-asleep when T'meen finally stirred and decided he preferred to be closer to Gredar's face. Gredar tugged him up so he was now lying on Gredar's chest. "T'meen haapy?"

"T'meen *tir-ed*. And haapy," he said, lifting his head briefly to smile at Gredar, before flopping down again. "Truly, is very good, much okay. T'meen very like." He lifted his head again. "Gredar like?"

"Very very much. Good kala."

"Huh." He put his around Gredar's chest and hugged tight—Gredar patted him, then covered him with the fur again.

"T'meen?"

"Whaat?"

"Hmmm....huu-man kala makes scent. Too strong. Make daiyne want sex, very much."

"Huh?" T'meen sat up a little, resting his head on his folded arms. "Kala scent?"

"Ye-ess. Make huu-man want sex, very much?"

"Scent? No. Kala have no scent." He said something else, but Gredar missed it. "Make Gredar want sex?"

"Very very much. Uh...Filwui and Buhi too, make want sex. Make *daiyne* want sex, truly." It made him long for the skill to explain to T'meen just what his kala was capable of, because an ability that amazing should be shared. And warned against, perhaps. But definitely shared with the right people.

"Huh." T'meen seemed genuinely perplexed.

Gredar tucked T'meen's hair behind his ear, then cupped his head. "Scent no make huu-man want sex?"

"No. Is strange thing."

"Ye-ess," Gredar agreed, then yawned suddenly. "Is strange. Gredar *tir-ed*. T'meen kala make Gredar *tir-ed*."

"Gredar say...." T'meen yawned too, pink tongue, pretty white teeth, all exposed. "Silly thing."

"Maybe. Sleep now. Sex tomorrow."

"Huh. Maybe."

Gredar grinned and wrapped his arms around T'meen, who seemed very comfortable on his chest and Gredar had no urge to move him. He felt...peaceful and warm, and strangely comforted by the weight of T'meen on his chest. *Sleep well, little friend. What an amazing creature you are.*



For only the second time in his life, Temin woke after having had voluntary sex with an alien. The feelings were a lot less troublesome this time around. It had been really *great* sex—again—but this time, he'd felt more in control, like he was giving something back to Gredar and not lying there helpless. He was, he considered wryly, a lot more touchy about his male ego than he'd ever realised. Jeng would laugh if he ever admitted that to him.

Jeng. Sharp sorrow made his chest ache. Jeng had been so close to rescuing him.... But now Temin had to think about a new life without him, in this strange land. He was no closer to an answer about that than he'd been the day before. All that had changed was that he had more vocabulary, more insight into day-neh society—and the knowledge that humans and day-neh, despite all the evidence, were sexually compatible. He'd bet none of the colonists had come close to discovering that interesting nugget of information.

Gredar was still fast asleep, but then it was barely dawn, if that. Too early to get up, so Temin cuddled into his own personal thermal blanket. Until he'd landed on this planet, there were exactly two people who were welcome inside his personal space without warning, and one of them was his mother. Now there was a third one, and Temin didn't know what to make of that, or where this was going. He and Jeng had been lovers since flight school, and pretty much exclusive for the last two years. Jeng had been making noises about finally getting a couple's apartment and Temin had been getting to the point of saying okay—and now look at him. Best friend and lover of an enormous cat.

He said it in his head three times—nope, didn't get any less weird. Nothing about this situation was normal. The best thing he could say about it was that it was occasionally a lot of fun.



The days following the surat continued in much the same way, and thankfully without incident. Gredar took T'meen to breakfast with his family, to everyone's mutual embarrassment, then dropped him off at Martek's for the day while he attended to his duties and tried to mend things with Jilen. He detected a slight mollification in her attitude, but nothing that would make him think T'meen was safe. He saw no sign of Filwui, and only a glimpse or two of Buhi—his nephew was too profoundly disgraced to expect a warm welcome, but he was carrying out his punishment obediently, so Gredar's mother reported. Gredar hoped

there would be no further flare-ups before snowmelt—it would allow Buhi to recover his good name, and hopefully T'meen's status would be more secure. Early days, though.

He continued to practice his singing with Martek, much to T'meen's obvious puzzlement. It was easier to show his friend what they were working towards rather than explain it, so he was content to allow T'meen to remain confused.

In the evenings, since T'meen couldn't face two family meals a day, Gredar fed him in his room, and hoped that wouldn't set Jilen off again. Meal done, their day discussed, and all T'meen's new vocabulary gravely practiced, Gredar either wiped him down with cleaning leathers or provided another full bath, since T'meen clearly enjoyed the chance to be properly immersed and clean. Strange in one whose scent was so mild, and whose sense of smell was, frankly, inferior, but T'meen insisted that he and his cloze be washed regularly. Since there was so little that he actually asked for, Gredar was happy to indulge this one request.

At night, they had sex, some of the best sex Gredar had ever experienced in his life, but Gredar didn't mention to anyone that T'meen was both friend and lover, even to the ever-curious Martek. He wasn't entirely sure why—he wasn't ashamed of T'meen, and he saw nothing wrong in what they were doing. It was just...he had a suspicion T'meen would suffer for it becoming common knowledge, and he couldn't bear him to be hurt again.

On the sixth evening after the surat, when they'd finished supper, Gredar told T'meen they were going out again. "Huh? Is dark, Gredar."

"Ye-ess. Is singing time. Gredar singing. T'meen come. Is good."

T'meen backed away from him. "Uh... T'meen stay. Too cold."

"Is not cold. T'meen is safe. Please?" Gredar gave a little encouraging yowl, and curled his tail seductively around Temin's waist. "Please? Is good, truly."

T'meen sighed. "Okay." Then he muttered something that didn't sound particularly delighted.

"Huh?"

T'meen made a 'never mind' gesture and sighed again. Gredar patted his shoulder. His friend would enjoy himself, honestly, he would.

They were early enough, which made Martek happy—he was always in a panic at a singing and his apprentice, Jaijair, was fluttering back and forth trying to keep up with him as he paced and snapped out orders. Gredar never understood why Martek got so worked up—after all, there was a singing every moonsweep or so.

"Gredar! Why are you standing around! Get ready! Check your tools! And T'meen! Sit, sit—out of

the way!”

T'meen stiffened, and moved closer to Gedar. “Is okay,” Gedar hastily assured him, then pointed at a cushion to the far side of the stage where he'd be safe and able to see and hear all that went on. “Gedar go, come here soon. Understand?”

T'meen nodded, though he didn't look happy—his eyes darted around the filling hall, and there was no way he wouldn't see that he was attracting a lot of attention. None of it was obviously hostile. Filwui wasn't anywhere to be seen—perhaps he'd not show his cowardly self tonight, which would be best for all concerned. Gedar patted T'meen's head, but was then hauled away by Martek to go over his song again.

It was a long singing, since the last one had been at the start of snowfall. His mother had a number of announcements to make, then took her place again in the audience, surrounded by her daughters and grandchildren. Gedar's family always seemed bigger every time he looked—always one of the daughters or granddaughters with newborn kitlings, or close to laying. The line of Kelara was secure for the next few generations.

There was a short song from one of Filwui's siblings about an improved wood joining technique he had been trying and which seemed to be successful—Gedar paid close attention to the song and joined the repetitions at the end, so he could pass it on at the gathering singings. Then it was Gedar's turn—by this stage in his life, after delivering dozens of singings, he was immune to nerves, but he still wanted to do well for the sake of family pride.

He glanced at T'meen as he walked on stage—his little friend had been watching proceedings with an intent expression, but now he smiled and made an odd gesture with his hands, both thumbs extended upwards. Probably encouragement—Gedar shook his tail in thanks at him, and then began.

It was a complicated piece, and required two of his assistants to work with him as they demonstrated the new pottery technique Gedar had learned at the gathering before last, and tested in the workshop. It was fiddly, but produced pots and earthenware of superior durability and beauty, so was well worth the extra effort. The important thing was getting the additives exactly right and being rigorous in the kiln temperature. All his workers joined in for the final emphatic chorus, before several of the older kitlings stepped up to show they had learned the song and its lesson. To the side, Martek nodded and beat the drums, Jaijair hit the tune sticks. By the end, even T'meen was tapping his foot in time to the rhythm.

One of Martek's more successful songs, Gedar thought, grinning as he watched the song being passed around the room, the words tested and memorised, the beat and the lesson going together. They would sing it again in several moonsweeps, and then once a season in classes as the written version was taught. The

clan would retain its place as one of the finest suppliers of earthenware this side of the Yetang sea if it could master this new skill.

Martek, his tail twitching happily, rose to thank Gredar. “Anyone else want to sing? There’s the song of the leather scraping, that’s always fun.”

A female rose—Nanar, head of one of the smaller families in the clan, and a good friend of Gredar’s mother. “I wish to hear the jopa belonging to the son of Kadit, sing.” A ripple of agreement ran around the hall, with calls for ‘Gredar’s jopa’ to come forward.

Martek looked at Gredar, ears flattening a little in concern. “*Can* he sing?”

Gredar had no idea, but he doubted that was going to be the problem. “He can’t, Martek, not in front of all....”

“I too wish to hear the jopa sing.”

Gredar turned at the lazily drawled words, and scowled at Filwui lounging at the side door. He nearly told him to shut up, but in point of law, Filwui had as much right as any other to be there, since he was only barred from the clan head’s home. Gredar decided to ignore him, but he’d reckoned without Filwui’s hangers-on and his brothers, all of whom took up the call, and began to stomp their feet in support.

Gredar’s mother, her tail snapping back and forth, looked about to intervene, but Gredar held up his hand, meeting her eyes. “Let me ask,” he said, careful to sound pleasant, as if this was nothing untoward.

She held his gaze a moment longer, then nodded. “If he’s well enough,” she said, glancing at Filwui and then back to Gredar as if Filwui wasn’t worth wasting time on.

Martek was actually holding his own tail in his hands, he was so worried. “But can he sing?” he asked in an anxious hiss as Gredar passed him.

“No idea, but it can’t hurt to ask.”

T’meen was sitting very still, clearly aware there was something wrong, but there was no way he could know it was to do with him. Gredar crouched in front of him. “T’meen okay?”

“Ye-ess. Thing bad?”

“No. T’meen sing? Huu-man song?” He waved at the assembly. “Daiyne want listen huu-man song.”

“Sing? Like Gredar sing?”

“No. Like T’meen sing. Huu-man song. Is okay,” he said gently, stroking T’meen’s hair. “Is good thing, T’meen song. Good for Gredar mother.”

“Mother...want?”

“Ye-ess. Very. T’meen sing?”

T'meen got to his feet. "Ye-ess." He looked over at Gredar's family. "Ye-ess," he said more loudly. "T'meen sing huu-man song to Gredar mother."

His mother nodded, and there was a definitely satisfied air to the way she flicked her ear in the general direction of Filwui and his crowd. Gredar put his hand on T'meen's shoulder and led him to the centre of the stage.

"Ugh, how torgu," he heard someone—someone *male*—say, but when he looked, Filwui was staring innocently back.

Gredar decided not to respond. He stood beside T'meen, hand still on his shoulder. "Clan of the forest plain, this is my friend, T'meen. T'meen is huu-man, from far away. He will give us his singing, as my mother wishes."

No one spoke, or made a sound. T'meen looked up at him, and Gredar attempted to look reassuring, but was suddenly seized with worry—what if T'meen made a fool of himself? But it was too late now. "T'meen sing now," he said, and stepped back.

His huu-man looked so small and strange in the flickering lamplight and his dark red cloze, and it struck Gredar how T'meen was unlike any other creature he knew. Perhaps his fanciful tale of his home among the stars was really true—but paznit! Nothing lived in the sky, everyone knew that.

T'meen cleared his throat, then bowed to Gredar's mother, who smiled and nodded at him—she was used to his ways now. "Please begin, T'meen."

T'meen straightened, and then began his song.

Even used to his speaking voice, which was rather guttural and flat compared to a daiyne's, Gredar was unprepared for the peculiar sounds that emerged from T'meen's throat. It wasn't as loud as a daiyne's, though it was clearly audible, but the range of notes and the rapid changes between them, not to mention the very disjointed rhythm, sounded utterly repellent at first. He found his claws starting to extend in purely instinctive response, as if his body thought the noise was a threat. He glanced anxiously at his family to check their reaction. His mother was listening with apparent interest, Jilen was expressionless, and his other sisters were holding their unclawed hands politely in their laps—impossible to know what that meant. He feared this wasn't going well.

But then Martek picked up the strange, random rhythm with his drums, and after a few moment, Jaijair began to tap the tune sticks in counterpoint to T'meen's song. His huu-man faltered, but then picked it up again as he realised Martek was trying to match him, not compete. Gredar listened closely, and when he felt he had picked up the backbeat, he began to tap it out with his foot, an extra loud thump on the downbeat.

T'meen smiled and kept up his song, and when it was over, someone called out 'Again'. So he repeated it, this time with more of the assembly imitating Gredar's actions. By the time the repeated song ended, easily fifty daiyne were keeping time, and Gredar's mother was nodding along.

T'meen bowed, and there was an appreciative chorus of yowls and foot thumps—more than politeness, somewhat less than complete enthusiasm. What one would expect for one of Martek's less well-known songs, in fact, and much more than Gredar had hoped. He walked over to T'meen and stood beside him, tail wrapped around his huu-man. "Thank you," he said. "The song was very good. Good," he repeated, looking down at his smiling friend. He looked over at Filwui and sneered—his erstwhile lover growled, ears flat against his skull, and slunk out the door. Gredar couldn't resist a little hiss at that.

Gredar's mother held up her hand and the assembly quieted. "Thank you, T'meen. That was unusual, but very nice."

T'meen bowed, and looked at Gredar for translation. "Mother say song is strange, good. Is okay. Very good."

"Thank you. Go Gredar's home now?" he added quietly.

He patted his shoulder. "Ye-ess. Well done, my friend."

But it wasn't that simple or quick. Daiyne crowded around Gredar and T'meen as they came off the stage, wanting to hear more of T'meen speaking, asking him to sing again, and when Gredar had finally pushed through them all, Martek pounced, and dragged T'meen over to Gredar's mother, apparently at her request. "Kadit ask, what is song about?"

"About? Uh...." T'meen looked like he would like to bolt. "Words...not know words."

Behind his mother, Jilen spoke up. "Take your time, T'meen. We know you don't know many words." Gredar stared at her in surprise. "Explain, Gredar," she added.

"T'meen, Gredar song about pottery. T'meen song about...?"

T'meen held his hands out. "Uh...is song about...T'meen home, T'meen clan head. About luff for home, clan head."

"'Luff'?"

"'Luff', uh. Very like, truly like." He wrapped his arm around Gredar's waist and rubbed his face against his stomach. "'Luff'. Protect, like, want thing very much. All," he said, mimicking squashing several things together. "'Luff'. T'meen protect T'meen home, clan head. Want very much. Is sad if huu-man no go home."

"Sounds like it's a song of loyalty to his clan, Mother. A declaration that he will protect it and is

devoted to it.”

She nodded. “Very proper sentiments. A fine song to sing. T’meen?” He looked up at her. “Is a good song. Kadit say, thank you.” She looked at Gedar. “That’s right?”

“Perfect,” he said, smiling. T’meen bowed. “And thank you,” he added quietly. “Paznit Filwui.”

“Yes, he was trying to stir trouble.” Her tail swished a little. “But there was nothing I could hold him down for, other than being a thorn in the taeng.” Jilen and Wilna grinned at the vulgarity. “If he keeps it up, he’ll find himself banished, or worse. A good singing, Gedar, Martek. Well done.” She allowed Gedar to rub his face against hers, and briefly twined her tail with Martek as a sign of approval. Then she turned to her daughters. “Jilen? I’m leaving.”

Gedar and Martek stepped back to let the females and kitlings pass, and the assembly began to break up as the clan head left. Martek heaved a great sigh. “That was....”

“Better than hoped,” Gedar said, ruffling T’meen’s hair.

“I want to try and write that song down. I hope you aren’t going to take our little friend away from me any time soon, Gedar.”

“No,” he assured him. “In fact, I’ll need your help more than ever, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. He’s no trouble, and now I have something else I can ask him about.”

T’meen, who’d been listening to the back and forth with a confused expression, piped up. “Whaat?”

“Is okay,” Gedar said. “Martek want learn T’meen song.”

“Okay. Go Gedar home now? T’meen tir-ed.”

“Ye-ess.” He picked T’meen up and hoisted him to his shoulders. “Martek, keep an ear out for any of Filwui’s nonsense, will you? He was trying to provoke Mother tonight and that can’t be good.”

Martek’s smile dropped. “No, it can’t. We need to be vigilant. We have an excess of males right now and that’s never a good thing during snowfall.”

“True. Might be time for some judicious de-balling.”

Martek clasped his hands over his groin. “Don’t go giving your mother ideas,” he squeaked, and Jaijair, behind him, muffled a laugh. “Get on home. Well done, both of you.”

Yes, Gedar thought. A good evening. One to write down in the clan’s history, and tell the kitlings about in his dotage.

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*Come on, big guy, stop talking and let's get out of here.* Temin's face ached from smiling over gritted teeth for what felt like hours, and he wanted to be where he felt safe—at least, safer. He was shefting sick and tired of being put on display, on trial for crimes he didn't even know he was committing, and though 'Great and Peaceful is our Home, Venshu' seemed to have gone down a treat, he wasn't stupid enough to believe the request had just been an impulse by Gredar's mother. He'd been watching that shefting thug, Filwui, since he'd sidled in as Gredar was performing, and the bastard hadn't taken his eyes off Temin the whole time. The request to sing had something to do with him, and that meant trouble.

Gredar seemed happy enough with how things had gone, but it wasn't just the abrupt transition from the superheated meeting hall to the brutal cold outside which made Temin shiver and huddle into Gredar's furry neck. Everything—every meeting—in this village was some kind of test, and he had a pretty good idea what would happen to him if he failed. Before Gredar had come into his life, and Temin was still a pet on a leash, he'd seen a jopa killed, probably because it was a shefting nuisance and had bitten the wrong person or kitten. One of the females had just taken it into the pump room and slashed out the back of its neck with one sweep of her powerful claws—the jopa had died instantly. Temin could still see its limp, bloodied form—a creature bigger than him—dangling from the female's paw. She'd tossed it outside, for what purpose he didn't know, and had washed the blood from her hands under the pump without even looking at Temin, tied to a pipe in the corner. A minor problem taken care of as emotionlessly as Temin would eat a bit of orkan meat for supper.

He had no doubt at all that would be his fate if he pissed the wrong person off, and in this village, there were too many unknowns—like who had authority and influence, who did not. Gredar and his immediate family were high status, but he couldn't really figure Martek, or why Filwui's creepiness was tolerated when he was obviously a problem for Gredar. All Temin could do was smile, obey, kiss arse, and hope no one took a dislike to him more than they already had.

He'd have liked to ask Gredar about the politics, but his vocabulary wasn't up to it. If he could have revealed the handheld, he could have used it to help, as he was surreptitiously entering all his drawings of day-neh words into the database, and recording Martek on the sly when he could. He was pretty sure he could write a speech synthesis programme that would help him at least construct and artificially vocalise sentences which didn't make him sound like a toddler learning to talk, but he needed more time and overt cooperation than he dared ask for. Give him a year here, if he lasted that long, and he might feel secure enough to ask—not now.

In a year, he might be thousands of clicks away, if he could get the podpod's sublights working...and

if he could bear to leave Gredar behind. That was a bigger consideration than maybe it should have been, but after losing Jeng, Temin didn't know if he could face leaving the only person who could come close to replacing him. The fact that Gredar had some scary and not terribly friendly relatives was some incentive to walk away, admittedly. Temin was still probably not in the best shape to make big decisions, and was trying to concentrate on getting through each day—which was fine until his new best friend decided to shove him on a stage in front of hundreds of hostile aliens and ask him to *sing*. He'd nearly pissed himself when Martek started banging on his shefting drum—he'd thought it was the signal for someone to drag him away and kill him. He grinned, remembering. He bet the Planetary President had never heard their official song performed anything like that, in all the places in this galaxy she must have heard it. 'Anthem, with drums and cats'. Yeah—he could really see it being popular with street performers on Nixal.

He was too wound up for sex that night, and Gredar accepted that, content to lie with Temin and pet him until he fell asleep. As Temin dozed off, he had the thought that maybe it was because they still couldn't talk much that they got on so well. Hard to have an argument with your lover when the worst insult in your vocabulary was 'silly day-neh'. But he didn't want to argue with Gredar. The big guy was too sweet.

The concert changed things in small ways—he had no way of knowing how significant they were, and no way of asking. Some of the day-neh actually spoke to him directly in the house—in the kitchen, in the breakfast room—and Gredar's sister, J'len, now acknowledged him, and even asked how he was a couple of times. It wasn't like he'd become their favourite person overnight or anything. He was now more like a houseguest who hadn't started to get on their nerves too badly, and less of a pet, although the distinction was a fine one when he was only as tall as a child day-neh, and sounded about as smart.

Finding out Temin could sing sent Martek into ecstasy, and Temin found himself having to perform his planetary anthem over and over until the historian had written it down to his satisfaction. It was surreal to think a strangled form of the song might end up being sung by day-neh long after Temin was bones and dust, but it was sort of nice too, to leave some kind of mark on the clan. Martek wanted to learn other songs too, and all Temin could dredge up about human society from memory. They spent hours, Temin talking, Martek asking questions and scribbling down his answers. But Temin was also left to his own devices for large parts of the day because Martek and his apprentice had a lot more work than two people could handle—teaching, writing texts which would be printed at some later date (it wasn't done in the village, apparently) and making illustrations for books used within the village, or on texts obtained previously. Martek wrote nearly all the instructional songs, Temin learned, and even if the songs sounded like the most raucous howling to his ears, musicality was highly valued in this culture. It meant Martek had a status higher than his male gender would

normally give him, and nearly all the day-neh bowed to him as their superior.

It took Temin more than a month to figure this stuff out, and that after spending almost every single day with the guy. He rarely saw Gredar during daylight hours now, and had little idea what he got up to. His pottery, Temin supposed, and other duties. Maybe trying to make it clear to his mother and sister that Temin wasn't taking up his time. Temin never discussed it with him.

For sure, they talked in the evenings. Gredar had taken to making sketches of him, nude and stretched out on the furs. Temin asked him what he was going to do with the drawings—Gredar claimed he couldn't explain it properly. Gredar couldn't lie for shit, so Temin just had to trust it wouldn't end up being something embarrassing or dangerous.

What they did talk about was families, and culture, and the nature of love, which was a tricky subject because there was no analogue in day-neh culture for romantic love at all. Gredar understood loyalty, and friendship, and the bond between siblings, parent and child. Fuck buddies, they called 'grooming mates', like Filwui had been—someone Gredar slept with more often than most, but not exclusively. In fact, monogamy was a concept Gredar could see no sense in at all. Fathers played no role in raising children, and the females needed no one to protect or support them outside their family, being stronger and taller than the males in most cases.

"Female pick male, male move on," Gredar explained.

"But...female like male best thing? Keep him?"

Gredar chuckled. "Female like male best? Why? Males paznit."

'Paznit' was the same thing as 'shefting bad' or 'nuisance' apparently. "Gredar no is paznit," Temin objected.

"Gredar smart," he said, tapping his head. "Smart male, no paznit. Help females, mother, sister. Is no...." He made a 'throw away' gesture. "Bad day-neh, paznit male, go away."

"Filwui is paznit."

Gredar stopped chuckling, and his tail swished. "Maybe. No go away *now*." Which meant it might be an option in the future.

Temin wondered what it was like for males who weren't smart enough to make themselves useful to their females. He asked Martek about it.

"Males go here, and there," Martek explained. "This clan, this clan, this clan." He mimed hopping between the different settlements. "No home. Always walking. Hunt, sell things. Steal, maybe. Fuck females. Then go."



*Wandering sperm donors.* “Is sad, male have no home.”

Martek shrugged. “Is bad, too many males. Make trouble. Males no make kitlings. Clan need kitlings.”

A pretty lousy way to judge a person’s worth, Temin thought, just on whether they could have babies or not. So that was three black marks against him—he was male, he couldn’t produce any more of his kind, and he wasn’t contributing anything to the welfare of the clan. Since he couldn’t change the first two, he needed to find a way to remedy the third, if he wasn’t to become one of the wandering males—or just killed as superfluous to requirements. No wonder Gredar worked so hard to be well-liked and useful.

But no one made any moves against him, and six weeks after that weird concert, he felt he was fitting in as well as he could hope. Gredar’s mother continued to be friendly, if distant, no one made any move to attack him, and no one said anything hostile or mocking to Gredar when they were together. He still took the pulse pistol with him wherever he went. He didn’t trust Filwui, and he was damned if he was going to be backed up against a wall again with no way of defending himself.

Martek began to gear up for the next concert, and several adult day-neh, including Gredar’s sister, Wilna, the metal-worker, were in and out of the house learning their pieces. Temin was slowly getting used to the weird sound of day-neh singing, but he doubted he’d ever like it much. He’d amused Jaijair for a day or two, teaching him human songs to beat on the set of tuned pipes they used in counterpoint to the drums. It had apparently never occurred to Jaijair that he could possibly actually reproduce a tune on the pipes themselves, though day-neh songs didn’t really lend themselves to that. Martek came in as they were making a row and attempting to duet, and said they should perform it for the village. Temin was worried he might end up being the regular party piece and declined. Martek agreed, but Temin thought the old bastard was probably still plotting. He was like that.

Now he knew what the ‘singing’ involved, he was somewhat less apprehensive about going, though he didn’t expect to enjoy it much. The heat of the hall from hundreds of close packed bodies, the presence of hundreds of strange day-neh, and the cacophony of sound hadn’t been a lot of fun for Temin last time, but he’d been through a lot worse. He did, however, tug on Gredar’s tail as they were getting ready to go out into the night, and make his friend look at him. “Temin *no* sing. Understand? *No* sing.”

Gredar chuckled and, whipping his tail out of Temin’s grasp, tapped him on the nose with the tip of it. “Temin *no* sing. Gredar understand. Is pity.”

“Too bad.”

“Ye-ess. Come on.”

Scary as the day-neh were individually, in a group they were utterly terrifying. For once, Temin was glad he was on Gredar's broad shoulders, high above the heads of the mass of milling day-neh and their lamps. The hall was huge, even once the larger size of the residents was taken into account—the only thing Temin had to compare it with was the State Concert hall in Xixan, and even that wasn't as lavishly decorated or colourful as this place. Even though it was only lit by lamps, the day-neh had an ingenious way with reflectors that threw a bright, even light over the stage, and the shape of the building was pretty acoustically sophisticated for a pre-technological society. He'd have to find a way to sneak back and get some images of it for his records. Historians back on Venshu would have their minds blown by all this, if he could just get them the data.

Gredar sat well to the back this time, as did all the males—only the females and their youngest children sat forward, Gredar's mother and family at the very front, with plenty of space around them. The day-neh status system in physical form. Fitting for such a literal minded people.

It wasn't much different from before, though the songs were shorter and more of them. Temin, too short to be seated and still see, stood in front of Gredar and leaned back on his broad chest, Gredar's tail wrapped cosily around Temin's waist. The singing itself had little interest for Temin, since he had no idea what most of it was about and he'd heard the songs a dozen times or more at Martek's. Instead, he scanned the audience, searching for faces he could now recognise, seeing if he was any better at picking up body language now he'd been around the day-neh for a while. He was getting better at tails—he could pretty much guess whether someone was happy or irritated or worried by their tail carriage—and the ears were obvious enough even the first time around. The really subtle stuff like tones of growls he was only starting to distinguish. Gredar, he could work out, Martek about half the time, and someone like J'len, not a chance. He was beginning to suspect that as well as having superior vision and smell to humans, the day-neh could hear a much wider range of sounds too. To them, he was probably as disabled as a deaf man in human society—so he'd have to compensate.

But even watching the audience had limited appeal, and after an hour, he sat down in Gredar's lap and thought he'd try and sleep, even through the din. Gredar wrapped his arms around Temin, not at all bothered by his lack of interest, and Temin snuggled into the deep fur, amusing himself by combing his fingers through it, and thinking he'd have to give Gredar a brushing tonight, because he loved that, and Temin adored touching him that way. He smiled to himself. *And which one of us is the pet now?*

A crash, heavy wood against solid walls. Temin jerked up and was thrust aside as Gredar leapt to his feet. Temin yanked his pistol out of his pack, ready to act, but found himself in a dense, panicking crowd of

huge furry people, and only holding onto Gredar's leg stopped him being swept away. An anguished scream came from the stage, and then Gredar was running—no, *leaping*—across the crowd, vaulting over bodies towards the front of the room. Temin, suddenly abandoned, and at real risk of being crushed in the melee, dropped and scuttled through the gaps between legs, trying very hard not to get kicked in the head. He could see *nothing* except legs and feet, but the sounds were terrifying—screams and growls and unbelievably loud hissing, coming from all around him.

And suddenly he was clear—and in the middle of a battlefield. Fighting, brawling, screaming day-neh were everywhere, and for a moment or two, he couldn't tell who was attacking, who defending. Then he spotted him—Filwui! Filwui and maybe a dozen males, tearing into Gredar's family. One of the day-neh was down—who, he couldn't tell—and several of the females were badly injured, blood dripping down torn and gaping fur, muzzles clawed, ears ripped. Why the sheft wasn't anyone helping them? He ran forward, skidding a little in the blood on the stones, his pistol held in front of him. Filwui had Gredar cornered, backed up against two cowering youngsters and his mother, while his sisters fought against the intruders. J'len, holding one of the males at bay, leapt suddenly, knocking him down and wrestling with him, but it became quickly obvious she was getting the worst of it. Gredar was in trouble too, serious trouble—Filwui had clawed his face, sliced him, flaying his left arm and across the gut, and was still pressing forward as Gredar crouched back, ear flattened and mane fully erect, hissing and swiping futilely with claws Filwui easily dodged.

Temin only took long enough to make sure he had a clean shot, drew a bead and fired. The pulse knocked Filwui clean off his feet and halfway across the floor, a smoking hole in his chest. Temin fired again, this time at the male pinning J'len to the floor, and as the day-neh fell sideways, Temin screamed, "*Stop! All stop now!*"

All sounds ceased, except for the whimpering of the injured and the smallest kits. The smell of blood and burned fur was cloying in the air, sickening. J'len sprang forward, at him, teeth and claws bared. He swung the pistol towards her. "No! Stop. No hurt Temin. Temin no hurt J'len. Gredar hurt! Help." *Don't make me do it, girl.*

She growled, ears flat, claws extended. He wondered if she was even hearing his words. "Gredar hurt," he insisted. "Please, J'len. Help."

Her tail swished, but suddenly she turned and ran back to her family—first to her mother and the children, and then to check on Gredar, who'd slumped forward, clutching his gut. How bad was he hurt? Temin didn't dare go look at his friend himself—around him, the females were still in defence postures,

claws raised, ears flat, their young ones huddled behind them, terrified. Every few seconds, one of the females would let out an angry, controlled hiss. The attacking males, suddenly trapped, were unable to move in any direction without facing danger. When one of them made the slightest attempt to advance, he was immediately pinned to the ground by a female. Gredar's sister, Wilna, came over to examine the prisoner—and with one swift swipe from her enormous paw, tore out his throat. She shook the gobbets of flesh from her hand, snarled, and walked away, as Temin swallowed, trying not to throw up at the fountaining blood.

It seemed to be a signal. The other males were turned on, and just as quickly killed, no trial, no arguments or pleas for mercy, until there were ten more corpses, and several females licking blood from their paws. It had taken less than a minute to execute the rogues.

Gredar's mother got to her feet with the help of one of the females and growled out something. The bodies of the intruders were dragged from the hall, leaving wide bloody trails across the worn stone. More growled orders and the hall began to clear of all but the females and young kits, Gredar—and Martek, standing on the stage, claws extended, but otherwise frozen in place. Temin stood where he was, ready to use his pistol against another attack—wherever it came from.

J'len, still crouched beside Gredar, snapped out a command, and one of the females set off at a run. The kits were led out by two other females, leaving the hall now virtually empty. Just the injured on the floor, and some very worried and angry day-neh who didn't know whether Temin was friend or foe now.

“T'meen, come.”

Gredar's mother, ears flattened, flanked by several granddaughters. Temin walked a little closer, avoiding the worst pools of gore, but refused to get within strike range. She pointed to his pistol. “Give.”

“No. Is bad for Kadit.” It was keyed to his DNA, but she didn't need to know that—and if one of them decided to smash the shefting thing up, it'd explode. Too risky—and it looked like it was all that stood between him and a quick death.

“Give.” Behind her, the other females exposed their claws, and began to hiss, fur erect, tails whipping from side to side in fury.

“No. Bad. Is danger.” He pointed the pistol at a bare bit of floor safely away from them, and fired. They all jumped back as a hole the size of a man's head was blasted out of the stone. The pinging of superheated rock and the sizzle of burning blood was stunningly loud in the suddenly silent hall. Gredar's mother stared at him, claws raised—he had to give the old girl credit though, she hadn't retreated a centimetre. *Balls of titanium*. “No. Bad. Is Temin thing. Temin no hurt Kadit, no hurt J'len. No hurt Wilna. No hurt any,” he said, waving his hand at the females. “Gredar hurt bad?”

Gredar's mother ignored his question. "Martek!"

Temin pointed his pistol at the historian as he started forward. "No, Martek. No hurt Temin. Please—Gredar hurt? J'len, say?"

Gredar's mother snapped something at her daughter. J'len looked up and hissed at Temin. "Yes. Very bad. T'meen go now. Leave clan."

"No. Want help Gredar. No go away. Please. Please, J'len. Want help Gredar!"

The angry stares continued for a few moments, then Gredar's mother nodded curtly. J'len snarled. "T'meen can stay now." But then she added something Temin could only guess at—and which he suspected was something along the lines of, 'until we get that weapon off you and then you're dead, human.'

He could only nod, and thank her. Gredar was the first priority now, getting him safe and healed. But Temin had to somehow manage not to be killed while that happened, and that, he suspected, wasn't going to be easy.

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Gredar...hurt. His gut, his...everything. A small moan escaped him, and instantly someone was at his side. Jilen.

"Shhh, brother, don't move."

His sister's face, lit by lamp light, leaning over him. "Jilen...how many...who did we...?"

She bent and rubbed her nose very carefully along his forehead—a gesture normally reserved for a mother towards her kitlings. "Halit's dead. You're the worst of our injured."

"Halit? No!" Their youngest sister—how could she be dead so pointlessly? "Filwui..."

"Is dead too," she said, her voice flat. "T'meen killed him."

Gredar remembered now. He tried to sit up. "T'meen! Is he...?" *Not T'meen too.*

"Be still," she snapped. "He's in the corner. He won't let anyone go near him or that paznit weapon of his."

Gredar looked past her. T'meen was huddled against the wall, his strange weapon clutched in front of him. He didn't look injured, but things had become very confused, and Gredar had lost track of him as he was being carried from the assembly hall. Jilen had dosed him with something at the infirmary and that was the last thing he remembered.

Gredar started to call over to T'meen, but Jilen hushed him. "Leave him be. Mother says to wait until

he's asleep, then we can deal with him."

"Deal with...? You mean kill? Jilen, he saved my life!"

She hushed him again, and moved to block his view of his friend. "Yes. He saved Mother and me, and my youngest too. I know. But Gredar—he killed two daiyne without even touching them! That thing he's carrying is more lethal than anything we've ever heard of. He's too dangerous for us to allow him to live. We have no defence against that thing—he killed *Filwui*. A little thing like him killed a male that size without any struggle." She shuddered. "He could kill us all."

"Yes, he could. But he hasn't—and considering what's been done to him, you don't think that's significant?"

Her tail flicked, and her usual stone-hard certainty slipped. "Gredar, it's not me, it's Mother. T'meen terrified her. He *disobeyed* her in front of the clan."

"The clan who did absolutely nothing to try and help, you mean?" Gredar snapped, injury and anxiety draining away his ability to be polite. "He saved her *life*. I saw him. If he'd wanted to kill her, he'd have done it then. Or before then." He clutched weakly at her arm, wincing at the pain it caused him. "You have to convince her not to kill him. Jilen, he's special. More special than you can imagine. Please...we've lost a sister, a mother of four. Let's not lose a friend too."

"It's not me," she repeated quietly. "We lost more than a sister—we lost twelve males, not all of them useless, and the conspiracy went deep. We're still investigating—Wilna's taking charge—but we think there are females involved too. It was a serious takeover attempt."

"I knew that as soon as I saw him." He stared at his sister. "T'meen really did save my life. I was losing."

"Yes. I know. *I* nearly lost you. Do you know how hard it is to operate on your own brother?"

The harmonics in her voice indicated how close she was to breaking down, and all Gredar could do was hold her arm and pet her. *Halit*. A sunny kitling, a placid adult and competent mother. Jilen had been training her as a healer alongside her own daughters. A loss to their family and to their clan that would demand revenge, if all the perpetrators weren't already dealt with. "The clan didn't come to our aid."

"We've been too long at peace. People just panicked. And...Filwui and his troop were not without support."

"So they were waiting to see which side was stronger." Not surprising—disappointing, but it was in daiyne nature to go with the winner.

Jilen nodded. "There will be banishments—or worse."

Gredar closed his eyes, tired and hurt and despairing. The clan would suffer badly from this night. “Please, save T’meen. At least let there be a surat, Jilen. He’s done nothing wrong. Does Mother want it known she rewarded the hero of the fight with death?”

Jilen’s tail flicked. “Now that’s an argument I can put to her. I can win a delay, Gredar. No more.”

“Even that’s better than nothing. Thank you, sister. I’m glad you’re not dead.”

She gave a sad little chuckle. “Me too, brother. You need to rest—the stomach wound is serious but didn’t involve the viscera, just the overlying muscles and tissue. You’ll be sore for a while, but you’ll live.” She propped him up on a bolster—his stomach screamed in protest. She gave him something bitter to drink—he was so thirsty, he didn’t care what it tasted like. “That will help with the pain, but you must lie still as you can or you’ll rip the stitching.” She checked the bindings on the dressings, and seemed satisfied as she stood up. “I’ll speak to Mother now, see if I can get her to agree that T’meen can remain unmolested until you’re on your feet. She was very angry earlier, and Halit’s death has really hurt her. It’s hurt us all,” she added, tail drooping.

“Go on. I want to speak to T’meen. Wait—how long has it been?” He glanced up at the lightview—it was still dark but he felt sluggish and heavy, as if he’d been sleeping for more than a few strikes.

“A full sun pass.” He boggled at her, and she raised a tired smile. “Yes. And yet you still need to rest. Don’t you dare try to get out of bed without help. I’ll be back soon.”

She rubbed her nose on him again and then left. Poor Jilen. His mother might be angry but most of the real strain was falling on her eldest daughter and heir.

He shifted, grunting in pain as deep wounds caught, then looked over to the corner. “T’meen? Is okay.” Had his friend really been sitting like that for a night and a sun pass? “Come. Is okay?”

Slowly T’meen uncurled, but the weapon never wavered. “Gredar...no hurt?”

“Ye-ess, I’m hurt. But is okay. Come,” he beckoned with his hand. “Is okay.”

T’meen walked stiffly, warily, over to the bed. “Jilen come here soon? Kadit angry to T’meen.”

“Kadit is angry with Filwui. Come. Sit. Please?”

T’meen still hesitated. His huu-man friend was badly frightened, and even if he didn’t know Gredar’s mother’s plans, he was more than clever enough to work out the possible implications of his actions. “Is okay,” Gredar repeated. “I won’t hurt T’meen. Honest.”

T’meen sat down, and put his hand carefully on Gredar’s tail. “Is very bad, Gredar hurt?”

“Ye-ess. My sister is dead. Halit.”

T’meen bowed. “T’meen is sad. Is sorry. No is sorry Filwui is dead.”

“No. T’meen did the right thing, killing Filwui...uh...this is bad, maybe.” He pointed at the weapon still clutched in T’meen’s right hand. “My mother is very worried. Kadit is worried.”

“Ye-ess. Sorry. Kadit want to kill T’meen. Jilen want.”

Gredar shook his head and placed his hand on T’meen’s thigh—his friend jumped. He was trembling, probably exhausted as well as frightened. “No. Jilen no want to kill T’meen. Kadit...worries. Worries for clan. Is scary, this thing.”

“Ye-ess. T’meen understand is bad. T’meen no want to hurt daiyne—*good* daiyne. Want to hurt Filwui, daiyne like Filwui. Only this daiyne. Understand.”

“Ye-ess. Sit. Here.” He patted the bed beside him, and T’meen moved in, snuggling very carefully against him. “T’meen is good. Gredar will protect.”

“Gredar is *hurt*. Gredar sleep, T’meen sleep, Kadit, Jilen come, kill T’meen. T’meen worry.”

And he was right to, but Gredar had nothing more to offer. He could only cuddle his friend and encourage him to get some sleep, and hope Jilen would get their mother to calm down. He wanted to be up and doing, helping Halit’s orphaned kits, her twin Jikar who would be mourning her deeply, his mother who was facing a crisis unlike anything Gredar had seen in all his thirty cycles. But he could feel his injuries, knew they would be days, weeks in healing. He smelled of blood and medicine, and would have dearly loved a bath, but he wasn’t capable of that. Even lifting his head made everything ache. *A wounded male is surely the most useless thing alive.*

T’meen, who stank not of blood but of stress and the unique scent he exuded when he was afraid, was carrying no injuries, but his listless movements indicated great weariness. They both needed to rest, but T’meen seemed to want to reaffirm contact with Gredar more than sleep. He was stroking Gredar’s side, as if trying to soothe away the pain with his touch. Gredar patted his head and wished he could promise things would be all right. There was every chance they would not be.

A noise at the door, and T’meen lifted his weapon. “Shhh, shhh. Is okay,” Gredar said, realising it was only Jilen again.

She came into the room, but kept her distance, perhaps to avoid startling their nervy huu-man. “She agreed. He can stay in your room for now and no one will molest him. She won’t come to see you while he’s here, but she sends her fond wishes. She wants me to report to her twice a day on your condition.” She flicked her ear wryly at him.

“Sorry about that. How long...?”

“Until you’re mobile. Then we will have to decide. Gredar...she did say if T’meen were to leave

quietly now, no one would stop him or hunt him. I could...give him supplies.” She glanced down at T’meen, who was staring up at her, the weapon not pointed at her but clearly ready to use. “It would be best. You know that.”

“Yes, I do. But if he had somewhere to go, or a way to survive, he’d have gone already. You think I’ve been preventing him?”

“No.” She contemplated T’meen for a moment or two, her tail twitching a little. “But he must have come from somewhere—why doesn’t he return?”

“He can’t. I don’t know why, but I know he would if he could. Jilen...I’m sorry, but I’m tired.”

“Yes, you are.” She moved forward, presumably to check on him, but jerked back as T’meen sat up and made it clear he wasn’t happy at her approach by pointing the weapon straight at her face. “He has to let me tend you.”

“T’meen, is okay. Jilen no hurt T’meen, Gredar. Understand?”

T’meen turned to him and seemed to be weighing up the statement, before nodding. “Okay.” He faced Jilen. “T’meen no hurt Jilen. Promise this thing. Honest.”

“Jilen understands. Jilen will not hurt T’meen. Understand?”

“Ye-ess.” But he still remained wary as she checked the bandages, and was tense until she moved away again.

“Rest. Both of you,” she said. “I’ll return in the morning. Karwa’s outside the door, call if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

She left and T’meen sagged. “Gredar trust Jilen?”

“Ye-ess. T’meen trust Jilen too. Sleep now.”

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Gredar was ashamed at being surprised that Jilen and his mother kept their word over T’meen, but the scent of treachery was in the air, and the situation was so unusual, he couldn’t trust his assessment of it. He was not without visitors. Jilen came several times a day, even though she was horrendously busy looking after the other injured and Halit’s kitlings. All his surviving siblings came to call, Jakir spending a long time with him, just twining tails and remembering his twin. T’meen hid in the washroom at such times, a discretion Gredar appreciated, whatever his motive.

Gredar was being treated as solicitously as if he was a high-ranking, fertile female, and he knew his mother had ordered it thus because in her house, who else could do so? But his mother didn't visit, nor send a message other than that first one. It wasn't a good sign. She wasn't just avoiding him, she was avoiding T'meen, and that probably meant she was determined to have him killed, no matter what his defence was. Jilen didn't want to discuss it—no one did.

T'meen was at his side as soon as Gredar was alone, and was as tender in his care as any mother with her kitlings. He couldn't lift Gredar, but he could do everything else, and Gredar minded looking weak much less in front of his huu-man than he did in front of his family. T'meen didn't talk about his fate, or the events of the night of the singing—he didn't talk much at all. In his position, Gredar doubted he'd be inclined to chat either.

He knew from previous experience with hunting injuries that he healed fast, and so it proved to be once more, despite his age. Within three sun passes, he was walking with only a little help, within four he could walk unaided, at least to the toilet and back. On the morning of the sixth sun pass, Wilna came to his room. "Gredar, Mother wishes to hold a meeting downstairs. Are you able to come?" She carefully avoided looking around, though T'meen had scuttled into the washroom at the sound of her step in the doorway.

"About him?"

"Yes. He must come as well. If he won't...then he'll be made to."

"We'll be there."

She seemed about to say more, but then only nodded. "By the third strike."

T'meen emerged as soon as she left. Gredar summoned him over, and put his arm around T'meen's shoulder. "Meeting downstairs, soon. Gredar, T'meen go."

"No, T'meen stay."

He tried to pull away, but Gredar held firmly on. "T'meen...must."

"Kadit kill."

"Maybe. T'meen can go away. Jilen help. Go away or go to meeting. Two choices. No more."

"Go where?" The high-pitched harmonics, very faint, were the sign of fear. It didn't mean T'meen was a coward. Anyone would be afraid in this situation.

"Anywhere. Out. T'meen home, maybe?"

"No. No can go home. Gredar say, Gredar protect T'meen!"

And he had. He wrapped his tail around T'meen's leg, and bowed a little. "Gredar sorry. T'meen can go away. Jilen give food, things," he said, waving his hand vaguely to indicate supplies.

“T’meen no know...Ptane. No know hunt, make home, make cloze. No fur for snow, no....” He shook his head. “No can go. Can talk to Kadit, maybe.”

“Ye-ess. Gredar no want T’meen killed.”

“T’meen no want too,” he said, making a strange choked noise that sounded a little like huu-man laughter, but Gredar didn’t think it was funny. “When?”

“Soon. T’meen can think, then can go.”

T’meen hesitated. “No. Talk to Kadit. Kadit...” He wrapped his arms around himself as if he was cold. “T’meen try to be good. But is no good for day-neh.”

“T’meen is very good. Is brave, clever, good lover, tall.” He won a small smile, and he licked T’meen’s face as gently as he could, putting all the affection he felt for him into the gesture. “Is *good* friend. Gredar luff T’meen. Is the right word? ‘Luff’”

T’meen went very still, as his scent subtly changed, became bitter with stress and something else Gredar couldn’t interpret. “Ye-ess.” His voice was shaking. “Is right word. T’meen luff Gredar too. Is sad if T’meen go. Is sad if T’meen dead.”

“Ye-ess.” He tugged T’meen down onto the bed and hugged him, because it was all he could do.

And on the third strike of the house bell, they went downstairs.

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T’meen walked ahead of him down the stairs, back straight, apparently confident, his lethal and mysterious weapon in his hand, loosely at his side. Gredar needed Karwa’s help to walk down, his thoughts not on his unsteady steps but what was about to happen. It seemed incredible to him that T’meen could be—probably was—walking to his death, when he had done nothing wrong whatsoever, and had done many things that were honourable and right. It wasn’t how things were supposed to go in Gredar’s ordered, stable existence. He half contemplated grabbing T’meen and making a run for it—but he was in no state to do that, and while he could certainly survive in the wild, he knew T’meen could not. Which T’meen understood, and why he had chosen to meet his fate in this way. Gredar could only hope for unprecedented eloquence in pleading for his friend’s life.

They were ushered into the meeting room, and the door was locked behind them with a very final thunk and scrape of heavy wood on stone. T’meen jerked at the ominous sound, and looked at Gredar for an explanation. He could only shrug as he steered T’meen over to a cushion, and sat beside him. His

apprehension was now replaced with a sick dread of the inevitable. There was nothing he could do to save T'meen, and he couldn't even really offer any comfort to his friend. Curling a tail around him didn't really count.

All the females in the immediate family were there, already seated and solemn-faced. It hurt, not seeing Halit next to Wilna, and as Wilna caught his eye, she nodded slowly. She knew what was in his heart.

To Gredar's puzzlement, Martek was there, sitting like a witness to the right of the females. "Why are you—?"

Gredar's mother interrupted, and called for his attention. "Martek is here at my request, Gredar." He turned to face her. In the six sun passes since he'd seen her, his mother seemed to have aged five cycles—there actually seemed to be more white around her muzzle, impossible though that might be. "My son, we have two things to do at this meeting. The first is more pleasant, so I'll do that first."

She rose from her seat and walked over to him, carefully bypassing T'meen, and not even looking at him. She laid a hand on Gredar's head. "Gredar, six evenings ago, you acted to save my life and those of my grandchildren. In doing so, you showed yourself to be a faithful son, a faithful member of our clan, an honour to the line of Kelara. In thanks, I have decreed that henceforth, you shall never fear banishment from this clan, not while I live, nor my daughters, nor my daughters' daughters. Your place is secured for the rest of your life. Martek is here to record this. We shall announce it again at the singing in Halit's memory."

He looked up to see her smiling gravely at him. He rubbed his face against her palm. "Thank you. I would have done it anyway."

"I know, which is why you're so treasured, despite your balls." He had to grin at that. "Are you well, my son?"

"Getting there. Still sore. Mother, about T'meen..."

"No. Wait." She clasped her hands in front of her, glancing sidelong at T'meen for the first time. "There's more you don't know."

"Mother?"

But she just flicked her tail and walked back to her seat. Beside her, Jilen and Wilna subtly altered position—anticipating a threat. From him? Surely not. He put his arm around T'meen's shoulders and pulled him close as his mother nodded to Martek. "Tell Gredar what you've discovered in our records."

Martek rose, holding a book in his hands, his tailing drooping and his ears half-flat in misery. "Gredar, I'm sorry...but T'meen is...his kind are our deadly enemy. And he can't be allowed to live, or leave this room." He bowed. "I'm truly sorry—for both of you."

He handed the book to Gredar, and backed away without looking at either of them. Gredar opened the book—it was an old volume, not clan history, but of Ptane. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ve marked the place. Read.”

Gredar turned to the page, T’meen watching beside him. His friend tensed as the pictures, and the horrific story they related, were revealed—but there was no surprise. “You knew,” Gredar whispered as T’meen stared at the vile...oh no. Gredar looked up, horrified at what he’d just worked out. “No. He...he would never...Martek, you *know* him.”

“Do I? Do any of us? Gredar—he knows of this, and never mentioned it, like he never mentioned that weapon. His kind tried to wipe us from the face of Ptane.”

Gredar slammed the book down on the floor, and thumped the ground beside it. “No! How long ago? He’s not like that! Mother, Jilen—he saved our lives! When did this happen?”

Jilen shifted. “Three hundred cycles ago. A long time ago, certainly.” She lifted her chin. “But he’s using the same weapons. Ask him, Gredar. Ask him if they’re his people.”

Gredar’s throat was suddenly dry, and his hands shook as he picked up the book again and opened it. “T’meen. These are huu-man? You do this?”

T’meen pulled away from him and stood—as one, the females bared their claws, but he ignored them. “Ye-ess, is huu-man. No, T’meen no do this thing. T’meen say, this is bad thing. Very bad. T’meen sad when see this. Very sad.”

“T’meen.” He turned to face Gredar’s mother. “Where are huu-man?”

He pointed up to the ceiling. “In sky, many many many leilil far. T’meen fly alone, hit here.” He swooped his hand through the air. “Three leilils. Karwa find, take T’meen this home. T’meen no hurt any.” He indicated the room. “T’meen want to protect Gredar, Kadit, Jilen.”

“That may be true, but the huu-man completely destroyed three clans, and nearly destroyed another four. We defeated them at a terrible cost.” Martek’s entire posture was miserable—he took no pleasure in bearing bad news. “I agree with Kadit. T’meen and his weapon are too dangerous.”

“Then take the weapon from him!” Gredar appealed to his mother, then his sisters.

“And if he has more? If he’s lying and his friends are close by, or will come to look for him? We can’t allow even one of his kind to live, Gredar.” His mother was taking no pleasure in this either. “T’meen must die. I’m sorry. I have sp....”

“No! Please...don’t make it an order.” He bent forward painfully, his forehead on the floor. “I beg you. Mother, he’s my friend.”

“Gredar.” He looked up—that was T’meen speaking. “Gredar stop. Is enough.” His friend was trembling, his lips pressed tightly together. “Is enough.” He knelt in front of Gredar and wrapped his arms around him. “T’meen luff Gredar. Is farewell.”

“No! No, Gredar protect T’meen!”

T’meen shook his head. Water was leaking from his eyes—Gredar had never seen that before. “No. T’meen protect Gredar because T’meen luff Gredar.” He pressed his head against Gredar’s chest. “Is okay.”

“No! Please!” But when T’meen pulled back, Gredar didn’t try and hold him, though it was well within his power. “T’meen, no, wait.”

T’meen stood up, and shook his head again. “No. Is tir-ed. Is enough.” He touched the book with his foot. “Is bad thing. Huu-man do bad thing. T’meen is huu-man. Understand Kadit is afraid. Only two things—T’meen kill all, T’meen is killed. No other.”

“No—three things. T’meen go away? Please?”

“We can’t allow that now, Gredar,” Jilen said, though not unkindly.

T’meen seemed to understand her words. “No. Is farewell. Uh...give scent to T’meen?”

“Ye-ess,” Gredar whispered, and tasted salt as he rubbed his face against T’meen’s cheek, licked the moisture from it and his chin. “Gredar is very sad.”

“T’meen is...is....” He patted the uninjured side of Gredar’s muzzle with a shaking hand. “Is farewell. Be haapy.”

He shrugged off Gredar’s curling tail and walked to the middle of the room. He laid his weapon down on the floor, then walked forward and knelt in front of Gredar’s mother. “T’meen no hurt any. Want to protect only.” He bowed low, and remained unmoving in that position.

Gredar’s mother got to her feet and walked over to T’meen, grabbing his hair without hesitation and yanking his head upright, exposing his throat. As she laid her claws across T’meen’s neck, Gredar refused to close his eyes, though he fervently did not want to see this. He owed T’meen this much but....

No. This was wrong. “Mother! He saved your life!”

She didn’t turn to look at him. “He’s a danger to us all.”

“But he’s been a danger all this time, and he’s done nothing! Nothing! Filwui forced him, hurt him, nearly killed him, and he did nothing! He only acted to save us! Mother....”

She turned her head and her lips pulled back in a snarl. “Be quiet, Gredar!”

But then Jilen got to her feet. “Mother...you’re wise in all things. But...this may send a message to those who would support us against the traitors.”

“I can explain why, if anyone questions it.” But still his mother didn’t move her hand. She only yanked T’meen’s hair a little more, so he was nearly lifted off his knees—it had to be hurting him, but he made not a sound, nor any movement to stop her. It was as if he had simply given up.

But Gredar refused to. “Mother, he came to you of his own free will. He’s put himself at your mercy. Please—think what that tells you.” He strained forward, willing his mother to understand.

“I *am* thinking, Gredar. But there is more at stake than my own feelings.” With the grip she had on T’meen’s hair, she twisted him so he was forced to look up into her face. “You’re dangerous. You must understand that.”

“He doesn’t know those....”

“Yes, he does.” Slowly she lowered him, and released his hair. The claws on his neck became a caress. “If you harm me or mine, I will kill you where you stand. Explain it, Gredar.”

Not daring to believe what he was seeing, he tried. “T’meen, no hurt Kadit or any? Kadit will kill, if T’meen hurt. Understand?”

T’meen swallowed and gave a single sharp nod, still staring up at Gredar’s mother. “Can hurt day-neh like Filwui, ye-ess?”

“Ye-ess,” she said. “Kill our enemies, not us. On that basis, you may stay. To reward loyalty and bravery with death is not wise.” She looked at Jilen who nodded, then grinned like a young kitling instead of the gravely responsible mother she always tried to be. Gredar felt himself smiling in response. It was going to be fine.

His mother gently stroked T’meen’s hair. “You can get up now.”

But his friend didn’t seem to understand, because he didn’t even twitch. “T’meen is okay. Stand.” Gredar urged, wishing he could rise easily from this position and go to his friend.

T’meen, strangely clumsy, got slowly to his feet. “No...kill?” His voice was barely a whisper, his eyes wide and staring.

“No kill,” Jilen said, walking over to him, still grinning madly. But before she could reach T’meen, he suddenly collapsed, Gredar’s mother barely catching him before he hit the ground.

No! Gredar struggled to stand upright, desperate to get to his friend. “T’meen! T’meen!”

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Temin swum up out of unconsciousness, his vision grey and spotty. He jerked a little as he realised he

was being cradled by a day-neh, but settled as he heard Gredar's familiar rumble. His head hurt and he was too dizzy to make out actual words. He jerked again as the memory of what happened came back to him. Gredar's mother...holding him, about to....

He shivered, and a big paw settled carefully on his forehead. "T'meen is okay?"

That wasn't Gredar. He tried to focus. "J'len?"

He wasn't lying on Gredar either—he was being held in J'len's arms, and around him was a circle of huge furry faces. "What happened?" He tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness forced him back.

Gredar said something he didn't understand. "T'meen rest." That was J'len, speaking slowly for his benefit. "Want water?"

"Yes. Very much." Had he just passed out? He appeared to be intact. She'd said she wouldn't kill him...he'd been ready to die. Why had she changed her mind? "Kadit no kill Temin?"

That amused J'len. "No kill T'meen. T'meen is safe. Rest. T'meen is sick?"

It was a struggle to translate her words, and to remember how to answer in the same language. "A little. Head hurt. Is okay."

Only when someone turned up with a smallish cup of water did she help him sit up and help him drink, which settled his stomach a little. Now he saw most of the others had left the room—it was just J'len, Gredar and his mother. The older female was sitting on her haunches, watching him in that curiously expressionless way they all had. Nothing about her suggested she was tense or angry, and J'len seemed in a very good mood. Gredar looked the most anxious, his tail tapping T'meen's foot and stroking it. T'meen caught his friend's eye. "Temin is good. Is okay, Gredar. No worry." Gredar gave a relieved little chirrup, and curled his tail around Temin's ankle.

More water and a little time made him feel almost normal, though he wasn't going to try and risk standing up. No one seemed in a hurry, which was strange because Gredar's mother always had a dozen things to do. Maybe they'd declared a public holiday in his honour. He chuckled to himself at the feeble joke and considered he was maybe just a little cracked right now.

"T'meen?"

He shifted so he could face Gredar's mother. "Yes?"

"Will huu-man come to find you?"

At least that was what he thought she was asking. He made himself sit up straighter, appreciating J'len's paw at his back. "No. Friend try, T'meen no see him. Friend go away, no come back. Kadit no worry. Day-neh is safe. T'meen alone." Gredar nodded, and stroked the inside of Temin's leg with his tail. "T'meen



can stay? Try to be good for day-neh. Want to be good. Is tired to be afraid. No can go home. Want home here—can stay?”

The two females exchanged glances, then Gredar’s mother leaned forward to pat his head. “Yes. Can stay.”

Then she said something else, and suddenly Temin found himself being lifted. He yelped and struggled in J’len’s arms. “Hey! She said I could stay!”

“Shhh, shhh. T’meen, is okay!” Gredar, still seated, was urgently trying to calm him. “Kadit talk to Gredar, J’len take T’meen to place to rest one strike. Is okay.”

Temin stopped struggling. Of course it made sense for Gredar to stay still—the poor bugger was still having trouble walking, and getting up and down had to hurt like shefting crack. “T’meen see Gredar soon?”

“Yes, soon.”

It was a lot more trouble than it was probably worth to convince J’len to let him walk to wherever it was she was going, and since Temin didn’t trust his legs right now, he didn’t even try. He’d never expected to walk out of this room again, and he wasn’t going to argue about how, if he was alive when he did.

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His mother waited until Jilen left with T’meen. “She can take him to the infirmary to make sure he’s all right. I didn’t mean to torment the poor creature. You do realise that, don’t you, Gredar?”

He bowed, not quite as deeply as was polite because of his injuries. “Yes, of course, Mother. You were trying to act fairly. I appreciate your mercy, and so does he.”

She sighed. “It’s so hard to know what to do sometimes, but when I looked at him, I had to wonder why I was destroying someone who was more devoted to our welfare than one of our own. Several of our own.”

“What has Wilna discovered?”

Her tail lashed back and forth, just the once. “That Filwui’s been laying his plans for some time, and attempting to build alliances with disaffected members of the river clan. Bold for a male, but then he was always trouble. This is a dangerous time for our family, Gredar. We don’t know if all the conspirators are dead. While I believe now that T’meen poses no threat in himself, there are those who would use him, whatever they can, against us.”

“So he should...remain hidden?” He shifted—he’d been sitting stiff and under stress for too long, and

his torn stomach muscles ached.

“Lie down, dear, if it’s easier. I don’t want you to suffer.”

She patted her lap, and he lay down, his head on her thighs as if he was a kitling again. She began to stroke his arm absentmindedly. “We can do one of two things—we can hide him, or we can make him a part of the clan, so that people who saw what he did the other evening know that power is at our disposal. I think we should integrate him, but discreetly. Can he work at all? In the pottery?”

“I haven’t tried him. I believe him when he says he wants to make his home here, so I think he’d try.”

“Then this is my command. His connection with the events Martek uncovered must not be discussed outside the adults in this family, preferably not at all. We don’t want a panic.” Gredar nodded. “If anyone asks, we simply say that his origins are unknown, but that he believes he’s the last of his kind. You tell him to say that too. As for this house, he must stop hiding in your room. He’ll attend meals when you do, be treated with the same courtesy as you, and behave towards us in the same way. I don’t believe he’ll have a problem with that, but he’s defied me once and that’s the only time I can allow that.”

“Mother, it was unusual....”

“...Circumstances, yes.” She raked her claws down his shoulder. “But discipline had never been more important. Tell him that. I must be seen to have control.”

“Yes, of course. Have you any objection to him staying in my room?”

“Who you fuck is none of my concern,” she said, giving him a sly flick of her ear. “So long it’s not your sisters or me.”

“Mother....”

“I note you don’t deny you *are* fucking him.”

“Er...not *exactly*.”

She stared down at him. “Oh, my dear. That’s really not very dignified, is it? Someone in your position, my oldest son?”

“It’s not like I tell people about it, Mother.”

“I should hope not.” She sighed. “There’s no precedent of course. He can hardly dominate you in other ways. But I suggest you remain discreet, and if he gets you pregnant, the clan isn’t going to look after the offspring.”

“Mother!”

She smiled. “Don’t be so humourless, Gredar.” She sighed again and touched his face. “This is nice, being with you. I’ve missed your company, especially since...since Halit....”

He caught her hand and squeezed. “I’ve missed you too. I miss her. I’m so glad you chose not to add to the loss today.”

“He’s a more faithful friend than Filwui, for sure. Anyway, that’s how we handle T’meen’s situation. Be discreet, make him useful...and find out as much about his people as you can. He may believe they won’t return but if they do, I want to be prepared. Do you know how he got here?”

“Not...exactly.” Gredar thought back to the mysterious shelter that had appeared and disappeared. “He claims his people can fly in a kind of special vessel, like a boat that sails in the air. After seeing his weapon, I’m more inclined to believe that.”

“Fly? Then we really need to learn more.”

“Mother, I think he might need a home of his own one day. This one is the wrong scale for him. I know he’s the size of a child, but he’s an adult, and needs independence.”

She frowned. “Perhaps—but we just lost our master carpenter and his senior apprentice, not to mention several other useful workers. A house for your pet...friend...will have to be low on the list of priorities.”

“Of course.” He didn’t wish to argue with her.

The conversation appeared to be over, and she called Karwa in to help Gredar get to his feet. “Rest, heal, Gredar. Jilen says it will be another five or six sun passes before you can return to work, so take that time. The singing for Halit will be shortly after that—I want you to sing as well as her sisters.”

“It’s an honour to be asked.” He didn’t know if he could sing of his sister without choking up, but it was what she deserved. “Mother—I think it would not be wise for T’meen to wander around on his own, outside the house, I mean. It’s not a problem now because of the snow, but later...he might prove tempting to our enemies.”

“I’d be more concerned if he had reason to use that weapon of his. Tell him he’s to carry it at all times outside the house—but he’s not to use it unless it’s life or death. No showing off to the males.”

“He’s not like that. He has no liking for male daiyne, thanks to Filwui.”

“He likes *you* well enough,” she said, twining her tail with his. “Karwa, help your uncle to his room, then tell Jilen where he is. T’meen can continue to care for you in your room until you’re fit, Gredar. Then you and he rejoin the household. I want my kits around me.”

She looked so forlorn that Gredar did what he would never normally dream of doing—he put his tail around her waist and his arms carefully around her shoulders, hugging her respectfully. “Thank you,” he whispered. “For today, and for all you’ve done for us.”

She allowed the liberty, leaning against him a little, but then asked to be set free, murmuring something about his injuries. “For a male kitling, Gredar, you’ve been one of my greatest joys.” She patted his arm. “Now go to your friend, and get well.”

He rubbed his face on hers, and let her lick his muzzle. This was not how he’d expected this to end, and he would be forever grateful for that.

Chapter 5

The pattern of Temin's life changed immediately. He was allowed to relax and stay hidden away with a recuperating Gredar the rest of that day, but the following morning, J'len turned up at the door and insisted Temin come to breakfast—without Gredar. If it hadn't been for Gredar's gentle urging, he'd never have agreed. Still, he went, J'len apparently having appointed herself his guardian in Gredar's absence. As soon as he sat down, he was gravely welcomed by J'len's mother, and then a set of cutlery and plates—child-sized—was brought for his use. That wasn't the end of the attempt to make him feel more at home. After breakfast, J'len took him to the kitchen and got him to explain in embarrassing detail what food he liked, could eat, would make him sick, and which might even kill him. Meals were likely to become a lot easier.

Later that morning Martek came to collect him personally from the house, and spent the entire walk back to his place apologising for betraying Temin, and trying to explain that he was only doing what he thought was right. As soon as he put Temin down, Temin hit him to make him shut up. Martek stared at him and at the fist which had whacked him hard on the leg, and then he just laughed. "Is okay?"

"Is okay." Temin hit him on the leg again, but more gently. "Now work."

He worked with Martek as before, while Gredar continued his recovery. In the evenings, Temin was invited—*expected*—to attend the family meal. His child-sized utensils and plates were replaced in a couple of days by a specially customised and beautifully decorated set made precisely to fit his hands and his requirements. He was no longer a guest. He belonged there.

After five days, Gredar rejoined the family, still moving slowly, still bandaged, but clearly on the mend. The family closed in protectively around him, and he was waited on hand and foot for the first few meals until he made them stop. When Temin commented to him about it in private, Gredar just sighed and said, "Halit." Then Temin got it. A sister lost, a brother safe. The family was grieving. That Temin was allowed to witness it, showed how things had changed for him.

But he was expected to work for the privilege of being accepted into the household. As soon as Gredar was back on his feet, he turned up for lunch at Martek's house, and spent an hour rehearsing another song. Temin expected him to go back to the pottery—which he did, but he hauled Temin along with him, much to Temin's confusion. At the pottery, he was set down at a bench, and one of Gredar's assistants showed him what he was to do—copy some fine details into the glaze on some infant feeding cups.

Apparently his efforts were acceptable. Gredar clapped him on the shoulder. “Temin do again. Is work now.”

And after that, he came to the pottery each afternoon and was set to similar tasks, his small hands being put to work on all kinds of jobs. It felt good to be useful again. It felt good not to be a freak too—in the pottery, he was just another worker, no one staring at him or whispering.

There were still stares and whispers, at least outside the house, and he couldn’t help but notice he was always accompanied by an adult day-neh, either someone from Gredar’s family, Gredar himself, or Martek. Gredar also encouraged him to wear the pulse pistol in the holster, not just in his pack. “Bad day-neh?” Temin asked.

“Maybe,” Gredar said. “T’meen protect. No kill Kadit, Kadit family.”

“No kill,” Temin promised. Gredar’s mother wanted him to be an obvious threat—but to who? Filwui was dead, so—as far as Temin could work out from Martek’s rather confused explanations—were his co-conspirators. Maybe it was just a precaution. Maybe she was flaunting him as her secret weapon in the faces of the unknown enemy.

That suspicion was strengthened when the clan had a singing a week after Gredar had returned to work, in memory of his sister, so Gredar explained. It wasn’t like the other ones he’d seen. This was a solemn affair, with many more day-neh participating, and at the end of each song, there was none of the foot-stomping and chirruping that the day-neh used as applause. Instead, there was a long, unified yowl that made Temin’s hackles lift and his teeth go on edge, ending when Martek gave a single decisive drum beat. And then the next song began.

At the end of what seemed like hours of discordant yowling, Gredar’s mother stood and made a speech. Gredar was summoned to the stage, and as he knelt before his mother, she placed a medallion around his neck. For the first time that evening, applause erupted, and Temin, catching sight of the medallion, realised it was identical to the one she wore. A reward for his bravery—had to be that. He gave the big guy the thumbs’ up. Gredar deserved his medal.

“T’meen?”

Temin froze as Gredar’s mother called him. “Huh?”

“T’meen, come.”

Sheft. No. She hadn’t reprieved him just to kill him in front of everyone, had she? But Gredar looked relaxed as he waved him over, and J’len’s ears were forward—they wouldn’t look that happy if he was about to be executed. On shaking legs and with a clenching gut, he walked over as casually as he could manage. Gredar’s mother patted him on the head. “T’meen is good,” she said slowly, and then carefully repeated it in

Standard. He was too shocked to reply, just stood there like an idiot with his mouth hanging open, as she placed a medallion around his neck. “Thank you,” she said, nodding. “T’meen protect Kadit.”

“Yes. Thank you. Uh. Thank you.” *Yeah, make her think you’re a complete moron.* But she didn’t seem to care, just patted his head again, and then Gredar put his arm around Temin’s shoulders to lead him away to his seat.

Temin stared at the medallion—it was the same as Gredar’s, made of a lightweight silver metal with some kind of stylised tree symbol beautifully carved on it. “What?” he whispered.

“Is thank you. T’meen is regaijen now.”

‘Regaijen’? That was the name of their clan—‘people of the forest plain’. “Belong to clan now?”

“Ye-ess,” Gredar said, his tail flicking happily.

“Wow.” First medal since primary school and a bunch of cats had given it to him. He didn’t know whether to be proud or freaked out.

Kadit had taken a huge risk, publicly acknowledging him like that, and he was pretty sure it wasn’t just gratitude that had motivated her. He was even more sure when he realised that Martek was pumping him for more than cultural information about humans. Gredar’s mother might have decided that he, Temin, was no longer a threat—but the same didn’t hold for the rest of mankind. He supposed he couldn’t really blame her, but he had a better idea.

“What T’meen do?” Martek asked as he, Temin and Gredar sat down for lunch and Temin hauled out the handheld.

“Wait.” He spoke into the mike, and hit play. Martek and Gredar leaned back in alarm as his voice came out of the little speakers. “Now Gredar say.”

“Say what?”

“Say...’Gredar loves Temin’.”

Gredar clearly thought he was insane, but gravely repeated the words. He yowled as they were played back to him. “What is this thing?”

“Is human thing. T’meen...show human all day-neh stuff. What day-neh know, how day-neh speak. Human know, day-neh is smart, can talk like human, then no kill day-neh. Understand?”

The two day-neh looked at each other, then Martek got up. “Huh?” Where was he going?

“Wait,” Martek said, and walked out of the room.

“Temin do bad thing?” he asked Gredar, who only shook his head.

“Wait.”

Martek was back in seconds, holding a book. He pushed the bowls of food away on the table and set the book down. “Martek, what?”

“T’meen, huu-man know day-neh is smart. Know day-neh can talk. Look.”

It was the book he’d first found, but he’d not been able to read the text, and so had missed vital clues in the pictures. Martek explained, how a day-neh clan had brought gifts and books to the new arrivals, and been treated as visitors—then slaughtered as they shared a meal with their hosts, their books and gifts strewn around them. “Huu-man know this thing,” Martek said, tracing a finger over an image of a bloodstained book lying over a corpse. “Huu-man kill.”

Temin got up and walked out to the foyer—he couldn’t open the door, but he didn’t want to go outside, just...away. Away from proof that his race was a menace, a violent, vandalising menace. This was what humans were supposed to have left behind when they’d fled a dying Terra. A brave new world—dozens of brave new worlds. In five hundred years, there hadn’t been a single war between the colonies. Not a single civil war. Every year, every planet held a Peace Day, and the time since the last bloody conflict was proudly announced, the years of peace proclaimed.

No human had recorded the first contact with a sentient alien race, nor the first attempt at the genocide of an alien sentient race. The years of peace were a complete lie.

“T’meen?”

He wiped his face and turned. Gredar was standing in the door way, ears half flat in concern. T’meen bowed. “Is ashamed. Is sorry. Human bad. Have no words.”

“Is not T’meen. T’meen say how day-neh protect? Protect day-neh? Say about huu-man thing?”

T’meen looked up at his handsome, brave friend. Imagined him dead in the snow, his elsert fur on fire, his brains blown out of his clever, creative head. “Yes. Temin say. Gredar, Martek, Jaijair learn. All learn.”

If that made him a traitor to his kind, then so be it. The human race wasn’t going to kill another world like they’d destroyed their first home.

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“T’meen! Where’s Uncle Gredar?”

Temin rubbed his forehead and laid the paintbrush down. “Uh, he go to see the wood collectors. Why, Karwa?”



The young day-neh sat down on the floor next to Temin's low bench. "Uncle Gredar said he will take me hunting. You come?"

"Uh...when?" Had Gredar mentioned this before? "Soon?"

Karwa nodded, his tail flicking happily. "Yes, soon. You come with us?"

"Hunting? I don't know how to hunt."

"It's fun! Gredar is great hunter. He teach me to hunt kizaz."

"Kizaz?" Those great winged snake things? Temin shuddered. "No thanks."

Karwa grinned and nudged him. "Yes, thanks."

"Ha ha. Funny day-neh." Karwa chirruped, pleased at getting a rise out of him. Temin thought the boy had to be related to Martek—they had the same lousy taste in jokes. "Gredar back soon."

"Okay. I come back." And then he loped off.

Temin shook his head. Karwa had picked up the most Standard of all of them, and when Temin was talking to him, he couldn't remember afterwards which language they'd been using half the time. 'Okay' was the one word that most of the clan had picked up from him.

He finished the bowl he was working on and put it on the shelf to dry. It would be fired overnight, and then put with the rest of the goods Gredar was planning to take with them to the gathering in a moonsweep. Now that was a point. When was Gredar supposed to be taking that kit hunting if he was travelling and working hard before that? Slacker.

He stood and stretched. "T'meen! Want some water?" Jelal called from the sink.

"Yes, please." He walked over and accepted a cup from his friend, as well as a leather to wipe his hands and face. "Karwa say Gredar is going hunt...hunting?"

Jelal nodded. "Maybe. Promise Karwa long time ago. You go with him?"

"Maybe. Er....is dangerous, hunting kizaz?"

"Oh yes. *Very* dangerous." Then Jelal fell about at his reaction. Temin poked him in the knee but it only made him giggle more.

"Shefting comedian," he said, making sure to enunciate clearly. Most of them knew what 'shefting' meant too, now. He handed Jelal the cup and leather to put back on the sink. "I finish now."

"Yes. Me too. You go to Kadit's house now? Or wait for Gredar?"

"Go now. Gredar can find me."

"Okay. See you tomorrow." Jelal patted him on the head and then Temin walked out into the cool spring evening.

It was easier now the snows had gone, though it was still damn cold at night. The day had been beautiful though—the weather this last week had turned sunny and warm. It had made him homesick again—it was so like spring on Venshu, up in the Hortan mountains where he and Jeng had gone on holiday a few times. He looked up into the blue sky, and at the sun, and the faint pale bodies of the triple moons. He wondered where Jeng was now, and if he was happy. He wondered how his sisters were going in their jobs, and what his mother was doing. He wished they could know he was safe and well and...doing okay, actually. Sometimes, a lot more than okay.

He sighed and walked on up the street. A couple of day-neh waved and said hello. None of them came up to try and rub their heads on him today, but it wasn't anything unusual if they did. His lack of scent glands had puzzled them for a long time, but they all seemed used to his strangeness now.

“T'meen! Wait!”

He turned, and smiled as Gredar came loping up the street. “You gone long time.”

“Sorry. I was talking.”

“Hah. You talk always too long.”

Gredar tapped him with his tail for his cheekiness, then put his hand on Temin's shoulder. “Finished?”

“Yes. Tired. Need bath.”

“Yes. Me too. Big bath or little bath?”

“Little. Big bath too much.” Gredar had taken him to the family bath rooms a couple of times, but the steam was a lot more than he could handle, and though he loved the luxury of the huge pool, he found sharing it with a dozen or more gigantic day-neh just a little intimidating. And tiring because they all wanted him to talk about human culture and the colonists, which was a depressing topic at the best of times, and worse when he was stark naked.

“Okay.”

“Karwa want you. Say you go to hunt with him? Is true?”

He glanced up at Gredar, who flicked an ear. “Maybe,” he said, sounding cautious. “You be angry?”

“Me? No. You want me to come? Karwa wants me to come.”

“Oh. You? Will be fun. Is not long hunt. Two, three sun passes. We take keriv. You be safe.”

Temin listened carefully and assessed Gredar's tail and ears. The big guy was kinda hoping he'd go, but he was trying not to push. “Sure. Why not? Yes, I'll go,” he clarified, seeing Gredar's confusion. “When?”

“Six sun passes? Okay?”

“Okay. You protect me, yes?”

Gredar squeezed his shoulder and wrapped his tail around Temin’s waist. “Yes, of course. Work hard, then hunt, yes?”

“Okay.”

The talk at supper was of all the successful impregnations that had followed the visit of a group of males two months before. Wilna was one of the females now carrying eggs, to general delight since she’d been unlucky for some time in her efforts to get pregnant again. She would lay within the next month, and then the eggs would be brooded for another five, the entire family helping out. Her mother was particularly pleased because the kits would be born before winter, which reduced the risk. Everyone had to pat Wilna’s tummy to congratulate her, and Temin didn’t escape, to her amusement.

“You like kits, T’meen? Want to help?”

“Me? No way—day-neh kits too big for me!”

She laughed but it was true. At a month old, they weighed as much as a five-year-old human, and J’len’s two youngest were nearly as tall as he was, or would be when they started to walk upright. He could just about lift one, and had learned the hard way that infant day-neh had fully working claws—but not fully working reflexes to control them. He had acquired some new scars in the last five months. “Is happy to see your kits. Is good,” he said, stroking the slight roundness.

“What human kits like, hmmm?”

So that meant he had to spend the meal explaining about human birth and reproduction, not a topic on which he was an expert, but the day-neh found it fascinating. The live birth thing totally freaked them out, and when he explained the babies basically lived in a sack of water for nine months, he suspected a few of them flat out disbelieved him. “It’s true,” he insisted.

“Kitling die,” J’len said. “Deerown?” She said the Standard word again—she had something of an obsession with human medical terms.

“No, they don’t drown. Kitling breathe water inside.”

“Is joke?”

“No, is true. Honest. Water goes and kitling is born.”

“The water go where?”

“Um.” He waved his hands at his crotch. “Just...out. From taeng.”

“Yuck,” Halit’s son, Edir, said, as several of the listeners winced. Gredar actually crossed his legs.

“Yeah. It’s pretty yuck. But no fur—clean up fast, see?”

And that meant having to explain how the babies didn’t die of the cold, when the mothers had no fur either. The conversation moved on to Temin’s attempts to make clothing for himself out of the available materials, and before he knew it, he’d spent four hours talking to them and it was getting close to midnight. Too late for a bath, he thought regretfully. Gredar would wipe him down, of course. Hmmm...so not all bad, then. Wipe downs with tongue and leather were fun for all concerned.

It occurred to him as he was drowsing, lying on top of Gredar after sex, that he could have recorded the conversation that evening for Martek, but Martek was hogging the handheld and Temin didn’t have another. It would take years for Martek and Jaijair and their new assistant, Walka, to go through even a tiny amount of the data on the device, even at the speed Martek was learning Standard. Maybe human reproduction was a pretty low priority compared with all the technological information they could get from the records.

Gredar licked his face and cuddled him tighter. “Sleep,” he rumbled. “You’re tired. I’m tired.”

“Too much thinking.”

“You always thinking too much.” He cupped Temin’s buttocks and rubbed one of his long fingers between them. Temin sighed and spread his legs—he didn’t really want to go another round, but he just liked the way Gredar touched him, the feel of half-furred hands on him. “You happy?”

“Yes.” Right there and then it was true. He was safe and warm and with someone he cared for a lot. It wasn’t the same as being home and being with Jeng, but it could have been so much worse. “You?”

“Yes. Very happy. Is good that you come here. Good for me, good for family.” He slowly licked Temin’s face again, teasing the sensitive place below his ear. “Is happy.”

“Good. Sleep now, big guy.”

The languid licking continued as Gredar began to purr, and Temin burrowed contently into his thick-furred chest. *Yes. Things could be much, much worse.*

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Surprised as he had been by T’meen’s agreeing to come on the hunt, Gredar was also delighted. He’d felt for some time that his friend hadn’t seen the best of Ptane, cooped up in the house or the workshop, and he wanted to show him more. Karwa’s excitement about getting out on the trail of big game was infectious, even to a daiyne of Gredar’s age, and he found it a little hard to concentrate on his work those final days

before they left. Everyone was more cheerful with the warm weather, and Wilna's pregnancy was putting smiles on faces again after the long mourning over Halit. It had been a trying snow season, but the rebellion hadn't resurfaced, T'meen's existence had ceased to be remarkable, and life was settling into its usual peaceful rhythm.

Martek was still worked up about the wondrous things T'meen's strange machine was revealing to him, but Gredar felt this was a project for the long term. If the huu-man had not come in numbers in three hundred cycles, it was unlikely they would come at all. If they had not bothered to rescue T'meen, or were unable to, they were probably not a threat to be too concerned about. He regretted they had not come for T'meen's sake, but for his own, he didn't regret they'd abandoned their friend. T'meen was appreciated and wanted here, and would have a home so long as Gredar's family held control of this clan. Wilna's pregnancy would secure that control still further, and with Filwui and his conspirators dead, the only serious threat his mother's authority had ever faced was gone.

So now it was time for a little relaxation, and loosing of the reins of responsibility. Karwa, the male most likely to step into Gredar's place when he was too old and infirm to be of any use, was still a little young to be responsible, and was still getting the need to hunt out of his system before he settled down. Gredar had been the same, though he'd found himself the senior male when he was not a lot older than Karwa was now. He was proud of the work he'd done for the clan in the pottery—but when the sun was shining, and the air was clean, the wind from the mountains crisp and scented with the pollen of food trees that attracted the finest prey, it was hard to be inside and tend to kiln and clay. For the next couple of days, he wouldn't have to.

T'meen was a little apprehensive as Gredar took him around the back of the house where Karwa was holding the kerivs ready, and Gredar couldn't blame him. The birds dwarfed T'meen, and they could be testy creatures. Gredar had arranged for the quietest ones the village beast master could provide, and his mount stayed calm as he hoisted T'meen up into the double saddle. "You be safe," he assured his friend.

Temin smiled. "Yes, I know. Let's go."

The hunting grounds and lake were well within walking range if they wanted to take all day to get there, but since Gredar couldn't afford to take much time away from the pottery so close to a gathering, and it was possible they might have a load of kizaz meat and skin to bring back, he thought it wiser to take mounts. Besides, Karwa loved the kerivs, and Gredar had to admit there was something thrilling about racing at speed across the plains. T'meen clutched the pommel and held on tightly as they tore across the land, but he smiled the whole time. When Gredar pulled them up at the lakeside where they would make camp, and lifted

T'meen down, his friend patted the keriv's stirrup. "Was *fun*. Do again?"

"Yes. Soon." Karwa grinned at them across his mount's back. "First, we hunt."

There was no safe way to take T'meen on the hunt itself—to carry him would be a serious hindrance, and the risk of injury to his friend was great—so reluctantly Gredar had to leave him at the campsite with a fire pit ready to light. T'meen had his weapons, and assured Gredar he'd be fine, but it was still a relief to return mid-afternoon and find him safe. It had been a fine hunt—no kizaz, but they had run down and killed a good-sized jujor buck. Karwa, bloody-muzzled and coated with dust, stalked back into camp with the buck around his shoulders and tossed it at T'meen's feet.

T'meen didn't move, just lifted an eyebrow. "Is very small," he said, eyes wide and innocent. "Is snack?"

"Ha ha, funny huu-man." Karwa sniffed. "I need a wash, Uncle. Do you think T'meen would like a swim?"

"Ask him, nephew. I'll deal with the jujor." It needed to be butchered—some for their supper, the rest to act as bait tomorrow when they would hunt kizaz in earnest.

T'meen agreed to go swimming, though only after a lot of teasing from Karwa about how cold the water would be, the little wretch. Gredar kept only half an eye on their splashing and swimming out on the lake as he began to cut the jujor up, hanging half the carcass up in a nearby tree, putting some of it on a spit over the fire which he then set gong, and burying the entrails in case it attracted pests which would spoil their sleep.

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Karwa tossed Temin a drying leather as he walked out of the icy water—sheft it was cold, but so clean and good after months and months stuck in the village, mostly indoors. The young day-neh walked over as Temin was wiping himself down. "You cold? Come to fire. Have fur for you."

He let Karwa coddle him a little and fuss around. Strange that if it hadn't been for Karwa and his love of hunting, Temin would never have met the day-neh at all, and would probably now be dead of starvation and cold. Gredar tended the fire and poking the spitted meat, which smelled delicious. Temin had never seen a freshly dead animal intended for his supper before he'd crashed on this planet, and if he'd been asked if he could kill and eat something he'd seen alive, he'd have said 'no way'. Now he was perfectly happy at the prospect of eating roast meat while half the previous owner was hanging gutted up in a tree over their heads.

As they digested their meal, Temin snuggled up against Gredar's smoke-scented fur as Karwa wrapped his tail around his hands to warm them. "I love you guys, you know that?"

Gredar made a little chirrup of enquiry. "Okay? Is happy?"

"I'm very happy, big guy. You two are the best."

Karwa chuckled. "Best day-neh, Uncle. You tell Grandmother, yes?"

"Maybe. T'meen is best huu-man on Ptane, yes?"

Karwa pretended to think. "Hmmm—maybe." Temin poked him in the leg and made out he was sulking. Karwa thought that was funny too.

Perhaps out of sensitivity to Karwa's presence, Gredar didn't make any moves on him that night, but it was okay. Temin liked to cuddle too, and no mattress in the galaxy was as soft or warm as two day-neh bodies. Karwa wrapped himself around his uncle like the kid Temin still thought of him as, and Gredar put his arms around the both of them. Temin slept like the dead all the way through to morning, and thought this camping thing wasn't too bad, all in all.

His friends were going to make another attempt to catch a kizaz the next day. Day-neh were the only real predators of these creatures which sounded more like the dragons of old Terran myth than anything else. Gredar explained that unless they were hunted periodically, they became a serious nuisance, not to mention a danger to the resident clans. Karwa had wanted to kill one since he was old enough to talk. And apparently, back in the day, Gredar—sedate, responsible, kind Gredar—was considered one of their best and most ruthless hunters. It was kind of scary, actually, to watch him preparing to go out that morning, the haunch of bloodied meat over one shoulder, and see him slip back into that role—like it was to see him in his very rare losses of control and temper. The veneer of civilisation fell away, leaving someone who really was alien to Temin's eyes, not just an overgrown cat.

But then he turned and smiled, and batted Temin with his big fluffy tail, and he was just Gredar, Temin's lover and friend again. "Is gone all day. You be careful."

Temin patted the pulse pistol in his holster. "I'll be fine. Good hunting."

And then they'd sped off, eating up the distance with those amazingly long legs. They would probably travel forty or fifty clicks before lunch, and not even be out of breath.

It was a much warmer day—cloud cover promising rain in the next day or so, Gredar had told him that morning—and the flight suit was just too damn hot. He really would have to get on with the clothes making. Jaijair had helped him make a passable shirt out of soft suede-like leather, and Martek was convinced that modifying some of their paper recipes would yield wearable cloth, but it was going to be

tough finding material he could use for underwear. Leather without something between it and his personal and private places sounded like a recipe for a fungal attack from hell. The day-neh farmed a cattle-like animal which produced a coarse wool, and he'd taught himself the rudiments of knitting from the handheld, but the wool was prickly and a bit on the stinky side. He could make a coat out of it, but the search for underwear went on.

So he always took a lot of care washing what he had, as he did now in the crystal clear waters of this enormous lake. His chore done and the wet clothes laid out on the sun-warmed stones to dry, he stopped for a minute just to take in the beauty around him. He'd been a city kid, and a spacer afterwards, so the great outdoors always meant vacation to him. And here he was again, having a holiday. No Jeng, which was never going to stop hurting, but it was still special here, the white-topped mountains in the distance, dense forests below them, and this blue, endless lake, fed by a river on the other side which ran down from the mountains, carrying snowmelt. The water was pure, but so very cold.

But the day was warm enough that the cold wasn't too unbearable, and he'd spent almost a year doing very little but sitting on his arse and being looked after. Now he could get fit again. He did his exercises, and, still naked except for his boots, ran along the shore until he was sweating and heaving in breaths. Then he stripped off his boots and flung himself into the lake, gasping as the chill tore away the little air left in his lungs. He began to strike out, maintaining a steady, even stroke, enough to keep himself warm and moving, without exhausting himself. Enough to distract himself from the slightly creepy sensation of being entirely alone on the planet, an illusion all too easy to believe in this empty, perfect world.

He swam for about half an hour before recognising that he was getting close to the dangerous point of hypothermic fatigue. He made his way back to shore, and cursed that he only had these shefting leathers to wipe himself down with—one of his mother's big fluffy towels, warm from the drier, was what he really wanted. Sitting on hot rocks under the sun to warm up wasn't the same...though it wasn't actually too bad. He lay on the pebbles, which weren't as uncomfortable as he thought they might be, eyes closed, enjoying the sun's rays, feeling them doing him good, warming his bones. If only life was always this easy.

He must have dozed off, because the sun was a lot higher in the sky when he looked up again. It had to be close to mid-day. He wondered how the hunt was going, and if they would bring the whole carcass back....

There was a scrabble and crunch, pebbles clinking as if being pushed away by large feet. He tensed—had the kerivs got loose? Karwa had tied them up under the trees so they could forage without needing to be tended to. Temin sat up to look—and froze. About a hundred metres from him was a dark brown bird of prey



the size of a speeder. The bird, using a beak about the length of Temin's shefting *arm*, was absorbed in digging under the pebbles—for what, Temin didn't know. It started to really get into whatever it was doing, tearing up the ground, tossing dirt and stones around, making a shefting mess.

His clothes. His knife and pistol. All between him and the creature, who hadn't noticed him yet but if he did, was sure to find Temin a lot more exciting than whatever crap he was trying to excavate.

He crept, centimetre by agonising centimetre, across the shore, freezing every time one of the pebbles clinked. The bird seemed to be absorbed in its hunt—it had found whatever it was looking for and was tearing at it, tossing back its massive head to gulp down long strings of...guts. Animal guts. The shefting *jujor*! *Gredar, I am going to get you for this.*

He was still a good ten metres from the pile of his clothes and the precious weapon belt when the bird lifted its head, turned and fixed him with a golden eye the size of a dinner plate. It let forth a scream like the crack of doom, and spread its wings.

*Sheft!* He dove for his clothes just as the bird dove for him—he managed to grab his pistol, still in its holster, and snap off a shot as a pair of huge yellow feet came within microns of his hand. The bird screamed again and wheeled off—with Temin's clothes in its talons. And the shefting weapon belt with the pistol still attached. “No! Bring those back you son of a...! Hey!”

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Karwa's tail shivered with excitement as he bounced along, the heavy burden of dead kizaz around his shoulders not impeding him at all. “Aunty Jilen will be *really* happy, won't she?”

“Yes, she will,” Gredar agreed for the fifth time, smiling to himself. “Mind you, she'll probably get you to render the glands down, and that's a smelly job.”

“Don't care! I got one!”

Gredar refrained from reminding him it had been a joint effort, because the lad had done very well. It was only a small kill, the kizaz not fully grown, but it was just coming into sexual maturity and that made its venom extremely valuable for medicinal purposes. Jilen had hoped they might collect a specimen with full glands, but had also sternly told both of them they weren't to put themselves in harm's way just to get one. But now Jilen and Karwa were both satisfied, and they would dine on fat kizaz back meat tonight—a delicacy, and supposedly good for joints and stiff backs. Gredar, getting to an age where this was a problem, was happy to try the treatment.

They both smelled though—the kizaz had vented urine and its own nasty excretions all over them as Karwa had wrestled it down for the kill and carrying the parts of the creature around their shoulders was only adding to the stink. A swim would be perfect.

He should have smelled it before he saw it, but the kizaz was drowning everything out. The first warning he got that things back at the camp had become a little more exciting than he'd planned was when he spotted the huge body of a boril uncomfortably close to their tent. He threw the kizaz corpse off his shoulders and started to run. "T'meen! T'meen!" No! What if the boril had...?

He skidded to a halt on the pebbles as T'meen—wonderfully and apparently whole—appeared from behind a tree. "Sorry, I take a piss...yuck! You smell!" He waved under his nose elaborately, then held it.

"Never mind that, what happened! Why is there a dead boril in our camp?"

"Huh? Slow down, big guy. I don't understand."

Gredar drew a breath and clenched his fists. "Why. Is. There. A. Dead. Boril. Here?"

"Boril? Bird? Oh, I kill it."

"You...." Gredar examined his friend—his cloze were ripped, and he had some nasty grazes. What he was hiding under the cloze, Gredar couldn't tell. But he didn't *seem* badly hurt, and if anything, was unusually cheerful.

"Uncle Gredar! Why is there a—?" Karwa ran up beside him. "T'meen! There's a dead—"

"Boril. Yes. I know. Poo." T'meen held his nose again. "Catch a kizaz?"

Gredar threw up his hands. "Karwa, let's get the kizaz and clean up. *You*," he said, pointing at his huu-man friend, "will tell about this thing."

T'meen grinned. "Yes. Sure."

He wandered down to the lakeshore to watch as Gredar and Karwa, having hauled the dead kizaz back to camp, hastily washed themselves down. Gredar kept looking over at the boril, unable to believe his eyes. He'd only ever seen the huge birds twice, never up close—and never dead. He knew no one who even attempted to hunt them, but rumours and stories about them preying on daiyne were not uncommon. They were big enough to carry off an adult, so how had T'meen dealt with it? With that strange weapon of his?

He got his answer once he'd left the water and shaken himself off. T'meen took him over to see the boril's body—and there, buried deep in its left eye, was the tip of a knife handle. T'meen's knife. "You did this?"

T'meen nodded. "It come here to look for food." He folded his arms and gave Gredar a dirty look. "Find juvor...." He waved at his own stomach.

“Guts? But I buried them...” Deep enough for everything but a hungry boril. *Paznitl*. “Is sorry. You hurt?”

“No. Not much. *Cloze* hurt. Paznit thing take my cloze! Fly away!” He mimed something taking his stuff and running off with them. “I chase. Boril drop knife, is good thing. I climb tree. Boril come, I throw knife, run away. Boril chase, fall down. Dead. Here.”

He grinned, but under the smirk was...his scent. Fear and sweat mixed together. The cockiness was partly because he’d been terrified out of his mind, and was now relieved to have survived. It was incredible that he had. “Why did you not use your peestoll? Peestoll better than knife.”

“Yes. Boril take it with my cloze. So I have to chase, get cloze, peestoll back. Take long time to find things. Paznit bird.”

Gredar shook his head. “You were lucky. Also very brave.”

“And tall and clever and good lover.”

Gredar laughed and pulled T’meen in for a hug. “Yes. All these things. Come. I’ll build the fire. Karwa can hear story.”

But T’meen was more interested in hearing Karwa’s excited retelling of the mighty kizaz hunt than in repeating the somewhat more fascinating tale he had told Gredar. As Karwa talked, Gredar made T’meen strip down to the waist so he could assure himself that his friend was really not harmed. He didn’t get quite as much reassurance as he hoped, because T’meen was badly scratched up, and when Gredar insisted he shuck the rest of his covering, he discovered a deep graze on one thigh. T’meen didn’t say anything, but his non-reaction made it clear that he didn’t want Gredar to fuss, at least not in front of Karwa. So while Karwa described in excruciating detail how they had tracked down and beaten the kizaz, then persuaded T’meen to tell a little about the hunt for his cloze and the boril who’d stolen then, Gredar silently cleaned and rebandaged the injuries. None of them were dangerous unless they became infected, but they had to be painful, even if T’meen pretended he was more annoyed about the damage to his as yet irreplaceable cloze, on which subject he talked for much of the evening.

He was still grumbling about how impossible it would be to mend the rips the boril’s talons and beak had caused as he climbed on top of Gredar in the tent. Karwa was already asleep, his youthful body not quite up to the strain of a serious big game hunt.

“Someone make me a small needle, will be good.”

Gredar licked his face and kept licking until his friend finally shut up. Then he dragged him up close so he could look into T’meen’s eyes, even though his huu-man couldn’t see in the dark. “Is easy to replace

cloze. Not easy to replace T'meen. Is very, very haapy you are not dead. Do not do again. Understand?"

T'meen rubbed his head against Gredar's jaw. "Understand. One time is enough. Paznit bird."

Gredar grinned as T'meen got comfortable, still muttering to himself. *You are very, very tall, my friend. Very tall.*

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Apparently bagging a boril was up there with dragon slaying and giant killing, and the event would become the stuff of myths and legend. Or so Gredar assured him. Temin had just wanted his shefting clothes back, although afterwards he thought he probably been insane to go after a gigantic eagle in just his underwear and armed with Jeng's knife. He hadn't wanted to kill the enormous bird for all that, and felt bad when Gredar explained how rare the creatures were. At the time, he'd felt it was him or the boril, and he'd only been trying to get the bird to leave him alone when he threw the knife. No one could have been more surprised when it hit the beast dead centre in its eye, like one of the street performers in Nixal throwing at balloons on targets. Pure luck—luck that had saved his life.

It wasn't an experience he wanted to repeat, but he had to admit that Karwa's hero worship was a little flattering. The lad was determined to bring as much of the boril back as they could—he'd have dragged the entire bird back if Gredar would have let him. But they had the kizaz head and skin to manage, and Gredar pointed out the boril would be a very sad and ragged thing once it was dragged two hundred clicks behind a keriv, so reluctantly Karwa agreed to settle for the head, the feet, tail feathers, and the spurs that grew from the elbow of the wings. It was the spurs which had clipped Temin and sent him tumbling out of the tree and onto a lower branch—which had shefting *hurt* at the time, and he was lucky to have survived.

So they rode back into the village bearing some extremely gory trophies. As the passers-by realised what Gredar was carrying on the back of his keriv, they stopped and stared. Word quickly got around and soon they had a small crowd of admiring day-neh, all wanting to see the boril's head and touch the feathers. Karwa seemed to be a tiny bit miffed that his amazing kill was getting so little attention, but in reality, the kizaz venom was actually useful while the boril was just a curiosity. The bird head would rot long before the venom stopped saving lives.

Gredar had to take charge eventually. The crowd was making the kerivs nervous, jumping around and threatening to bolt. He spotted one of his nephews and called out to him to run and fetch Martek, and then firmly insisted on them all being allowed to progress to his mother's house.

It was pretty cool though, Temin thought as Gredar pushed the keriv through the onlookers. Karwa let slip that it was Temin who'd killed the boril, and that made him someone everyone wanted to talk to, to touch, as if the glory of the deed could rub off on them. Suddenly someone set up a yowling, and other day-neh joined in, throwing their heads back. Startled by the noise, it took Temin a few seconds to recognise it as singing.

"What is this?" he asked, twisting around and staring up at Gredar.

"Is song of hunting. Of great day-neh hunter, Rogor. But they sing 'T'meen', not 'Rogor'." Then he chuckled.

"Is funny, this song?"

"No, is not funny. Is funny, Rogar is female." Gredar poked him in the side. "But Rogor is great hunter. Long time ago."

"Huh." Temin chose to accept it as a compliment, but it was still shefting embarrassing.

With the singing and the looking and the fact more and more day-neh were coming out onto the street, they just weren't moving. Any minute now, Gredar's mother was going to come out and demand what the sheft was going on and then they'd all be in trouble.

"T'meen! Gredar!"

Temin looked across the sea of faces and saw Martek waving to them. He waved back. "Come! Look what we have!"

"T'meen, you must come! Thing...talking thing! Speaking for you!"

'Talking thing'? "What...oh, sheft."

Gredar put his hand on Temin's shoulder. "What?"

"I have to get down. I need to...help me, Gredar! Please, I need to speak to Martek!"

Though obviously puzzled, Gredar began to push and shout at people to move. "Let him down! T'meen must get down! Please, let him through!"

Someone took the reins of their keriv, and Gredar jumped down, holding his arms out for Temin. "Come."

He swung Temin off the keriv, and up onto his shoulders. "Karwa, take them to the house!"

Temin felt a little bad for leaving Karwa in the lurch like that, but mostly he was fluttering with excitement. 'Talking thing'—did Martek mean the radio?

Martek grabbed his leg and stared up at him. "Hurry. Thing talking for many strikes. Is good for T'meen?"

“I don’t know. Come on, Gredar.”

It was much quieter in Martek’s house, and Temin was conscious that he smelled of smoke and blood and the stinky kizaz. But Martek didn’t seem to care. He rushed off and returned with the pack Temin had left in his safe-keeping—and from it, Temin could hear Jeng’s voice coming over the radio’s speakers. He snatched up the pack and yanked the radio out of the pack. He pressed the voice transmitter. “Jeng! Jeng, it’s me!”

But the message was recorded. He set the radio down and the three of them listened. He’d come in near the end of the message, and it quickly looped to the beginning. “Temin, this is Jeng. We’ve received your message—we know you’re alive. A relay satellite has been set in orbit above your position, and is being monitored. If you get this message, send a signal. A terrestrial craft will land and collect you soon after that. The satellite will be monitored for at least a year—longer if I can swing it. Please...send the signal. I miss you.” His lover cleared his throat. “Anyway...Pilot Misan Jeng, signing off.” He gave the date and time. The message had been set up three days ago. Fluctuations in solar ionisation and cloud cover probably meant the signal had been having trouble penetrating.

Temin turned the speaker off, staring at the radio. “I can go home,” he whispered. “I can go home.”

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Gredar looked at Martek—his friend was radiating worry more than excitement or curiosity. He tapped T’meen on the cheek with his tail. “What this say?”

T’meen turned to him, eyes bright and wide. “I can go home. Is Cheng, my...my grooming mate. Is good friend. Is come for me.”

“You...leave? Now?” It was a struggle to keep his voice calm, to appear unaffected. “Is good, yes?”

T’meen caught his tail in his hands and rubbed his face against it. “Is good...is bad also. Huu-man come to this place. No good. I...miss this place. No good. Miss daiyne. Miss you.” He bit his upper lip as he did sometimes when he was trying to think. “Maybe...I not go? If huu-man come, kill daiyne, is sad. Is very bad thing. I....” He rubbed his face against Gredar’s tail again.

Gredar put his arm around T’meen’s shoulders and hugged him. He didn’t want him to go, of course not. But he knew how very sad his friend had been at losing his friends and family. “When will Cheng come?”

T’meen rubbed his eyes. “Uh...soon. When I...say, send message. He wait long time for me. Make

Cheng wait, is bad thing. But...go away, leave Gredar...is bad thing also.” He pressed his face against Gredar’s side, and began to shake a little.

Martek coughed. “I’ll make some pkite, bring some water.” He sniffed. “Is that kizaz I smell?”

“Yes. And he killed a boril.”

“He *what?*”

Despite everything, it was amusing to see Martek’s shock. “Tell you later. I think this is more important.”

“Yes...Gredar, if he brings his kind here...we have no defences.”

“He knows that. We need to talk, that’s all.”

He shoosed Martek away, and then he changed position so T’meen was sitting between his legs. He began to stroke his back, and made soothing noises, but his heart wasn’t calm at all. This was the last thing he expected—he was sure it was the last thing T’meen expected. He had an urge to smash the evil machine sitting in front of him, remove the choice, the message it contained that meant his friend was going to leave, but that wasn’t fair. T’meen had a right to a life with his own people.

T’meen straightened up after a few moments, his eyes red and his breathing strained. “Sorry. Just...is surprised. Worried.”

“Yes. You must go soon? This strike? This sun pass? When?”

“Uh...I can say. I choose. Not this strike, not this sun pass. I miss Cheng very much.”

“You luff him?”

T’meen nodded. “Yes. Is to me like...you and Jilen? Maybe? Like brother, only...fucking too.”

Gredar was a little surprised at that news. “Not brother...like brother? Good friend?”

“More than good friend.” He made an exasperated noise. “Daiyne not have word. Is forever thing.”

“Ah.” That concept Gredar had so much trouble with. “Then you must go. You get sick, if you miss him too much.”

“Get sick miss you too much!” His hair, come loose from the leather tie, swung wildly around his face as he shook his head. “I don’t want to go! I want to go home! Is....” He touched his fists together then yanked them apart. “Pull two ways. Understand?”

“Yes. Is time to think, T’meen. No hurry this sun pass.”

“Why now, Gredar? Why it come now, not long time ago? Is happy now.” He tried to smile. “Is great hunter now.”

Gredar could only rub his face on T’meen’s head. *Yes, you are. Great hunter, good friend.* But he had

no answers to offer. None at all.

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A month ago, even a week ago, if someone had asked him what he would do in this situation, Temin would have had no hesitation. Regret, certainly, but he would have known what he wanted to do. What he needed to do. Somehow, the hunting trip, with its friendship, its freedom, its trust, had crystallised all that Temin loved about living with the day-neh. For the first time he had really felt at home, and at one with them. And now he would have to give all that up because the only way to keep the day-neh safe was to keep them a secret.

He had to explain it all to Martek, of course. Martek understood, and while he was sad at the idea of Temin leaving, he was almost as upset about losing their pet translator of the information in the handheld. “So many, many things to learn,” he said with a heavy sigh. “You take this thing with you?”

Temin shook his head. “No, I can leave it. I can say I lost it. We can...uh...work some more before I go.”

Gredar rubbed his arm. “You work all the time with him. Pottery does not need you. This is more important thing.”

“If I go, it is.”

Gredar tilted his head and regarded Temin with those huge green eyes. “I think you will go. Is best thing.”

“How do you know when I don’t know?” Temin cried. “Gredar, I’m happy here! I...you and me...”

“Is not home, truly. Is hard for you, for huu-man. I know this thing. Is hard to be one, day-neh are many.”

“Gredar...you’re my friend. Good friend.” He struck his chest with his fist. “Hurts, here.”

Gredar touched his own head. “Hurts here too. Jeng hurt, you think?”

“Yes,” Temin whispered. “Hurts here for Jeng too. Is same hurt...I don’t know what to do!”

He heard footsteps and turned. Karwa, looking out of breath. “Sorry, Martek. Grandmother says Uncle Gredar must come.”

“Yes.” Gredar stood. “We all go. T’meen, you must tell Mother about this thing. Martek...?”

But Martek was already clearing up. “So much happening,” he muttered to himself, or that was what Temin thought he was saying. “No one talked about the boril,” he added, and Temin swore he pouted.



Gredar's mother was in her front sitting room, J'len's two young crawling around on the floor. They headed for Temin as soon as they spotted him, but though he did his best to pet and scratch behind their ears, he was too upset to pay much attention. Gredar rescued him, taking Shiri onto his own lap and handing Weikil to Karwa. His mother didn't seem too annoyed that Gredar had headed to Martek's first, but she wanted to know about the boril, and Temin had to tell her all about that. Only when he was done, did Gredar swipe at his ear and politely indicate there was something else.

"T'meen friend come. Send message."

She sat back. "When?" There was a short exchange between mother and son where Temin thought she was asking why she hadn't been told and Gredar was explaining about the radio message. She turned to Temin. "You will go? Bring huu-man here?"

"No. I mean, I guess I'll go. Maybe," he said when she frowned. "I won't bring human here. Won't tell human about day-neh. Is worried, same as you. If...you say, I cannot go, I will stay, protect day-neh. Will not hurt day-neh for *anything*."

She looked at Gredar, clearly puzzled. "T'meen must go home?"

Another exchange, which got a bit lively. Karwa leaned against Temin in comfort, still carefully scratching his niece's belly and making her purr. "You stay, maybe? Karwa want that. Is good thing. T'meen is my friend."

Temin tried to smile. "Karwa is my friend too. Is sad, leave Karwa, Gredar. But...my huu-man friend is sad, if I do not go home."

"Hmmm. Is hard, this choice. Is sad, if you go, if you stay."

Martek turned to the lad. "Is choice for T'meen, Karwa."

"You like T'meen to go?"

"No! Is sad. Still many, many things to learn. T'meen is my friend. But is his choice, this thing." Martek was deliberately speaking slowly and clearly for Temin's benefit, speaking to both of them, and when he finished, he patted Temin's hand with his tail. "Wish message not come. Make everyone sad."

"Yeah. Tell me about it."

Gredar and his mother had stopped talking—or arguing. She glanced at her son, and then looked at Temin, her hands folded. "This is your choice. You stay, you are welcome. You go, we are sad. But no huu-man must come. Understand?"

Temin nodded. "Understand. I will be careful."

"Good. You work with Martek now. Martek...." She issued some instructions that included the

dreaded words ‘singing’ and ‘boril’, so Temin figured he was about to be on display again. “T’meen—if you stay, I will be happy. Gredar will be happy. Many of us will be happy. Understand? You do not have to go.”

She said something else and Gredar explained more simply. “Have home here, she say. Are friend to day-neh, yes?”

He put his arms around his friend’s waist. “Yes. Very, very much. I don’t know what to do.”

“Have a bath,” Karwa said, wiser than Temin. “Bath make *everything* better!”

Temin had to smile at that. “Yes, it probably will. Thank you, Kadit,” he said, bowing.

“You’re welcome.” Her ears perked up and she flicked her tail. “Now, go, wash. You all smell.”

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## Chapter 6

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His mother had decided that, since it was up to T'meen to make the decision as to whether he wanted to stay or go, the possibility of him going was to be kept quiet. The only change in his routine was that he now spent every sun pass—all of it—at Martek's, working furiously on helping their historian translate information from the strange device that Martek could barely operate with his much larger hands. Gredar missed his friend at the pottery, and knowing these might be the last few sun passes of his time here only made that sorrow sharper. He said nothing to T'meen, whose troubled mood did not improve as time went on. Even the singing where his amazing deeds were celebrated, and he was roundly admired and cheered, did little to lift his sombreness. At night, he again began to suffer the nightmares which had plagued him after Filwui's attack, but he refused to talk about any of it. He just clung tight to Gredar in the dark, as if terrified to wake and find him gone. Gredar had no words to comfort him, and his body could not solve his friend's dilemma. He simply didn't know what to do to help.

They only saw each other in the evenings. Gredar was too busy preparing for the gathering to break off and have lunch with Martek and T'meen was leaving the house long before Gredar these days, since Gredar was spending more time with Jilen's kitlings while their mother kept an eye on the group of pregnant females. Halit's death had made them all rather nervous of anything happening to the rest of their siblings, and Wilna had been suffering some worrying symptoms which were possibly the sign of becoming egg-bound. Though the crisis had passed, Jilen wasn't taking any chances with their precious sister.

Ten sun passes after they'd returned from their hunting trip, his mother called him in to her workroom just as he was about to go to the pottery, and invited him to sit with her. "Gredar, has T'meen decided? You can't delay going to the gathering. If we're to send another in your place, we need to decide who, and quickly."

"He hasn't decided, and yes, we should send someone else. Lerin said he could do it, if he's given a little notice."

She sniffed in annoyance. "I feel for T'meen's situation, but I dislike the disruption."

"It's not just him, Mother. Jilen and Wilna have said they would like me to be around until she lays."

"Yes, but Wilna will want Lerin around too...it's mostly T'meen, isn't it?"

Gredar sighed. "Yes, I suppose it is. Mother, I'll attend the gathering if you order it, of course, but...I

would appreciate the leeway.”

She put her tail on his lap. “You can have it. It’s probably time Lerin took on more of the clan travelling anyway, and he can take Karwa. The boy’s been at me to be allowed to go, so this is his chance. Darling, you’ve been so sad since this news came.”

He thought he’d done a good job of hiding his feelings, but his mother was older and wiser, and no one would ever accuse her of lacking perception. “I’ll miss him. I’ll worry about him whatever he chooses.”

“He’s not one of us. You should not...engage your feelings so much.”

He smiled rather painfully. “Too late. He’s...become of my kin. I know his scent. I don’t care he’s not daiyne. He is simply who he is, and special. Surely you can see that.”

“Yes, my son, I can. But if he stays, he’ll always feel regret, and you’d never be happy about that.” She stroked his cheek with her tail. “If only you had been born female. Your heart’s too generous for a male.”

“But then Jilen would be the male, and that would be a pity.”

“True. Gedar....” She pulled him forward and rubbed her face against him. “Do what you need to do, dear. Lerin can go to the gathering.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, breathing in her comforting scent, grateful to have such a wise and kind mother to tolerate his foolishness.

Reminded what a gift it was to have the support of his family, he made his mind up. So, after speaking to Lerin, and listening to his mild grumbling about having to change his plans, and going to the pottery to let them know so they could coordinate matters with Lerin’s workshop, he walked to the other end of the village, to Martek’s house.

The scene was familiar to him now—T’meen sitting on a high cushion, Martek crouched beside him, Jaijair taking notes as T’meen, voice hoarse from hours and hours of talking though it was still early, dictated and translated from his device. His huu-man friend only glanced up as Gedar walked in, and then went back to his task, as if the time spent in properly greeting Gedar was wasted.

Martek had more manners. “Gedar! It’s not lunchtime, is it? Or does Kadit want me?”

“No. I need to speak to T’meen, if I may.”

T’meen looked up. “I’m busy, Gedar. Many things to do. Talk later.”

“No. Talk now. Is important.”

“This is important!”

Martek sat back on his haunches, ears flattening in surprise at T’meen’s shout. Jaijair, wise kit,

scuttled out to the back of the house, leaving the three adults to ‘talk’.

T’meen stared up at Gredar, cheeks red and his eyes glittering and wide, as if he’d been running. “Now,” Gredar repeated. “Please.”

T’meen shoved the device aside and stomped out of the room. Martek shrugged. “He’s been very irritable. No matter how fast we work, it’s not enough, and he has no patience any more.”

“Is there much more to do?”

“Of course! It will take me the rest of my life to learn all there is in here...though there’s much that perhaps we do not need, and should not know. If we had time, I’d share this burden,” he said, tail drooping miserably. “What if something happens to me?”

Gredar held up his hand. “Then our lives continue as they have been. You forget—we don’t *need* this huu-man knowledge. Learn what you need to protect us, Martek. The rest is...not essential.”

“But I don’t know what I need to know! Even T’meen doesn’t!” He grabbed his tail and held it in front of him, wringing it in his distress. “If only he would not call his paznit friend, then none of this would matter!”

“Calm down, Martek. The threat from huu-man hasn’t affected us in three hundred cycles. T’meen won’t do anything to bring them here now. So nothing’s changed.”

Martek stared up at him, his weary posture revealing his age as it rarely did. “What’s changed is we know. Now we know, we can’t unknow it. Like that message. T’meen can’t pretend it doesn’t exist and it’s ruining his life.”

“Then we can’t let that happen. I need to speak to him.”

He found T’meen on the back porch, staring out into Martek’s small vegetable plot. A young kitling was working among the rows of seedlings, and gave Gredar a cheery wave. Gredar smiled and waved back but his attention was all for his huu-man friend. T’meen was thin-lipped, colour still bright in his cheeks, and his arms were tightly folded in a way that indicated stress. “No time to waste, Gredar. What do you want?”

“You send message to Cheng yet?”

“No. Soon. When...when I finish work with Martek. When you come back from gathering. Is time then.”

“Not going to the gathering.” He sat down on the step so his head was just above T’meen’s. “You’ll never finish work with Martek. Is too much. You should send message now. Is time now.”

T’meen turned to him. “You want me to go? In a hurry for me to leave, hmmm? Paznit human must go? Sure, fine. I go. Is not caring. Daiyne can...daiyne can do....” He turned away so all Gredar could see was

his back, which was shaking. "Is not caring at *all*." His voice shook too, and suddenly there was the scent of salt in the air.

Gredar wrapped his arms around T'meen's waist and pulled his huu-man against him. T'meen only struggled a little bit. "Stop," he muttered.

Gredar ignored him. "T'meen, is not wanting you to go. At *all*. But is time now for message. Cheng is sad, is waiting. You are sad, will be sad long time."

"Yes. Long time." Gredar barely heard the whisper. "Miss too much, everyone. Martek, Karwa, you."

"Miss Cheng?"

"Yes. Yes. So much."

"You come back, visit, maybe? Is not so bad."

T'meen twisted and stared at Gredar, his cheeks wet and his eyes red. "No. You not understand. I can't. No visit. Huu-man will know, will come to hunt. Only way is go, never come back. Never. No message, no visit. Never know...if you are good, happy. Never know if Martek get sick, if Wilna safe with kitlings. Is end." He made a chopping motion with his hand. "Can't...can't...is too sad. Feel...like I am sick, so sad. Understand?"

Gredar rubbed his face against T'meen's, and began to slowly lick the salty water from his face. "Yes. Understand very much. But is not huu-man family here, no huu-man friend. Everything is too big for huu-man. Is best if you go. I...I want you to go."

"Gredar is dirty liar."

That startled a laugh out of him, sad as he felt. "Who teach you this thing? Jaijair?"

T'meen pulled away so he could look Gredar in the eye. "Karwa. And you are. Dirty liar. You no want me to go."

"No," he admitted. "But you must go."

"When I finish. So many things...." He waved his hands around to indicate the multitude of tasks left undone. "Soon, I send message."

"No. Too hard, soon. Send now, T'meen."

"But...."

Gredar licked him, licked around the back of his neck the way T'meen liked, wrapped his tail around him to show that he cared and was not doing this because he wanted it in the least. "No. Now. This strike."

"After lunch?"

Gredar stood. "Now. With Martek. We go to the...thing? I forget the name."

“Podpod. I forget where it is. We go later.” Gredar sighed and looked at his friend until his shoulders slumped. “Bad daiyne. Hate you.”

“Yes, I know. Come.”

Martek was all for supporting T'meen's desire to put the deed off, and Gredar had to be very firm about it all. Dragging two reluctant friends to do what all three of them wished very much not to do was painful and slow, but even with all the whining and arguments for delay, within a strike they were at the place where he had last seen the 'podpod'. This time he was prepared for the sudden appearance, but Martek nearly fainted with surprise.

“What is this thing?” he demanded to know, stalking up to it and sniffing. “Where did it come from?”

“It was hiding,” T'meen explained. “Want me to show you?”

“T'meen.” Gredar tapped his tail warningly. “Message, then show.”

T'meen spat something which Gredar recognised as an insult in huu-man, but he ignored it, waiting patiently for T'meen to give up resisting and get on with the distasteful task. Finally T'meen walked over to the podpod, banged something on the side, and with a great hissing noise, a huge doorway opened.

Martek gasped. “This is amazing! It flies from the stars?”

“So he said.”

T'meen ignored the two of them and went inside the podpod. Gredar and Martek were too big to fit through the opening, so they sat and watched as T'meen fiddled with things inside. Gredar heard him speaking quickly in huu-man speech, then he fiddled some more. It only took a few moments, then he came back outside and closed the door on the podpod again. “Done,” he snapped, glaring at Gredar. “Happy? Get rid of paznit huu-man?”

“No. No, is not happy. But is right.”

“No, it's not. Why did you make me?” he shouted. “Now...can't stop. Must go now. Why? Why you do this thing to me, Gredar?”

Gredar snatched at him and hugged him close. “Because T'meen is my friend. Good friend. Must go home to good friend he luff. Is very sad, T'meen. Is very sad.”

“Yes. Is too sad.”

He buried his face in Gredar's chest. Martek gave Gredar a sorrowful look across T'meen's head. “Too late for regrets now, my friend.”

“Yes, I know.”

T'meen wouldn't speak to him the whole way back, and stalked back into Martek's house without a

word. Gredar thought it best to let them both calm down and went back to the pottery, but his heart wasn't in it. Finally Jelal politely suggested that it might be best if he came back the next morning with a clear head, and taking the hint, Gredar left. He was half-tempted to return to where the podpod was, and do...something to destroy it, stop the sending of the message that would bring T'meen's friend and mean his huu-man would be leaving their lives forever. He hadn't realised that once T'meen left, that would be the end of all contact, but even knowing that, he knew he had done the right thing. Didn't make it any less painful.

He walked back to the house, and told his mother that T'meen had summoned his rescuers. She only nodded, and twined her tail with his, as if he had suffered a bereavement too painful to speak of. Which he had, in a way.

Jilen was in Wilna's room, her own kitlings crawling around and getting into everything. They'd be walking within a moonsweep and then they'd really take some looking after. Gredar went to Wilna and rubbed her tummy, feeling the eggs that meant new life, new members of his family. New demands on his time that would fill the hole....

"Gredar? Is something wrong?"

Wilna was looking at him. Jilen, very carefully, was not. "Uh. T'meen is leaving. His friends are coming to rescue him." He turned to Jilen. "You knew about that message."

"Mother told me. It's good news for him. I'm sorry, brother. It's for the best, but...I'm still sorry."

Wilna put her hand on his head and made him lean against her. After a moment, he felt Jilen at his back, hugging him. *This*, he thought desperately, *this is what I wanted to give to T'meen. This is what he needs too.*

But it didn't feel as convincing as it had that morning. And it hurt much more than he thought it would, knowing he had done what needed to be done.

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T'meen sent a message through Karwa that he was too tired to eat supper, and asking if he could be excused. Gredar only heard about it when he came to supper himself. His mother said it was understandable that T'meen was tired, and took that opportunity to tell the family that their huu-man friend would be leaving soon. Gredar half-wished T'meen could have seen how much genuine regret there was at that news, but then it would probably have upset him more. It upset Gredar, certainly, and he waited the barest minimum time that was polite before excusing himself from the meal. His mother and sisters gave him worried looks as he

stood, but he couldn't find it in himself to force a smile.

T'meen was working at Gredar's desk, and studiously ignored Gredar as he came in.

"You want a bath?" Gredar thought it was worth a try.

T'meen kept on with his notes. "No. No bath. Need to be smelly, make huu-man think I live out there." He flung his hand in the general direction of the wilds beyond the village. "Will sleep at Martek's if too smelly for you."

Gredar came and sat by the desk, waited until T'meen flung his pencil down and glared at him. "Why?" he demanded.

"Because you are good friend. Gredar luff T'meen. Understand?"

"No. No understand. Is no hurry, you say. Now is hurry, now...is no time." T'meen hugged himself as he stared, wide-eyed and shaking, at Gredar. "Just...want time. More time. Little more time. You take. Is no time."

Gredar bowed low. "Is very, very sorry, T'meen."

There was silence for some time. He stayed bent down until he heard the quiet words. "Gredar...please...please...?"

He straightened up and found T'meen holding out trembling arms. Gredar leaned over and let his friend cling hard to him. "Oh, my little friend, I will miss you. Come to bed."

T'meen, probably only understanding the last few words, whispered, "Yes."

Gredar lifted him up and carried him over to the bed, laid him down. He could smell T'meen's distress, the sadness that seemed to leak from his pores. Everything about him was tense, miserable, desperate, and it was so very hard to believe that what Gredar had insisted upon really was the best thing for his friend. He'd never seen sorrow this deep before and didn't know if a person could survive it. Had he ruined T'meen's life, in trying to help? "I meant for the best," he murmured, as he started to undo the fiddly bindings on the shooz. As Gredar removed all the things that stood between his tongue and T'meen's naked skin, T'meen just lay there and watched him, eyes following every movement, his breathing deep and painful sounding, like sighs.

Once the last paznit thing was taken off and laid carefully aside, T'meen slid his arms around Gredar's neck. "Is sorry I shout. Is...just very sad."

"Yes, I know. Want sex now?"

T'meen nodded. "Want *you* here now. Gredar...Cheng come maybe very soon. Maybe one, two sun pass. Is little time."

“Yes. But even long time is not enough, to lose friend, yes?”

“Yes.” T’meen bit his lip and turned his head away. “I...have no words.”

“No need for words. Shhh.” He gently removed T’meen’s grip around his neck, and made him lie flat. Then Gredar stretched out beside him, and put his hand on T’meen’s stomach, claws a little extended so he could rake them carefully over T’meen’s skin. T’meen shivered as the fine points traced down his belly, over his hip and down his right leg. His kala was limp, but Gredar wasn’t concerned about that just yet. He just wanted to make his friend feel more relaxed, less unhappy, and in the past, touch was the one sure way they’d found to do that.

T’meen watched him as he stroked his claws so very gently against the fragile skin. So many scars now—where there had been virtually none when Gredar had first met him. He bent and licked one of the worst, tasting the small trace of salt that would normally have been removed in a bath or a wash before now. “Is sorry for this thing. Is sorry you were hurt.”

“Not you. You no do this thing.” T’meen reached over and began to scritch his fingers in Gredar’s fur, digging in deep as if trying to reach the skin. “If Filwui not do this thing, you no learn I talk, yes? So...maybe is good, this bad thing.”

“Maybe. Am happy Filwui is dead, you are not dead.”

“Yes. But am happy...you learn I can talk. Is happy...is your friend. Not pet now.”

“Not pet, no.” He leaned in again and licked T’meen’s face. More salt. So much sadness. He licked along T’meen’s forehead, along the hairline. Down the strange, flat, immobile ears that were so delicately shaped. He’d spent a lot of time sketching just this single body part, fascinated by how different it was to any ear he’d seen on any creature before. He licked down T’meen’s neck, tasting the skin over the throbbing pulse. Strange also that huu-man exposed such vulnerability. Daiyne veins were buried deep behind muscle and bone, so a predator couldn’t easily strike and rip them out. But this...he could slice with a single slice of his smallest claw. He licked the pulse again, and wished huu-man were not such frail things. So easily damaged, and yet such precious creatures. Such dangerous creatures, but then daiyne were dangerous too. T’meen knew Gredar could kill him without effort, and yet he lay there, so trusting, so willing to accept the differences between them.

He couldn’t help himself—he had to reanoint T’meen with his scent, rubbing up and down his face, his chest, even onto his stomach. When he was done, he found T’meen looking at him, mouth turned down. “Scent no strong enough, help you find me in my home. Is too far. Your scent...I will no smell you, I think. Too far to smell.”

“I will know your scent always. Long time, far away. Anywhere. You come back, I will know you.”

“I can’t. Gredar, I can’t come back. Please...no say this thing. Make me sad, too sad.”

“Sorry.” He licked T’meen’s face again, licked across his closed eyes, licked down the middle of his chest and over the small brown nipples (he still didn’t know why huu-man males had nipples and no taeng, when daiyne males were just the opposite. A taeng was much more useful.) T’meen fisted the fur on Gredar’s shoulders—he always lost a little control when he was licked this way. Gredar knew every place on his body where he could give the greatest pleasure, and he carefully explored each one now. The shivery skin on T’meen’s side, the softness under his arm, above his elbow. The inside of his thigh, close to his balls, and the balls themselves, contracted in their wrinkly naked sacs, so ugly and yet so revealing of mood. Gredar found them repulsive but fascinating—though he’d never told T’meen that because he suspected it wasn’t very polite.

And then the kala, which was gradually thickening and going rigid even without a tongue to tease it. Gredar loved to see how hard it would get before he actually touched it—now it was fully erect, bobbing over the tight balls. He glanced up—T’meen’s eyes were screwed shut, his body tense and his hands in fists. Already, the scent from T’meen’s kala was having an effect on Gredar’s own body, but...he didn’t want to ask for anything tonight. Tonight he just wanted to give. So he would be strong and....

“Gredar. Please? Let me?”

T’meen sat up, and reached for him, pushing him back. Gredar resisted. “I want to....”

“No,” his friend said. “*I* want to. Please?”

“Okay.” Whatever he wanted. He lay back. T’meen didn’t move between his legs as usual. Instead he sat beside Gredar, and began to stroke the fur on Gredar’s stomach in a rather distracted way. “No need sex, if you are tired.”

“What? Oh. No. Is tired but want sex. Just...fur is elsart. Want...remember. You elsart.”

“Cheng is elsart?”

A brief smile. “No. Yes. To me, is elsart. Maybe not to you. Is tall, more than me. Big.” He puffed out his chest, held his arms out to show someone broader than him. “Has no fur. No tail. No tail, is very sad thing.”

“Yes. Tail is good.” He proved it by using it to tickle T’meen’s side and make him smile again. “Arse is good too, though. Is right word, ‘arse’? What’s so funny?”

“You say ‘arse’. Just...is funny. For huu-man, is funny word.”

“Huh.” But though he pretended to be offended, he was pleased to see more smiles. “T’meen’s arse is

funny for daiyne too.” His friend stuck his tongue out, which Gredar now knew to be a sign of great derision. He copied the gesture and T’meen chortled. “You are rude.”

T’meen poked him. “Hah. Have bigger tongue, *you* are rude. More rude.”

“Yes. I am bigger, can be more rude.”

“This is true thing.”

He resumed his stroking, a little less careful, applying more pressure. The way Gredar liked it, if he was being stimulated for sex. He wasn’t sure that was what was going on. T’meen was still thoughtful and sad, though maybe not as sad as he had been.

Suddenly, T’meen bent forward and rested his head on Gredar’s stomach. “Maybe...no want sex now? Just...want to touch. Is okay?”

“Is fine, my friend.” He urged him to get more comfortable, and hooked one of the furs T’meen like to use, over his friend’s back. He slid his hand underneath so he could still stroke him. “Want to touch too. Is okay?”

“Yes. Please.” T’meen put his arm across Gredar, and nuzzled at his stomach. “Is elsart. Always remember this thing.”

Gredar wasn’t sure if that was a command or just T’meen talking to himself, but it didn’t matter. What did matter was that T’meen smelled and sounded much less upset and stressed, and if he was still sad, that was probably unavoidable. It wasn’t possible for this not to hurt him. Gredar was just aiming for bearable. T’meen’s own strong character would have to do the rest.

He put his free hand carefully on T’meen’s hair and began to comb it through with his claws. He’d hoped to see it regrow to its former extent—now he never would. But he’d seen it grow a little, like he’d seen T’meen change and adapt to a strange and frightening situation. Would he adapt to life back in his home, after so long away? Would his experiences scar his mind as they had his body? Gredar was seized with worry that he was sending his friend back without anyone there who knew what had happened to him. Was Cheng wise enough to cope?

“Gredar? You angry?”

“No. Is not angry. Just thinking. You sleeping?”

“Nearly. Touch me. No stop.”

“No stop,” he agreed, and began to comb through the black hair again. “You sleep. Will protect.” T’meen looked up, stared at him so long that Gredar became a little unnerved. “What?”

“Is no need, protect. Is need only...friend. Okay?”

“Okay. But sleep. Need sleep.”

“Yeah. Yes. I need sleep.” He muttered something else, and then settled down.

Gredar reached over and turn the lamp to the lowest setting. One more night, two more nights maybe, was all he had left with T'meen. So while he had this time, Gredar would watch over him. It was what he needed to do.

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The deed done, Temin wavered between wishing Jeng would just get here already, and half-hoping the solar ionisation meant it would be months before anyone picked up the signal. The first burst of anger and agony spent, he now just felt tired, and sad, and wanted to make sure that however much time he had left with his friends, he didn't waste. If he'd asked Gredar to spend these last few days at his side, his friend would have agreed without hesitation—so Temin didn't, because it was an abuse of their friendship that dishonoured all they had shared. Instead, he himself made time to be with Gredar while he helped Jilen and her kitlings, to sit with Wilna for a half hour and talk about her eggs, and about the sorrow she still felt about Halit. She said she was glad to have a chance to say farewell, and to his surprise and pleasure, made sure she rubbed her scent on him very thoroughly. So did Jilen, who also insisted he hold each of her kitlings one more time before he left, even though they were getting to be a real handful. She smiled as he struggled with a playful Shiri. “You father kitlings, in your home?”

“No. I want to, maybe. Two sisters, have kitlings. Miss them.”

“Yes.” She patted his shoulder. “You like Gredar. Should be female.” She chuckled at his expression. Gredar, watching them, smiled at the joke. “Will miss you. Is sad.”

His throat tightened, as it always seemed to do in conversations now. “Yes. Will miss you all too.”

Martek was resigned to him going, but then he was old and had seen his friends come and go—die, or leave because they were surplus males or because they preferred to be unattached to a clan. To him, Temin wasn't leaving his life because Martek had made a record of him, and would continue to, extracting information from the handheld, writing up the slaying of the boril, and the recollections of those who'd known him. Temin would live on in the clan, in Martek's books, long after both of them were dead, and that was kind of nice, he thought.

Karwa was also resigned, because he was young and the finality of Temin's departure hadn't really hit him—Temin wasn't going to try and drum it home either. There were enough sad faces around him. But

he did want to leave the lad something to remember him by, and by pure luck, he had the perfect gift—the knife that killed the boril. He didn't want to take it with him, since its blade was in suspiciously good condition considering he was supposed to have been living off the land for the best part of a year. Karwa's tail shivered in delight when Temin handed it to him, and Temin found himself engulfed in a furry hug that nearly squeezed the life out of him. "Uh, Karwa?" he managed to squeak.

"Karwa, let T'meen go," Gredar warned.

"Oh. Is sorry. Uncle, I have the knife!" He licked Temin's face excitedly, then put up a finger. "You wait for me?"

"Okay. What...?" But Karwa had already bounced off back towards the house. "What he do?" Temin asked Gredar.

But his friend only shrugged. "Not know. Just wait."

Karwa was back in five minutes. "This for T'meen. Is for you." He thrust something long and white and rather sharp at Temin, who took it carefully. "Is kizaz tooth. Is...." He poked at one of his own canines. "Poison thing."

"The fang? Wow!" It was twenty centimetres long, surprisingly small to have come from such an enormous animal, but sharp and nearly as deadly as any knife even without the venom, beautiful in a creepy sort of way. Someone had cleaned it with great care. Temin was holding something no other human had ever seen before. "This is great."

"You say you find," Gredar murmured. "To huu-man."

"Yes, I can do that. Thank you, Karwa. Are you sure? Is precious thing."

"Preshusss?"

"Is very good thing for Karwa. You sure?"

Karwa nodded emphatically. "Yes. Is for you, my good friend. I miss you. Is sad. You see this tooth, remember me, yes?"

Temin threw his arms around Karwa and hugged him tight. "Oh yes. Remember you all."

He wanted to give something to Gredar as a keepsake but he had nothing at all that he thought his friend would like. He kept coming back to the problem as the hours, and then days, went past, however much he tried to distract himself by keeping busy, even though he knew Gredar expected nothing, and probably would be hurt to think Temin was wasting time on such a trivial issue. But it was easier to think about that, than the thing that was really bothering him.

The call finally came late on the third evening, just as he was preparing to leave Martek's house.

Temin listened carefully to the message, then turned the radio speaker off before turning to his host. “Tomorrow. My friend come tomorrow, midday.”

“Is farewell then?” Martek said. “You tell Gredar.”

Temin nodded, unable to speak. He stood and put his arms around Martek’s neck, rubbed his face over and over in the thick fur. Martek patted him. “You good friend, T’meen. Be happy.”

He found himself walking up the now familiar street, under the now familiar sky with its triple moons and huge sun, consciously noting every detail, storing it all up in his mind, wondering if time would dim his recollections, and if he could ever forget all that had happened to him in this place. The fear of forgetting had been the worst part—that he would eventually lose even the consolation of memory, and those who were most precious to him now, would seem unreal and unclear in the future. But he had no way of capturing concrete reminders—he could take nothing with him, not a note, not a picture, not the smallest thing made by the hand of any of his friends. The kizaz fang passed only because he could pretend he’d picked it up, but it wasn’t the same as the voice recordings he made of Martek and Gredar and the others, or the photos and videos he’d taken of them, or the diary notes he’d made from time to time in the handheld. All that would stay in Martek’s archives, to the puzzlement of future generations, who would never see a human and not know that somewhere, at least one member of an alien race held their people close to his heart.

He found Kadit in her smallest workroom, writing notes about the herbs lying on her desk. “Message come from friend,” he said, kneeling at the side of the desk. He removed the clan medallion, so proudly worn for months, from around his neck and held it out. When she put out her hand, he placed it in her palm and folded her fingers over it. “Thank you for all, and this thing. Is sad I cannot take. Please...keep.”

She bowed her head, closing her fist tight over the medallion. “Yes, I will keep. T’meen...you forgive day-neh for all? Forgive me?”

“Yes, forgive all. Even Buhi. Please...please tell him this thing. Be happy, Kadit.”

She beckoned him forward, and gently rubbed her face against him. “You are regaijen even when you leave, T’meen. Know this.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

His stomach in knots, he couldn’t face supper with all the goodbyes. He was talked out, thought out, farewelled out. He ought to be happy and he’d never been more miserable. Did it mean he didn’t love Jeng the way he thought he did? And if he didn’t, was this a pointless exercise? But the idea of never seeing Jeng again hurt as much as losing Gredar. He was getting used to the pain of being torn in half. Now he just wanted it to be over.

He was lying on the bed, going over what he would need to do to the podpod before Jeng arrived to make his unaided survival for so long appear credible, when Gredar walked in with a lamp, which he set down on the table. “Mother say...message come. You leave soon?”

“Tomorrow. Midday. Need to go early, things to do at podpod. Understand?”

“Yes.” Gredar sat on the bed and placed his paw on Temin’s stomach. “You not happy.”

“No.” Temin covered his eyes with his arm.

Silence for some time, then he felt Gredar shift, and then Temin yelped as he felt Gredar’s hands under him lifting him up. “What the...?”

But Gredar just wanted to hold Temin in his lap, and had taken the matter into his own hands—literally. “It’s not like I don’t *want* you to hold me,” Temin muttered, burrowing into Gredar’s fur. Gredar’s tail wrapped tightly around Temin as if trying to say he didn’t want Temin to leave. But it was the tail’s owner which had set this in motion, and now it was too late to change things.

All Gredar wanted to do was hold him, it seemed, and now, when words were so useless, so redundant, Temin was grateful to return to how they’d begun—with touches, with gestures, with a wordless meeting of minds that had transcended race and language. He would never, ever, be able to tell anyone how he felt at this moment, and it was knowing that, knowing he could never share or describe what he had discovered, the generosity he had experienced, which tore at his soul now. If his shefting race had not been such brutal, mindless destroyers, it could have been the start of a wonderful friendship between two peoples. Two peoples who must never meet now, if the day-neh were to survive at all.

Gredar allowed him to shift position so he was sitting sideways, and could look up at his friend’s face while still being held close against his chest. Gredar’s face, of course, showed little to Temin, but his ears were drooping, and his tail was a limp, sad thing. “I wish I have thing to give my friend,” Temin said, patting carefully over the faint disturbance in the fur pattern where it had grown back over Gredar’s injuries. “But no have thing.”

“Yes. Have thing. Give thing already. Many things.”

“Huh?”

“Come.” He was abruptly shifted off the furry lap as Gredar stood up and walked over to his desk. “Come. Look.”

Gredar pulled out one of the large drawers in the chest next to his desk, and drew out the rolls of sketches he had made of Temin over the last few months. He spread them out on the desk top for Temin to see—there were dozens and dozens of them, of Temin in all kinds of poses and positions and lighting, day



and night. Literal to a fault, Gredar had recorded every scar and mark and bump, but somehow he had managed to make no judgement about them—just added them as part of the whole, so that it seemed perfectly natural that Temin’s skin was so flawed now.

Gredar tapped one of the pictures. “You give me this thing. This elsart thing.”

“This your thing. You make this.”

Gredar shook his head. “No. You give me thing to keep. Elsart thing. Remember always, T’meen. Is best thing for me.” He reached over and cupped Temin’s face. “I keep this, in here.” He tapped his head. “Always.”

“You forget, maybe. I forget, maybe. Is scared, to forget.”

Gredar shook his head again, and stroked Temin’s cheek with his thumb, before leaning over and licking his face. “No. No forget. Know this thing. Is forever thing, T’meen.”

Gredar’s face was getting all blurry. “Big guy, you...you...no. I won’t forget. How could I forget you?”

Gredar gave a little yowl of enquiry, but when he didn’t get an answer, he just pulled Temin onto his lap and held him tight again. “Is okay. You see Jeng, you be happy. Gredar be happy T’meen happy. Is okay.”

Was it? Would it be fine once he saw Jeng? He looked down at the pictures Gredar had drawn with honesty, with affection—and maybe even love, as much as the day-neh understood the concept. “No. Is not okay. But I’ll be fine.”

*I hope, anyway.*

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They left at dawn, Martek tagging along because he didn’t want to miss this momentous event. He hung back though, giving Gredar and Temin privacy, though they didn’t have much to say to each other. Temin had said all he’d wanted in making love that one last time. It wasn’t like there were words that could make this easier for any of them.

At the podpod, he stripped out everything he might have conceivably used for survival over the past nine months and gave it to Martek. He kept the weapons though—they were just too dangerous to leave behind. He had nightmares about one of the kits blowing a paw off by banging the shefting things around too much.

He was going to say his shelter was some distance away and that he was leaving most of his gear there, to explain his lack of improvised tools and the like. He and Gredar had discussed how he could have survived on his own, and what would sound plausible. Temin was hoping that people would just be so amazed at his return he could fudge the actual details. So long as no one suspected the truth, he thought they would not ask too many hard questions.

They scuffed up his clothes and shoes to simulate months of hard wear. His scars and the damage the boril had caused to his stuff would all lend veracity to his story, he hoped. He didn't know what he'd do if anyone wanted to see where he'd been living, but he was determined about one thing—he would never lead them to the day-neh village. All the day-neh had been warned for some time that they must conceal themselves if they spotted humans. But provided Temin's rescue didn't stir up too much interest, he thought the day-neh would remain undiscovered for many more years. He couldn't promise their secret would be safe forever—one day, inevitably, someone would come exploring, or another spacer would crash. All he could really hope for was that this current generation would be safe.

A little before noon, his radio crackled. "Temin, are you there?"

"Yeah, Jeng, waiting for you by the podpod. Site is clear."

"Then stand back. At your position in T minus five minutes."

So this was it. He hugged Martek quickly. "He comes, you must leave."

"Understand. Is farewell, my friend."

He accepted a quick lick, and then Martek moved away. Then Temin faced Gredar, his heart racing, his gut churning with tension and sadness. "Is farewell. Be happy."

Gredar put his hands on Temin's shoulders, and very slowly and deliberately marked his face, his clothes, even his hands with his scent. Then he curled his tail around Temin's waist. "Farewell."

Temin stared into his great, green eyes, and fought back tears. Jeng would never understand if he found Temin weeping like a kid. "Go. Be safe."

Gredar nodded, and then stood. He turned and ran off a little way, to wait with Martek.

A bare minute later, Temin heard the engines, and then dust and dirt and leaves flew everywhere as a cargo ship hovered overhead. He squinted up and waved, and then the ship slowly descended, main hatch opening, as it lowered itself right over the podpod. So they wanted to retrieve it—made sense, he supposed. He kept well clear until the ship was fully down, and then a small rear hatch popped open.

"Temin!"

Jeng. His heart flip-flopped as his lover's smiling face appeared. Temin waved. "Hey. What took you

so long?”

“You...come here, you shefting idiot!” Jeng ran to him and scooped him up, swinging him round and round. “What the hell happened to your hair? And you weigh nothing!” He kissed him hard, and then put Temin down, still keeping his hands tight on his shoulders. “I can’t believe it. You’re...you’re really, really alive.” And why Temin had been worried about crying when Jeng’s eyes were red, he didn’t know, but other than that, Jeng looked the same as ever—broad, tall, incredibly handsome. “I never thought I’d see you again.”

“Well that goes twice for me. Can we get out here now...no!” He broke free of Jeng’s grip and ran to the crewman who was aiming a pulse pistol at Gredar and Martek, sitting on their haunches two hundred metres west and looking entirely cat-like. “No! Don’t kill them...they’re harmless! Please...they’re just big dumb animals. Don’t hurt them!” He waved at his friends to get the sheft away, but they didn’t move.

The guy smiled, a little embarrassed. “Don’t get bent out of shape, man. I won’t hurt your pets. I just thought they might attack or something.”

“No, they won’t. They’re just slow and harmless. Can I come on board, or did you just want the podpod?” He smiled to show no hard feelings, but the sooner this guy stopped looking towards the day-neh, the better. He turned to Jeng. “And how the sheft did you find me anyway?”

“Long story. Get inside, and I’ll tell you everything.”

A few more minutes while the podpod was secured, and then Jeng gave the order to lift off. Temin was able to get one last look towards the ground and the rapidly diminishing figures of his friends before the blast shields closed and they were ascending hard and fast through the atmosphere.

Once they’d cleared the gravitational pull of the planet, Jeng put them into FTL mode, set the autopilot and undid his harness. The crewman, Hiso, wandered off to check on the podpod but Temin stayed put—he was feeling a little numb. After so long, it had all happened so fast, and everything felt strange and wrong—the human-scaled dimensions of the cargo ship seemed too low and cramped after months in the tall ceilings and wide rooms and halls of the day-neh houses.

Jeng came over and knelt at his feet, taking his hand. “Hey, are you all right? You’re looking a little shocky. Sheft, I didn’t think...should have brought a medic. Are you hurt? Sick? I could....”

Temin touched Jeng’s lips, relearning their texture. “No, I’m not hurt. Just...still getting used to it. You, lover, have some explaining to do. How the shefting crack did you find me? I thought there wasn’t a chance in hell that anyone would pick up my signal on the FTL lanes...you dropped out to look for me, didn’t you? Jeng, did you break regs?”

Jeng smiled, and Temin's heart flipped again. He had really missed that gentle smile. "No, actually, I didn't. Did you work out why you crashed?"

It was so long ago he'd almost forgotten the reason he'd ended up on Ptane in the first place. "The podpod—someone sabotaged the FTL drive. An explosive. I nearly didn't make it. The sublights were fried in the landing."

Jeng squeezed his fingers. "Did you know you were carrying quiladia in the payload?"

"No! The labels said...um, something like farnom?" He'd taken so little interest in the cargo, once he'd realised it was useless for survival purposes. "Nothing exciting, I know that. Quiladia? Really?" The ore was one of the rarest and most valuable substances in the galaxy, mined only on Polmara and in incredibly miserly amounts. "What the sheft was it doing on my craft?"

"It was a secret trade deal, made at government level with Polmara—you weren't told so attention wouldn't be drawn to the shipment. I was bloody furious when I found out they'd used you for that. They said you'd stolen it—that you'd made off with it and were holed up somewhere, maybe on Oxit."

Temin rubbed his forehead. "How could I steal it when I didn't know what it was? And I wouldn't do that!"

Jeng nodded. He got more comfortable, but still held Temin's hands tight. "No, I know, and when word came of your late arrival and then your disappearance, and this crap started flying around that you were a thief, I knew it was a lie. Your mother, sisters, me, we all kicked up a stink. Commander Ling, he did too, and pushed for a second investigation. We retraced your steps on Nixal, found out who knew what about the shipment, and eventually we turned up someone who was prepared to inform on his conspirators—for a price. When we found out what they'd done, I was able to work out approximately where your engines would have failed, and then we could start to search that area. Still took me too shefting long. They said to give up after we tried the first contact, but Commander Ling let me drop out of hyperspace whenever I had a run in that area and that's when I got your message."

'Let' was probably an exaggeration, Temin thought, laying his hand on Jeng's head and stroking it. "Wait...conspirators? To kill me? What the sheft would anyone want with me?"

"Not you, love. Your payload—more specifically, what the payload was for. DCIR were on the verge of mass-manufacturing an anti-cancer agent which would make hormonally-linked cancers a thing of the past. It was worth billions and billions of yien to our economy."

"Was'?"

Jeng grimaced. "The whole thing got shut down—without the quiladia, the manufacture wasn't

viable, and Polmara wasn't willing to sell any more to Venshu because we'd allowed the last lot to disappear. The government was severely embarrassed and the President came this close to resigning. Some of the cabinet actually did resign."

"Over this? Over *me*?"

"Yeah. You were declared a traitor and a price was put on your head. You were worth a fortune, dead or alive." Temin blinked at him. Jeng was smiling, but it was hardly funny. "It's okay—that was lifted months ago when we found who was really behind it. Anti-Federationists."

"I don't understand. Why would anti- Federationists want to blow me up?"

"To do what they did—embarrass Venshu, cause tensions between its government and Polmara, sow suspicion. There's been other stuff going on, assassination attempts, fomenting dissent...they want a war." His face screwed up in distaste. "They think if they can cause instability, people will disavow the Federation secularism and demand a religionist influence in government. They weren't happy about Oxit joining the Federation and accepting the same laws, because they thought Oxit would hold out against them and give them a wedge to strike the secular laws down."

"So you're saying I nearly died because of politics. Great." He'd never been one to pay any attention to that stuff. All he'd ever wanted to do was fly....

"Oh, and I've saved the best bit to last." Jeng grinned, as he bent to kiss Temin's wrist. "The press are following this rescue minute by minute. You might want to clean up so you look your best when we hit the dirt in Xixan. You're about to become famous for all the *right* reasons."

Temin groaned. "Why did I send that shefting signal? Life was so much easier this morning."

"Not for me, love." Jeng leaned up and put his arms around Temin. "This morning, you weren't with me. Now you are. So things are already better. Did I mention I missed you? Like every single shefting second of every single shefting day?"

"You might have hinted, yeah. I kinda missed you a bit too." He bent and kissed Jeng on the forehead, then on the mouth, savouring his clean taste. "This better not be some whacked out dream, or I'm going to be seriously pissed."

But he knew he wasn't dreaming. Jeng was really holding him, really kissing him, and Gredar really was millions of clicks away. This was his life now

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Gredar couldn't seem to make himself move even long after the amazing craft that had swallowed up the podpod, and then T'meen, had disappeared into the endless blue of the sky. He stared up after it, unblinking. It had been so quick, in the end. It didn't feel real.

"Gredar?"

He shook himself as he felt Martek's tail twine with his. "How will you record that? How do you find words to describe it?"

"Ah, if you knew that, then you'd be the historian and not me. I can't tell you all my secrets, kitling." Martek nudged him with his shoulder and Gredar smiled a little. "It's better this way. You know that. We could never have really ensured his safety—not such a frail, small creature among us, in our world."

"Not so frail. Not so small either. I..." He placed his hand over his heart. "This pain...I don't understand it. It's not like T'meen is dead."

Martek rubbed his face against Gredar's shoulder, licked his muzzle. "I think the feeling's different because *he* was different. But now he's gone." His tail curled around Gredar's body and he leaned against him. "Come with me, my friend. We'll drink pkite and talk, and take pleasure in our remembering."

"I have work to do. I can go to the gathering now—there's no need to put Lerin out."

Martek nudged him again. "No, there's not. But let's take a strike or two anyway. Your work will still be there when we're done."

Gredar cast one last look up at the sky, and then he turned and followed Martek back to the settlement.

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When Temin was a boy, he'd heard his mother describe someone to his Dad as a 'hero'. When he'd asked his Dad what the word meant, his Dad had smiled and said, "the kind of guy I'd like to be when I grow up." Which confused Temin since his Dad was already all grown up, but since he wanted to be just like his father, he'd decided then and there he wanted to be a hero too. Then his Dad had got himself killed racing, and his mother had had to cope with her grief and three kids, and Temin thought that maybe being a hero wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

After the circus that had greeted his arrival back on Xixan, he was even more sure of that. If he hadn't had Jeng there beside him to push for Temin to be allowed some breathing space, he'd probably have suffocated (and at times, literally, given how many people turned up to meet the shuttle.) Jeng had managed

the press and charmed the President's people, got Temin's mother in to see him, and insisted to the doctors at the clinic where Temin was rushed for a check over that, no, Pilot Pyr did not need to spend his first night back on Venshu in hospital, yes, he'd come back for more thorough tests in the following days, and what he really needed more than medals and thanks and adulation was a hot meal, a shower and a night in a familiar bed, which turned out to be his own in his mother's house. His sisters had spoken to him by mobile and promised to come over the next day, with the families. Tsuji told him that Jeng had warned them about the likely press attention even before he'd left to pick Temin up, and that all she needed to know was that he was in one piece. He grinned and assured her he was, and said he wanted to see them as soon as he'd got some rest.

His Mum accepted that Jeng was essential to Temin's sanity, so it was just the three of them who ate an early supper that night, in blessed quietness after the turmoil of the day. It was a simple meal but Temin stuffed himself, the flavours shockingly intense and rich after months of bland day-neh cooking. "You're acting like you've never seen food before," his mother said, smiling and ladling more stew onto his plate. Jeng shoved some more buttered bread over at him and grinned as Temin snatched up a slice.

"Well, you know...nothing like home cooking. I missed this, Mum. I missed you, everyone. I still can't believe I'm home."

She looked so worn even when she smiled—he'd done this to her, he thought guiltily. "You and me both. I think you and I need to have a little talk about this career of yours. I don't recall any mention of bombs when you graduated the Academy."

She was only half-joking. "Mum, you knew it wasn't a risk-free job when I took it on."

Her gaze held his eyes for long seconds. "Your life is yours to do what you choose, Temin. But your choices affect other people. We have a right to say we'd rather you didn't die."

"Yes, you do, and so would I. Dad got killed right here on Venshu. Danger's everywhere." He made himself smile. "And hey, I'm here, so what are you complaining about?"

She sighed just a little. "No complaints, except for the fact you seem to have left half your body mass behind somewhere. Now eat up, and Jeng, you let him get some rest. You can get down to monkey business when he's caught up."

"Mother!"

Jeng just laughed. "Yes, ma'am. Do as your mother says, boy." Temin kicked him under the table for that.

He'd showered earlier, a little reluctantly because he was washing Gredar's scent from him, but after

days without a bath, he really did pong. Sitting in his dressing gown in front of the window, he still didn't feel properly clean. He missed the feel of a warm, rough tongue, the curious slickness of a wet leather on his skin. The shower had felt all wrong.

Jeng came out of the bathroom having had his own shower, and plopped himself behind Temin on the bed. Temin shivered as Jeng's damp hand curled around the back of his neck. "Why did you cut your hair?"

"Uh...it got caught in some bushes. I had to cut it off to get free. It was more practical for it to be short anyway." He hated to lie to Jeng but he couldn't talk about the rape, even if he'd allow himself to talk about anything that had happened on Ptane.

"Hmmm. You look very different without it. You look different anyway. Thinner—older." Jeng put his arms around Temin and pulled him back against his chest. Temin snuggled happily against his warmth, trying hard not to miss fur and tails and big paws. "You're carrying some bad scars. It was pretty rough for you, wasn't it?"

He began to comb his fingers through Temin's hair, baring his nape so he could kiss it. Temin sighed. Jeng's lips were wonderful against his skin, even if he never would stop missing other sensations, other touches. Gredar had been right—he *was* happy to be home. That didn't mean he didn't miss Gredar and the friends he'd made. "Yeah, it was rough. If I didn't mention it before, I'm really grateful to you and Mum and Tsuji and Liseng and Commander Ling."

"You sure, love? You've been...kinda lost looking ever since we picked you up. Like you'd left something behind."

Damn him and his perceptive eyes. Temin turned and smiled. "Just still dazed. Until I saw the ship I didn't really believe it was going to happen. I didn't let myself get excited until we landed on Venshu. Give me a chance to get used to it all again."

Jeng pulled him down for a kiss, lingering to taste Temin's mouth, to rub his cheek against Temin's skin. "You haven't said much about what it was like. Feel like talking?"

Temin's throat closed up and he pulled away, tugging the dressing gown tight against himself. "No."

"Okay. You know that's fine with me too, don't you?" He reached over and tucked a long strand of hair behind Temin's ear.

"I just...just want to get back to work. You know—normality."

"Yeah, I bet you do. Must be tough to have had your life on hold for nearly a year."

It wasn't on hold, Temin wanted to say. "Don't want those bastards to stop me flying, that's all."

"They won't. I've already spoken to Commander Ling. He's going to make sure you don't get turned

into some press monkey. As soon as you feel fit to fly, pass the medical, you're back on the job."

"Thank you. I mean it—from the bottom of my heart, Jeng. I owe you everything."

His lover grinned. "Don't worry, I plan to collect on that out of your sweet, sweet hide, Temin." Then he yelled as Temin lunged at him and launched a tickle attack. Dirty tactics were shortly employed, and soon all out war, with pillows and hairbrushes, was declared. But Temin was badly out of shape so he wasn't too surprised to end up with Jeng pinning him down, and smirking into his face. "Yield, brat."

"Never. No surrender."

"I see you didn't pick up any brains while you were marooned." He climbed off Temin who stuck his tongue out and hoped Jeng hadn't noticed his tiny freak out as Jeng had held his wrists down. Jeng wasn't Filwui. Nothing remotely like him. "Now—sleep, or your Mum will castrate me."

"I'll lend her the knife."

"You can't—you lost it, remember?"

"Oh yeah." Temin wondered if Karwa would ever use it, or just keep wearing it around his neck as he'd started to do before Temin left. "I'll find something to use."

"Bloodthirsty brat. Come on."

It was so strange to sleep on a normal-sized bed, on sheets and pillows. He kept thinking he was going to fall off the edge. But Jeng behind him was a warm and luxurious sensation even without fur, and Temin was very glad not to sleep alone this night.

Jeng began to stroke his side. "I know you don't want to talk about it, love—but will you tell me about it one day? When you're ready?"

"Yeah." It came out as a croak.

Maybe one day, he would be able to tell people about the day-neh, and Gredar, and Martek, and a decent race of people in love with beauty and honour. Maybe one day, he'd be able to tell Jeng about what he had given up.

He caught Jeng's hand and rolled over to face him. "Ask me again." He kissed Jeng's forehead and closed his eyes. "One day."