

Pets:
Bach's Story
By Darla Phelps



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Chapter One

Bach Bauer wanted a pet. He'd never been very keen on pets, nor had he considered himself much of a pet owner. But the idea had been gaining in merit these last two years. When a man lost both his wife and children in a vehicle collision and suddenly found himself confronted with facing life very much alone, Bach supposed a man might consider all sorts of things he previously would have thought uncharacteristic. It wasn't that he was trying to replace his family. That was impossible. They were utterly irreplaceable. He'd never spent a single night apart from Laan, his wife of nineteen years, until the night of her death. And had his twin daughters, Gema and Kali, survived the wreck, they'd be turning six next week.

No, he wasn't trying to replace them. In fact, it was his intention never to remarry ever. But after two years of rattling around in the tomblike silence of his home, Bach decided what he needed wasn't so much a replacement as something to fill the oppressive void their absence had created.

Standing at the admissions' counter of Exotics Incorporated, Bach scratched his eyebrow with his thumb, twiddled his pen in his hand, and wondered how to squeeze that kind of explanation into the two line space they'd given him beyond that mind-boggling question: Why do you want a pet? He finally settled on the banal and totally inadequate excuse: Loneliness.

The next question was even more banal: Can you provide the proper level of care for your pet? Yes. For two years now he'd read every book and article he could find on the subject, everything from feeding to bathing to breeding. It was a lifetime commitment after all. Most pets had a life expectancy of 60+ years in captivity these days, what with the general increase in interest leading to intensified research in animal biology and the improved veterinary care. If his pet didn't outlive him, it'd be a pretty close race!

He also checked the box marked 'Female' on the next question. Males were more common, not to mention significantly less expensive, but the females were reputedly more intelligent, less aggressive, and could even learn tricks if one practiced patience in the training of them.

Do you plan to breed your pet? No.

Will your pet be for work, show, or recreational purposes? Bach shook his head and checked the last box. He hated filling these things out. He was about to hand over a lot of money; he wished they'd just give him his pet so he could go home.

"Sir Bauer?"

Bach glanced up from his application form to see one of the company's agents standing in the open doorway to the walled-off consultation offices beyond the waiting room. He wore the standard grey suit of a service worker, immaculately neat but slightly ill-fitting, too long in the sleeve and broad upon his narrow shoulders.

"Greetings," he said with a thin and nervous smile. He placed his long hands together, fingertips templed, and bowed respectfully. "I am Nil Ralhan. You needn't worry about your application. Formality, Sir. Mere formality. We try to make sure people understand what they're

getting into when they bring a pet into their lives. Most haven't an inkling, you know." He cleared his throat, tapping his fingers together twice, his eyes widening with distress behind his wide-rimmed glasses as he realized the unintended insult that lay hidden behind his words. "Oh, n-not that I meant you, of course. No, no, not at all. You come highly recommended, Sir Bauer. Yes, yes. Highly recommended. I have spoken with Councilman Remeik twice today alone. Spare no expense, he said. The absolute best quality specimen we can find in the shortest possible time. And we've done that. I think you'll be well satisfied."

Bach glanced back down at the half-completed page beneath his pen. When he looked up at Ralhan, the man's smile was almost pleading. "This is a mandatory process, is it not?"

"Yes, yes." Ralhan bobbed his head repeatedly, then pushed his glasses, which had slid down his sharp and narrow nose, back into place. He re-steepled his fingers. "Absolutely mandatory. We screen all our applicants with great care. Pet abuse simply cannot be tolerated. No, no." Tap-tap went his fingers. "Neglect and ill-treatment are, I believe, the number one reasons for why pets go bad. But, here at Exotics, Inc., we take great pride in the knowledge that not one of our pets has ever been put down for attacking its owners. Good screening. That's the ticket." Tap-tap. "That and good quality pets to begin with, of course."

"Then I will submit to mandatory procedures the same as everyone else," Bach said and turned back to the form. He hurriedly checked the appropriate boxes to the last few questions, then flipped the page over. Oh lord, there were thirty-seven more on the reverse side. "I'd hate for anyone to get into trouble because one person didn't follow the rules."

Ralhan fidgeted with increasing distress. "But...but you've already been approved. C-Councilman Remeik spoke for you. Said you had a level six clearance when you worked for Central."

"I'm retired," Bach said, as he went down the page. No, he owned no other pets from this corporation or any other. Yes, he had a proper shelter prepared. Yes, he had made himself familiar with all the dietary and veterinary requirements. He hated these things, but he did like to do things by the book. By the book, that's what he was known for.

"We've arranged a selection of our best animals for you to choose from. They're caged in the back."

"Fine." Bach scrawled his signature down on the bottom of the page and handed the agent the completed application. "But now it's legitimate."

"Well, well. Uh..." Ralhan tapped his fingers twice more, then took the form. "If you'll follow me then. I'll show you what we have available."

He stepped aside to allow Bach into the separate consulting area. As they walked down the hall, he tried to both lead Bach, bow apologetically, and walk a respectful distance behind him all at once. It wasn't working very well.

"Forgive my presumption, Sir Bauer," Ralhan said, the corner of his mouth ticcing with worry as he gestured ahead of them. "Through that door, if you please, Sir."

Growing aggravated, Bach finally stopped. "Since I don't know where I'm going, why don't you go first?"

Nil Ralhan blinked rapidly, many times. "Ah...yes. Yes, of course. I--" He sidled into the lead. "Right this way." He cleared his throat, and as they walked, did his best to engage Bach in a little idle chitchat. "Did you have any difficulties finding us?"

"No," Bach told him, side-stepping the water cooler that Ralhan ran into because he was now trying to bow apologetically, lead Bach and walk backwards all at the same time.

"Ah...Good. Good." Ralhan bumped into the corner of a desk, nearly knocking over a lamp. He caught it, righted it, and sidled further out into the hall. He pushed his glasses up on his nose again. "Right this way," he said, and continued on down the hall.

It was several steps before he tried conversation again. "For your appointment to be held today was quite fortunate. You see, we've received the latest shipment just last night, and it had the most darling little female in it. If I had the money, I'd buy her myself. Unfortunately, I've already got two. If I bring another one home, my wife will kill me." Ralhan chuckled, a high, thin and awkward sound.

Bach smiled, because polite social conduct deemed it appropriate, and tried to ignore the stab of pain he felt at the mention of the word 'wife', especially when it conjured memories of Laan in his mind.

"It's standard procedure not to show her until we've completed a full behavioral evaluation," Ralhan said as he led Bach past a row of secretarial desks, bumping into each one in turn and knocking over a cup of writing pens on the last. "But she really is a lovely specimen. Everyone's taken by her. And for a man of Councilman Remeik's prestige--a-a-and your's too, of course, Sir Bauer," he quickly templed his hands together and ducked a hasty bow. "Well, even the hard and fast rules become negotiable."

Bach stopped between a desk and a row of filing cabinets. Up ahead he could see the company coffee pot just waiting to be spilled unless he put an end to this. He sighed, clasped his hands behind his back and waited for Ralhan to notice that he was suddenly walking alone and hurry himself back to Bach's side. Quite conversationally, Bach asked, "Are you a traitor to the Central Cause?"

Ralhan gulped and his eyes grew very wide. He shook his head.

"Have you ever engaged in acts of treason?"

"I sell pets," the agent squeaked.

"And I am here to buy one. You have nothing to fear from me. Now please," Bach gestured with one hand for Ralhan to precede him. "Continue."

Adjusting his glasses upon his nose and giving Bach several anxious backwards looks, Ralhan pointed down the hall. "This way, if you please, Sir Bauer."

At least they made it past the coffee pot without incident. As they walked, although he did it nervously, Ralhan finally took the lead. He escorted Bach through a veritable maze of half-wall cubicles and the individual personal offices of upper management. He took him to the far back of the building and out through a stark warehouse door. As he walked, some of his nervousness seemed to dissipate and the routine comfort of doing one's job overtook him.

"We don't bring most people back here," he said as they passed through a supplies room and through a second warehouse door into a large and brightly lit hallway. "Normally, we'd bring the selection of pets to you in a socializing room up front. But as I said, we just got a new batch in and the pick of the litter, so to speak, isn't up and about quite yet. So we thought taking you to her would be best."

"I don't mind the walk," Bach said diplomatically.

The hallway connected to a large, square warehouse, filled with rows of tiny rooms, each twelve feet deep but no wider than the space required for a door, through the windows of which he could view the caged occupants. Many of the rooms were empty, with less than half housing a pet.

"These are all males here," Ralhan said when Bach stopped at one door to peer inside. "That one isn't pet quality. He'll require a good deal of hands-on work, you see. And--"

"That's all right," Bach said, eyeing the naked male that squatted in the back corner of the room, hairy elbows braced on hairy knees, scowling back at him with dark and furious eyes. "I find my heart set on possessing a female anyway."

The consultant nodded. "I've always felt a partialness for the sweeter sex myself. They are more devoted to their owners, you know. More sociable and quicker to seek out affection."

In the few seconds that Bach stood looking in that window, the male erupted from the floor, leaping forward to strike the glass before Bach's face with his fist. The veins stood out on his neck as he roared his fury, battering the door with both hands and feet.

"As I was saying," Ralhan coughed out a nervous half-laugh. "He, uh...he's not pet quality. Much too aggressive. Maybe too much even to place him in a breeding program. Wild ones like that have been known to hurt the females."

"What are you going to do with him?" Bach asked, stepping back from the glass when the agitated male began to beat and kick his confining walls.

"If we can tame him down, we'll sell him to a breeding facility. If not," Ralhan shrugged one shoulder and left the rest unsaid before moving on.

A thin cloudy mist began to pour into the room from a ceiling vent. The male dropped immediately to his knees when he saw it. He covered his mouth and nose with both hands, but the mist continued to fill the room in a fog of sedation. Within seconds, the male's hands dropped one after the other from his face to the floor. Slowly, limply, he rolled from his knees onto his side and simply lay there.

A half a dozen rooms down, Ralhan announced proudly, "This is the first of the females that I have lined up to show you."

Bach walked to his side and looked through the viewing window.

"She's the smallest pet we've got. Slender and graceful, her brown skin is unblemished and smooth. She has magnificent eyes. Notice the slant, and how the color matches her mane--"

"No dark pelts," Bach said the instant he looked in the window at the sleeping female. Dark manes made the animals look too much like people. The female even wore hers short,

much like Laan had. The last thing he wanted was a pet who'd remind him of his wife and children every time he looked at her.

"No dark manes." Ralhan blinked in at the little female in surprise, but Bach had already turned away and continued on without him. "Well...that takes care of the next one then, too. All right, this way."

The consultant led him all the way to the end of the hall and turned the corner. Bach counted six more aisles just like this one, all linked together like a grid of single-doored cages. Ralhan skipped the next aisle and turned down the third.

"This next one is one of my favorites. She's a pleaser, so personable and sweet tempered."

They stopped in front of a viewing door and Bach found himself looking in at a plump blonde. She immediately jumped up from where she was sitting by the wall and trotted over to the window. Grasping the ledge, she jumped twice, trying to get her head up high enough to see them, then consigned herself to pressing one hand to the bottom of the window, so high above her head.

Ralhan tickled her fingers through the glass. "Yellow mane, blue eyes. There's not an aggressive bone in her body. So far, she's only earned herself one really good bottom smacking, and that was during the first week of her introduction here. She has been a model of good behavior ever since. A very low maintenance pet in that regard. Very sweet." Ralhan looked at Bach and in a conspiratory voice said, "But dumb as a bag of rocks. We've had her a year and she's only mastered one word: hello."

The female wiggled her fingers over to Bach's side of the window, and he obligingly tapped at them through the glass. He smiled when he saw her mouth moving, a welcoming greeting without so much as a whisper of sound heard through the door.

"She's a possibility," he said, admiring her mane and her eagerness as she tried one last time to jump high enough to see him above the bottom edge of the viewing window. "Let's see the rest."

They moved on to the next aisle.

"Too dark?" Ralhan asked, stopping in front of the door to a lanky brunette, sitting in the middle of the room, picking at her toes.

"Yes," he said.

Ralhan took him to another blonde.

Sitting in the far back corner of her cage, hugging her knees to her chest, she glanced up once when Bach peered in at her through the door, then turned her face to the wall.

"We've only had her a few months," the consultant said. "She's a relatively high-maintenance pet. She requires close supervision, is somewhat high strung, quick to temper, but highly predictable. Any rules you lay down for her, go ahead and plan for her to break. So long as you're watching her, she'll make attempts at obedience, but I personally wouldn't trust her to remain so once you've left the room. She'd probably do better in a breeding program than a recreational one, but she has begun to make a few small gestures towards appeasing the staff. She knows how to say 'hello', 'I'll be good', and 'no'. Naturally, she uses 'no' a lot."

"She'll be something of a challenge, in other words," Bach said.

"Some people like that," Ralhan said. "I'll even be the first to admit, a little naughtiness does make them more interesting companions. It shows they're thinking, constantly trying to figure us out. The highlight of my day has always been walking through my front door and hearing about all the little misbehaviors my pets got into while I was at work."

Bach made a non-committal sound, and the female turned all the way around so that her back was to them.

"She'll need socializing," Ralhan said. He tapped his fingers together apologetically before moving off down the hall.

"Mm," Bach said again.

"Here is the darling little female I was telling you about earlier," Ralhan called out.

Two doors down on the opposite side of the hall, the consultant beckoned him up to the viewing window of another narrow room, a small smile on his face. "This is the one I wanted to show you. Isn't she beautiful?"

For the first time, there was no nervousness in the consultant's manner or tone. Quiet passion, spoken from the heart of a species specific connoisseur, had taken its place.

Bach walked over to the door and looked inside.

Covered only to the waist by a thin blanket, she lay curled in a fetal position on her side with a number of diodes attaching her to a machine, its blinking lights busily monitoring her heart rate and breathing. She was fast asleep. Her long mane had been twisted into a single braid of copper-red strands that swept down over one small shoulder to partially hide her face. Her breasts were little more than small mounds, crowned by tiny pink nipples, and her limbs were very thin, only a third the size of his, and rather frail looking. Someone had tucked a stuffed toy into the crook of one arm to look as though she were hugging it, but it was obvious that she hadn't been awake enough to move for some time.

"She's still under sedation," Ralhan said softly. "Poor thing had a reaction to the tranquilizer during shipping. She was sick all night long. Her stomach will likely be tender for a while."

"She's very tiny," Bach said.

"Not even six feet in height," Ralhan told him. "Five-seven, I believe her measurement was. I can check on the chart, if you like. Although that height is about normal for the females of the human species."

"Is that all the bigger she'll grow?"

"Oh, yes. Though young, she is a fully adult specimen." The consultant's smile widened. "We rarely get a female with such vibrant coloring. At least not when said color is genuine. Sometimes their manes don't match their pelts when they first arrive. I don't know if it's something they eat in their natural environment, which they simply don't get here, maybe something that affects their pigmentation. Whatever the reason, natural manes like hers are very rare. And look closely. Do you see them? She's got spots." Ralhan grinned excitedly. "Spots! Not just one or two, either; she's got them everywhere. An absolutely gorgeous little female! Very

wild, of course. We haven't had a chance to handle her yet. But with patience and consistency, and utilizing the proper training methods, naturally, I'm sure you'll have her tamed in no time at all."

Bach's breath fogged the glass as he moved closer to the door.

"Loving discipline," Ralhan said fondly. "I've got two of my own, so I know. They respond very well to a firm hand, so long as that hand is also tender. It's like having a perpetual two-year-old running through the house. They're very intelligent, very curious, and tend to misbehave when not watched closely.

"My first pet, Minmin, I've had now for six years. She's got a vocabulary of almost two hundred words and phrases, although she understands just about anything you say to her. She pretends not to, of course, the naughty little thing. That should tell you how smart they can be. Mischievous, too. Not a week goes by when my wife isn't forced to take her across her knee and just paddle--" Ralhan's eyes slid to Bach as if for one startled moment he suddenly realized to whom he was talking. He steepled his fingers and bowed, stepping back from the door. "Your pardon, Sir Bauer. I could talk about my pets all day. Sometimes I forget this is about you and getting to know your own."

"Not at all," Bach said sincerely. "I have read that they can be difficult unless kept on a short leash. You are a man with six years experience on the subject. Please go on."

Ralhan blinked twice. Then a smugly pleased expression melted across his features and his chest puffed out. "What would you like to know, Sir Bauer?"

"When I spoke with Remeik, he claimed both his male and his female pets were cuddlebugs for affection. But the books I've read say you shouldn't devote more than an hour or two of your attention to them per day, or they could become spoiled."

"Not true," the consultant said with a shake of his head. "They can't be spoiled. Not from affection alone. Pets are like children. Beyond meeting their basic physical needs, like food, shelter, etc., they need to be loved and disciplined. A happy and well-mannered pet--in my humble opinion--is one enshrouded by rules and boundaries, cause and consequences. Those kept on a tight leash are always the ones with the fewest behavioral problems. Apart from their natural naughty tendencies, that is. You'll never break them of that, but that's also what makes them interesting."

Bach inclined his head, watching as the tiny fingers of her right hand flexed once. "How naughty is this one?"

"Much too soon to tell. We only received her last night, you see." Ralhan leaned over his shoulder, smiling as he peered in through the door's viewing window. "Have you ever seen anything so dainty? And her eyes, she opened them briefly yesterday when they brought her off the ship. Slate grey. Lovely long lashes. She actually tried to reach for me. Oh, but she was so sick. Poor thing."

"May I go inside?"

"I knew you'd like her." Ralhan looked inordinately pleased with himself. "But of course! She's quite safe. We do ask that you wash your hands before handling her, naturally, since the

poor thing isn't well. But how else are you to know if this pet's the right one for you, if you don't see her up close?"

Inside the room, high up on the wall was a single narrow shelf with an assortment of bottles. At eight-foot-two himself, Bach had to reach to take down the solution of waterless antibacterial soap. As he rubbed the liquid on his hands, he looked from the shelf to the tiny human female sleeping on the floor in the back of the room. "Can they jump that high?"

The agent chuckled. "No, no. As a species, they aren't accomplished jumpers. But some can reach fairly high up. As I've said, they can be quite intelligent, especially when getting into mischief. We had one, he put his hands on one wall and his feet upon the other, and just walked himself up to the ceiling. We couldn't see him through the viewing window and thought he'd escaped. He did escape, of course, when the staff member left his cage door open while he ran to get the manager on duty. We caught the little beast before he left the building, certainly, but it shows how smart they can be."

As the solution dried upon his hands, Bach crossed the narrow room to kneel beside the sleeping pet. Her hand next to his was positively tiny in comparison, and she did indeed look very dainty. Very much like a child, but with a musky scent that was pleasant and not too strong.

"She looks like a pigmy person," he mused, gently unfurling her fingers to look at her nails. Very sharp. They'd need to be trimmed to keep her from scratching him, either accidentally or otherwise.

"If one had to judge from appearances alone," Ralhan said, then nodded. "Yes, I suppose she does. But intelligent though they may be as a whole, they aren't quite as smart as we are. Minmin, my first pet, speaks very well for her species. She uses phrases that make sense and at appropriate moments in conversation, which makes me think she might have some sort of comprehension ability. But it's limited, to be sure. She'll never progress beyond the level of a nine- or a ten-year-old child, and that's likely an optimistic assumption on my part that she'll even get to be that high. It's remarkable how much they do look like real people, but it's important not to forget, pets are animals. Nothing more or less."

The little pet's hand closed around two of his fingers, faintly squeezing. Thin lines of copper-red hair above each of her closed eyes quirked together, arching upwards as she made a soft gasping sound in her drugged sleep.

Brushing back from her forehead a wayward wisp of copper that had escaped her braid, Bach then folded back her blanket and looked at her.

"Lovely spots," Ralhan said, as Bach smoothed a hand down over her shoulder, down the dip of the waist and over the curve of her haunch.

Animal though she was, she looked almost exactly like any other proper female he'd ever met. Her skin was smooth and soft and a healthy shade of pink. A little bald, though, except for a downy red swath that crowned her genitalia.

"I'll take her," he decided aloud.

Ralhan clapped his hands together in his exuberance and bowed low. "A beautiful specimen, deserving of a loving home, to which she's going, of course, of that I have little doubt!"

Bach picked her blanket up and lay it back over her, carefully tucking the edges around her.

"We'll bring her safely out of sedation and then you can take her home. Oh, happy day!" Ralhan said as he turned and walked out of the room. "A breeder was scheduled to come in later today, too. While I would love to see other pets with her magnificent coloring and spots, I was so hoping someone would take her home as a recreational pet instead. No brutish male mountings and frequent impregnations for her, no sir! She's much too sweet for that."

As Bach let go of her hand, she lethargically tipped up her head and her eyes peeled open a crack. She rolled them to look at him. Behind him, Bach heard Ralhan announcing, "As soon as you're ready, Sir, we'll go back to my office and complete the licensing paperwork. Congratulations! You own a pet!"

Her brows quirked together again, arching upward as she fought to keep her eyes open and focused on him.

He stroked her cheek, and she hummed at him. A sweet reaction, he thought, for what he was sure would no doubt be a very sweet, female pet.

Chapter Two

His daughters would have grown up, but Pani--as he'd come to name his coppery-maned pet--would always be the size she was now: small, with the top of her head just coming up to his chest. She would never grow up and move away; he would never again feel as though he were rattling around in an empty house. An ideal situation, to his way of thinking.

Too bad Pani hated him.

She had stuffed herself into the farthest possible corner, her arms thrown out against both walls, squatting with her legs drawn all the way up to her chest. Her grey eyes were so wide, they all but dominated her pale, spotted face.

At least she wasn't making that high-pitched screaming sound anymore.

Bach reclined in his chair by the fireplace, reading his book, *How To Raise A Well-Behaved Human*. He had flipped to the index in the back and looked up the section that entailed excessive screaming. The chapter heading was *Judging the Mood of Your Pet*. Well, he already knew her mood. It was scared half to death. To be honest, he really couldn't blame her, either. He was many times her size, at least three times her weight, and she was a wild creature who was suddenly confronted with forced domestication. Unfortunately, the book didn't have a section that detailed what to do if your very appearance terrified your pet half out of her mind.

He sighed. And while his attention was focused on the book, skimming the chapter for something relevant to his situation, she made a desperate dash for the door. Grabbing the knob with both hands, she vigorously shook the door, rattling it in its frame four or five times. She flung herself into another corner and stared at him again, those slate grey eyes of her wide and unblinking.

He was careful not to move. There wasn't any need. The lock for the door was higher than she could reach, and he'd closed all the windows. All the breakables had been removed to safer locations, he'd put paper down on the floor until he got her housebroken, and every exit out of the living room had been sealed off. Whether she wanted to be or not, she was stuck here until he had a chance to socialize with her. If it continued on like this, they'd probably still be sitting here, with her ducking from corner to corner, until midnight.

He sighed again and flipped back to the index. Ah, here we go. Page fifteen. *Your Human and You: The First Introduction*. Number one, the page read, don't scare it.

Damn.

Bach frowned and flipped back to the index to see if there was a section on what he could do to correct an accidental scaring. There wasn't one.

Double damn.

Pani dashed towards the window, grabbed the bottom sill and yanked frantically to get it up. When that failed, she flattened herself back against the glass and stared at him again, as if reassuring herself that he still hadn't moved. Then she surprised the hell out of him. When she turned back to the window, she stretched her hand up for the locking mechanism, jumping in an

attempt to reach it. The first time, her fingers missed it by bare inches. But on the second jump, her fingertips skimmed the bottom, causing the latch to turn, albeit barely, towards unlocking.

Bach quickly stood up. Although fairly confident that he could catch her again if she did get outside, he didn't want to risk it. She was scared enough of him as it was. He didn't even want to think how far back on the Trust Meter it would push him to have to chase her down on the lawn.

Struggling to jump high enough to unlock the window latch, she must not have realized how close he was until he grabbed her. Little, slender, and frail though she might appear, she still fought him like fury: bucking, kicking, twisting, screaming and tossing her head wildly. As he pulled her close to his body and sat down with her on the floor, she latched onto his hand with both of hers and sank her teeth into his thumb.

He'd already read the section on biting. Pretend it doesn't hurt and you won't create a habitual biter, the book had said. The pain shot out through his thumb and he grit his teeth, trying hard to make no sound. Blood trickled down his hand as her sharp teeth broke his skin.

Pretend it doesn't hurt, like hell, he thought and barely resisted the urge to thump her on the nose.

With two gasped out whimpers, she abruptly gave up on biting and went back to fighting his hold, and Bach almost sighed with relief. He looked at his bloody thumb, then simply wrapped her in both arms and held her in his lap until she struggled herself into exhaustion.

He crooned to her non-stop. "You're all right, Pani. It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. Settle down, Pani."

Eventually, she slumped into his embrace as limp as a wet rag.

"There's a good girl," he murmured. He tentatively stroked her mess of a braided mane, and she cringed from his touch, turning her face away. But that was as much as she moved and he viewed it as an encouraging sign. Maybe she was coming to accept him.

He held her for a good twenty minutes, constantly murmuring platitudes in her ear while caressing every part of her body from her face to her toes so she'd grow accustomed to his touch. Those pert little breasts of hers, with their rosy red tips, were just like a real woman's breasts cupped in his hands. Her body tensed abruptly when he did that, but though her nipples stiffened when the pads of his thumbs rasped the tips, she still didn't move.

He stroked her shoulders and down her arms to her fingertips. Her waist was a trim as a doll's, and she felt very warm between her thighs. Her breathing quickened and she made a soft whimpering sound when he cupped the mound of her femininity. It was easy to see why they were so popular for recreation, although it was a little repulsive trying to imagine fitting himself inside her small body.

"There, you see. I'm not going to hurt you," he said, sliding his hands down her legs to her tiny feet. Five toes, he noticed. How odd.

She was trembling, staring straight ahead at nothing at all.

That was enough socializing for now, he decided.

Bach picked her up and carried her down the hall, past the kitchen, up the stairs to the second floor and past the master bedroom. While one day he did hope she'd be tame enough to sleep in his bed with him, he doubted if either one of them was up for that kind of battle tonight. So he carried her down the hall to the smallest of the three upstairs bedrooms.

When his daughters were very young, this had been their nursery. It was within hearing range of the master bedroom and easily accessible in the middle of the night. The windows were also higher than in the living room, so there would be no jumping to reach the latches.

He'd spent the entire weekend getting this room ready for Pani. He'd bought a crib and all the necessities the book had claimed were needed in order to be a proper care provider for a helpless human animal. There were blankets, clothes, and a basket-full of toys (brightly colored, multi-textured, and even some electrical gadgets designed to keep an intellectual pet mentally stimulated for hours) nestled up to the wall between the diaper hamper and crib.

He set Pani down in her new bed, and she sat there, the perfect little angel, for the short time that he stood watching her. But when he turned to get a diaper from the changing table, she scrambled up to swing her leg over the top of the rail. He caught her before she shimmied down to the floor and rolled her back into the crib. That started a whole new argument, especially when he worked the diaper under her hips.

"Be a good girl, Pani," he told her as she simultaneously fought to roll over and kick his hands away. "Hold still."

But she was having no part of that diaper. He won because he was bigger and because she wore herself out, but he could remember diapering his own daughters and trying to put one on Pani was almost an athletic event in comparison.

Shaking his head, he covered her with a blanket. Immediately she tried to crawl out from under it, but he pulled her back into the center of the mattress, rolled her onto her back, and covered her with the blanket again. He dropped two toys into bed next to her.

"You need a nap," he told her. Turning around, he headed for the door.

Sitting up, she picked up one of the toys and looked at it--a round, clear plastic maze with three silver beads trapped in separate dead-end bends inside. Then she looked at him, at the bed, around the room, and then back at the object in her hand. As Bach walked out of the room, the toy hit the wall near his head and ricocheted back at her.

My, but she was turning into such a naughty and disagreeable thing.

Bach closed the door anyway. He'd let her get away with it this once, because she was new and because all this was strange and had to be very unsettling for her. But many more tantrums like that and he was going to skip ahead two chapters in that book and go straight to chapter four: How to Discipline Your Pet.

He stopped in the bathroom to wash and bandage his injured thumb, then headed downstairs to the kitchen to make dinner. It was the first time in two years that he wouldn't be eating alone. So, even though he knew she wouldn't appreciate it, he fixed a special meal of all his favorite foods. Two hours later, when he was ready to set the table, there were more than

eight steaming platters surrounding his place. He only set out one plate, but moved her baby-styled highchair closer to his seat so he could feed her himself.

Since he hadn't been able to bear the thought of using either Gema's or Kali's highchairs--both of which were still carefully stored up in the attic--he'd bought Pani her own and had it modified as the book suggested, with padded wrist and ankle restraints. When everything was finally ready, he went back upstairs for Pani.

He got his second pet-induced surprise of the day when he opened the door to find the diaper lying unused in the middle of the floor and Pani not in it. Instead, she had pushed the crib across the room and quite ingeniously used it as a stepping stool to reach the window latch. Of her, all he could see were two white-knuckled hands tightly gripped around the thick branch of the ancient, drooping willow tree, which grew just outside the window.

As he stood there in shock, her soft but nervous grunts floating back in through the window to his ears, Bach suddenly realized her hands were beginning to slip from the branch. She was at least thirty feet off the ground!

He ran back downstairs, barely making it outside and around the corner of his house in time to catch her as she fell.

It was debatable whether or not she realized the mistake of her actions, but for all of three seconds after she'd dropped into his arms, Pani grabbed onto his shoulders and hugged herself to him, trembling as she clung. For those three perfect seconds, she was the sweet and darling pet he'd thought her to be at Exotics, Incorporated.

Then she pulled her head back and she looked at him. And the wild animal in her suddenly returned full fury. She erupted in his arms. Her limbs becoming a windmill of hitting fists and kicking feet.

He dropped to the ground, shifting her in his embrace and pinning her arms to her body so she wouldn't hurt either of them, accidentally or otherwise. He gave her a single sharp swat, his hand covering the entire surface of her bare bottom. That jolted her into sudden motionlessness.

Her whole body stiffened. She put a hand back as far as she could reach to touch her bottom and stared at him, her expressive lips rounding in a look of shock.

"Enough," he told her sternly. "I'm all done tolerating these displays of bad temper. Any more of this and I'm going to give you a real spanking."

He knew she couldn't understand him, but she stared at him as though she did. Whether because of that smack or because she knew she was caught, she didn't renew her struggles against him.

Picking her up, Bach carried her back into his house and to the kitchen. It was too much to hope that one swat would make her permanently pliant. She took one look at the highchair and became her bucking and writhing old self again.

He put her in it anyway, but she made him work at getting the straps around her arms and legs. She twisted, bucked, and grunted, tugged futilely on her captured arm while he gently buckled it down, and glared furiously at him with grey eyes that all but crackled with ire as he

did the second. He had to hand it to her. If nothing else, she did have a very, very expressive little face.

Once she was secure, he sat down to fill his plate from the assorted platters of food.

"Here," he said, spooning up a small bite of vegetable casserole. He had to roll the spoon, winding the gooey strands of cheese around the utensil until they broke. "Try some of this."

He blew on it once to cool it before extending the food to her mouth. She turned her head away.

"Are you sure you don't want it?" he asked, chasing her mouth with the spoon.

Clamping her lips tightly together, she twisted her head back the other way.

"Suit yourself." He ate it instead.

Bach offered her a different taste to try every few bites, but she was as stubborn as she was wild and refused everything. He wasn't really surprised, although it wasn't until he'd cleaned up the kitchen and wiped down the table that he remembered what Nil Ralhan had said about her tender stomach. Well, if she still wasn't eating by tomorrow, then he'd consult a vet. In the meantime...

He went into the living room to get his book, then sat back down at the table and turned Pani's highchair to face him. Opening back up to page fifteen, he briefly skimmed the section on introductions.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pani lean slightly sideways as she looked at the book's front cover. Thinking maybe she liked the colors of the picture, he held the book up so she could see the two collared humans smiling back at her. She stared at them for a long time, then her eyes flicked up at him.

"It's a fascinating read," he told her deadpan. "Supposedly chock-full of all sorts of useful information." He lowered the book and went back to reading. "'Pick the name by which your pet should address you. This is usually your pet's first vocabulary word. Some examples can be: Master, Boss, Sir, or pander to the child-like qualities that make the human animal unique, and teach it to say Mommy or Daddy. Whatever your preference, your chosen word should be used consistently and often. Repetition is the key to teaching your pet to speak.' Hm, okay."

Bach closed the book and looked at Pani, who had leaned to one side in order to rotate her right arm in its cuff. She was slowly and painstakingly picking at the buckle with the tips of her fingernails in an attempt to loosen the strap.

Clever thing.

She froze when she saw him watching her.

"All right, let me think." He tightened the buckle back down again. "What should you call me?"

Twisting her arm back around, she leaned back in the highchair and slumped sulkily. One leg began to jiggle rapidly up and down in its bonds.

"I don't like Boss, Master, or Sir. You hardly strike me as a submissive pet. And my daughters called me Daddy, so that won't do."

He reached out to touch her mane, smoothing back all the wisps of red that had deftly escaped her braid. She flinched, but although she watched his hand very closely, she allowed the touch without twisting her head away.

Progress.

"How about Papa." He tapped two fingers against his chest. "Papa," he repeated. "Can you say Papa?"

She blinked twice, then leaned to one side, so she could twist her arm around in the strap again. She poked a finger back at herself, and gargled something guttural and hard to make out much less pronounce.

He gently tapped her chest. "Pani," he said. "You are Pani. I am Papa." He tapped his chest again. "Can you say, Papa?"

He stretched the syllables, repeating the word three times before she heaved a deep sigh and softly gargled out, "Pa-a-pa."

He was inordinately pleased. He got her to say it twice more before taking her back to her room. He nailed both windows closed and diapered her again, despite her squeals and protests. A sleep sack kept her busy hands, arms and legs contained in a warm pouch that buckled, not too tightly, at the back of her neck. Then he placed her on her back in her crib, before pushing it over the floor to its proper place against the wall.

Pani lay in the center of the mattress glaring up at the ceiling as he bid her good night. She tried to bite his hand twice when he reached down into the crib to caress her face, but a warning tap on the tip of her nose put a stop to that.

"No more bad behavior out of you, little miss," he told her softly. "Tomorrow is a whole new day for us, and I intend to start your training off right."

Like a landed fish, she rolled and flopped in the sleep sack from her back, to her side, and then to her stomach. She glared at the wall and sighed.

"Like it or not," he said, as he gently rubbed her back. "You're going to be hand-tamed."

He gave her diapered bottom a pat, then covered her with a blanket and quit the room. He shut the light off, but left the door open so he could hear if she managed to wiggle out of the sleep sack to make another daring escape for freedom.

Well, he'd done it. He was now a pet owner.

Every so often as he got ready for bed, he walked back down the hall to peek in at her. She was still awake and fidgeting to find a way out of her sack, moving around the perimeter of her crib like a frustrated inchworm.

He brought the book upstairs to read in bed for a while and made a list of things he would need to get tomorrow, the first and foremost being formula. He didn't want her starving to death before she grew comfortable enough with him to start eating.

It was late when he finally turned out the light, rolling over onto his side to sleep. In the dark and quiet of his house, as he lay there with his eyes closed, Bach suddenly became aware of a soft snuffling and gasping coming from down the hall. His pet was having problems breathing.

He was up and down the hall in record time, whacking his foot on a short table and all but falling into the nursery room. He slapped the light switch on and, ignoring his throbbing toes, bent over the crib to check the neck of her sleep sack. No, she was getting plenty of air. It wasn't until he rolled her over to check her coloring that he noticed her face was wet.

Though she tried to turn her face away, he touched her cheeks with gentle fingertips. Tears, an intense emotional reaction to disciplinary situations. He'd read about them in his book.

"Pani," he said gently. "You're not being punished."

It hadn't even occurred to him that placing her in a room to sleep alone would be viewed like that. But it only made sense, he supposed, since on the distant planet of Earth, wild humans reputedly dwelt in large colonies called cities. Apparently it was a very rare occurrence indeed to find one completely by itself. Hence the high cost of purchasing a human pet. Not only was there the expense of transporting the beasts, but it took time and patience to tag a good, quality pet without spooking the entire colony.

Bach rubbed her back while she turned her head away from him. Who knew how many individuals had been in Pani's city, and now she was being forced to sleep in a strange place all by herself. Small wonder she was crying.

Bach picked her up and, despite her instant shouts and squirms, carried her down the hall to his bedroom. Her resistance to being placed in his bed ended when he climbed in beside her. She lay as stiff as a wood plank in her sleep sack as he covered her with a blanket, and snuggling down beside her. With his head cushioned on his arm, he draped his other around her waist and pulled her back against the confines of his hard chest.

He stroked her mane, caressed her tear-dampened cheeks, kissed her forehead, and went to sleep holding her so she wouldn't feel alone.

Chapter Three

Bach woke up early the next morning with a comfortable weight snoring softly on top of him. He opened his eyes, inclining his head to look at Pani, still in her sleep sack. Sometime in the night, she'd curled up against him for warmth. Her head was cushioned on his shoulder, one hand within the canvas sack tucked up under her chin. He almost hated to move. He knew once he did, she'd wake up and then the struggle for freedom would begin.

Pani's face scrunched into a disagreeable expression and she made soft, yet angry talking noises in her sleep. Someone in her dream was getting the sharp side of her tongue, and Bach smiled. It was probably him.

He caressed her soft cheek with the backs of two fingers, and her eyes fluttered, then opened. She blinked sleepily at his chest, then moved her hands as though to rub her eyes. The sleep sack confined them, and she looked down at it in confusion. Some of the sleepiness fled her, and she tipped her head back and looked at him. Her body went tense against him.

And so the day began.

She fought him getting up. She kicked and howled the whole way down to the bathroom, where he locked them both inside so she couldn't run all over the house while he took care of business. He then discovered that he was going to have to install a different kind of lock on the doors, and higher up, because she figured out how to unlock the doorknob very quickly.

Leaving her in her sleep sack was the best thing he could have done. He managed to chase her down in the hallway with very little effort and carried her back to the bathroom. This time, he wedged a hamper in front of the door and finished his morning routine while she crouched in a corner and glared at him.

Not quite trusting her to stay where he'd left her, he spent the entire duration of what should have been a pleasurable morning shower trying to see through the distorted glass door to check up on her. Sure enough, about midway through washing his hair, he glanced up to see the blurred shape of the sleep sack tiptoeing towards the bathroom door.

Pani was just starting to try to wrestle the hamper out of her way when he opened the door. She froze, as if by not moving perhaps he wouldn't see her. He gave her a stern look, snapping his fingers as he pointed back to her corner.

Her eyes narrowed and she abruptly let go of the hamper. Grabbing up the folds of the sleep sack to keep from tangling her confined feet, Pani stomp-waddled back to the other side of the bathroom, kicking out her feet every few steps to untangle them from the sack, and flung herself down in the corner in a thoroughly irritated heap. Cupping her chin in the palm of her confined hand, she scowled at him.

"All right," he said, and got out of the shower. Her eyes widened and she sat upright when, dripping and naked, he started towards her. "Since I obviously can't trust you to stay put, you can shower with me."

She raised pure hell when he picked her up. By the time he wrestled her out of her sleep sack and dragged her over to the shower, he'd hit the end of his patience for temper tantrums.

Bracing his foot up on the edge of the tub, he tossed her over his knee and pinned her squirming body down with one arm thrown across her back. "Little miss," he said as he captured her wrists in one hand and twisted her arms up behind her. "It's about time you learned what all this bad behavior will get you."

She was just a little thing with a little bottom. He wanted to give her only five or six good swats, just enough to deliver a bit of a sting and plant a firm and unnegotiable 'No' into her naughty way of thinking. He only struck hard enough to land some really crisp-sounding smacks and for the flesh of her bottom to turn a lovely shade of pink.

Pani's struggles ended suddenly with the very first swat, and she lay over his knee gasping and grunting with each subsequent blow until the final one bounced off her rosy red bottom and his hand came to rest on her thighs.

Panting, she made no effort to get up on her own, so he helped her, rolling her over so that she could perch upright on his thigh. As he smoothed the unruly red mane of her hair back from her face, he realized he'd stopped way too soon. She stabbed him with the furious, slate-grey stare of her eyes, then with a roar, lashed out with both fists. He promptly toppled her face-down back over his knee. This time he gave her more than six.

His open palm whacked and smacked all over her bare bottom, darkening the rosy red to a deeper shade of scarlet while she kicked and howled as though she were being skinned alive. A proper good skelping, as his grandfather had once told him, rarely did a body any lasting harm and often did a lot of permanent good.

So that's what Bach gave her. Though Pani hardly seemed appreciative. Her furious shrieks began to be displaced by pain-filled wails. Instead of kicking to hurt him, she was now kicking to get away and struggling to twist her hips from side to side in an futile effort to avoid his hand. When she tried to roll over, he promptly flipped her back into place and continued spanking until, in a move that smacked of self-preserving desperation, she began to cry out clear and audible 'Papa, Papa's', then burst into tears.

Bach stopped, but he didn't let her up right away. He rested his hand upon her bottom, the scarlet flesh seeming to sizzle beneath his touch. As she cried in loud and lusty sobs, he gently rubbed to soothe away the hurt.

"You need to learn what is and is not acceptable behavior," he said. "So far, all I've seen from you is the unacceptable."

As her wails dwindled to hiccups, he again helped her up to sit on his thigh. She reached back with both hands, alternately rubbing and cupping her bottom, the saddest look upon her face. He couldn't help but hug her and was a little surprised when she allowed it. She didn't even turn her face away when he dampened a washcloth and gently wiped the tears from her face.

She made no fuss when he brought her into the shower with him, other than to duck her head when the spray of the warm water struck her. He washed every part of her, but the only time she shied away was when the rasp of the wash cloth passed over her tender flanks. She had only one brief moment when she tried to get out of the shower all together, and that was when he dipped between her slender thighs to clean her more intimately.

He caught her arm before she could climb out and sternly told her, "No, Pani."

She uttered a small and muffled sound of protest, then repeated, "No, Pani."

Without another word, she stood frozen while the spray of the water struck her bowed head.

He tried to play with her as he was toweling her dry afterwards, but his attempts at peek-a-boo were very one-sided.

He picked through a packed away box of his daughters' old clothes and finally selected a small green dress. There was quite a fad going these days for people who liked to dress their pets up like real people. He guessed he was going to be one of them. She looked cute in it. It was loose and uncinched at the waist, short sleeved, and only came down far enough to cover the bottommost swells of her blushing bottom. He'd sent his daughters to school in dresses like this. With white knee socks, ruffled yellow panties, and buckle-down shoes on her feet, for a moment, he could almost forget Pani was a pet.

He took his time brushing out the chaotic remains that her braid had become and, when all the tangles were gone, rebraided her mane. Two braids this time, tied at the tops and bottoms with thin green ribbons that matched the color of her dress.

Breakfast was another battle, albeit a much more muted one.

Strapped into her highchair, sitting gingerly on a pillow that he'd provided, Pani just turned her face away when he offered her a bite of egg. He made two attempts, then set his fork and the omelette aside.

"All right," he said, standing up. "We'll do this the hard way."

He took the plate into the kitchen and scraped it into the sink. He got a blender out of the cabinet and opened the refrigeration unit. He mixed up a protein shake, adding a dollop of honey at the end to sweeten what was, he knew from prior dieting experiences, an otherwise nasty flavor. In the attic, he found an assortment of bottles packed away in an old diaper bag and brought them all downstairs to wash them out in the kitchen sink.

He poured the thick protein shake into the bottle, screwed the cap into place, and then widened the hole in the contoured nipple.

"Just remember," he said as he walked back into the dining room, noting as he came that she'd somehow worked her hands out of the straps and was busily struggling to unbuckle her ankles. "You asked for this."

She took one look at the bottle and covered her mouth with both hands.

Pulling his chair away from the table, he set the bottle next to his unfinished breakfast and sat down. "And now you've asked for this, too."

She screamed when he lifted her from the highchair only to lay her face-down over his knee, and instead of covering her mouth, she snapped her hands back in an effort to protect her bottom.

"No, Papa," she cried as he skinned her panties down over the swells of her red bottom to the backs of her thighs. "No, no! Papa, no!"

"Papa did not say Pani could be excused from the table," he told her as he pinned her hands up out of his way. "Pani's being naughty, and so Pani is going to get a spanking."

"No, Pani, no!" she sobbed, wiggling her bottom futilely back and forth.

Even knowing she had no idea of the meaning of the words she was parroting, Bach couldn't help but agree with her. "That's right. No, Pani, no."

With a bottom as sore as hers, it didn't take much to reduce her to tearful wails. But he'd already learned his lesson about leniency. With his disobedient pet, five or six smacks simply wasn't going to do it. He paddled her soundly, saying all the while, "This is what happens when Pani misbehaves. She gets her bottom spanked. Does Pani like her spanking? Is Papa going to have to spank her every day?"

He repeated the word 'spank' with all its varying verbiage in the hopes that she would connect it with the action, and her bottom was so red by the time he was done that it all but shone. When he put her down on the floor, she grabbed her crimson nether cheeks with both hands and, with her panties dangling on one foot, sobbed and stomped out the most darling little dance of pain.

Bach let her jump and cry herself out, waiting until the frenzy had passed and Pani stood, bowed over, clutching herself and wailing, long, wordless cries at her feet. He reached for her. Taking hold of her arm, he pulled her to him. Though she came, it was with the utmost stiff-legged reluctance.

He lifted her up to straddle his lap, cradling her so close that her head lay upon his chest just above his heart. She was stiff and unresponsive for all of five seconds. He hugged her, patted her back and kissed her cheek as he rocked her from side to side. But when he began to sing to her, a light nonsensical nursery rhyme, suddenly she just melted in his embrace. She let go of her bottom and grabbed his shirt instead, sobbing into him as though her heart were broken.

"All you have to do is be a good girl for Papa, and we won't have to do this," he said.

He continued to rock and sing to her until there was nothing left of her sniffles but, baby soft gasps and the occasional miserable hiccup.

He felt like a daddy again. And for the first time in two years, he felt just a little less empty.

* * * *

Pani lay slightly sideways on his lap, a comfortable armful, her head pillowed in the crook of his elbow, reluctantly sucking from the bottle. From the look on her face, it was obvious that even with the honey she hated the taste. She'd take a few shallow pulls from the nipple, which was made to suit an infant of his species and which was a tad too long for her mouth, then she'd make a face and try to turn her head away. But he was persistent, pressing the bottle against her lips to seat the nipple well into her mouth and made her take every last nutritious drop.

With only a few ounces left to go, she tried to push his hand back and twist her head away. All Bach had to do was switch the bottle to his other hand, tip her hips towards him to

make her still bare bottom an easier target and flatten his hand where she could take heed of the ominous warning.

"Does Pani need another spanking?" he asked, both his expression and tone quite stern.

She lunged her mouth towards the bottle, capturing it in both hands and sucking vigorously to get it all down. When his hand returned to a less threatening posture, only then did she relax somewhat and ease back into a more natural (for Pani anyway) and sulky suckling.

"You brought this on yourself," he told her, trying not to smile. "Maybe after a week or two of bottle feedings, you'll be ready to eat like a big girl."

Afterwards, he took her back to the bathroom and washed her face. He held the top of her head with one hand while he brushed her teeth. Twice she tried to reach up and take hold of the toothbrush, and twice he made her put her hands back down to her sides with no more than a firm, "No!"

Once she'd rinsed her mouth, he pulled her dress up and her panties down. He picked her up and set her down on the toilet. No time like the present to get started on the housebreaking.

"Go potty," he told her.

She looked down at the seat she was perched on, then back up at him.

He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

Her face went bright, bright red. She fidgeted her fingers in the hem of her skirt. She pointed to the bathroom door, and Bach shook his head. "We're not going anywhere until you go potty. I'm not going to clean up any messes off the floor."

She made shooing motions at him with both hands.

Bach's jaw dropped and he stared at her. She was telling him to get out? He looked back at the door. How was it possible to embarrass a human when they weren't supposed to have dignity to begin with? His eyes narrowed sharply, then he turned his gaze to the bathroom window. Unless, of course, this was yet another escape attempt.

Propping his hip against the sink, he folded his arms again. "Nice try. I'm not going anywhere, either. Now, go potty."

Pani sighed. Her face flushed even brighter and she turned her head to face the wall an instant before he heard the light tinkling sound of her obedience. She closed her eyes and didn't look at him until she was done.

He knew she was done when she began to fidget on the toilet, looking from right to left before reaching for the box of cleaning wipes on the little wall shelf beside her. Bach took it from her hand and spread her legs. Wanting to make sure she was clean, he did it himself, then found himself pausing to examine the thatch of red curls that crowned the pouch of her womanhood. Other than the color, just like a real adult woman, except that on Pani it seemed terribly out of place. He should have shaved it off earlier. Well, no time like the present for that, either.

He had her stand on the counter by the bathroom sink and hold the hem of her dress out of the way while he wet and lathered her pubis. She became very vocal when she saw the razor. But from the instant it touched between her legs, until the very last time the razor swished

beneath the running faucet, washing away every last strand of red, she didn't move. He was still wiping her baby smooth mons clean with a warm, wet cloth, when he heard her bite back first one moan and then another, and that's when he felt it.

She latched onto his shoulders with both hands when he stroked the little bump with his fingers. Her eyes half closed and her legs began to tremble.

With one hand on her waist to steady her, Bach parted the narrow folds of her labia and took a closer look. If he didn't know any better, he'd have thought it a clitoris. Except that it was in the wrong place. Outside instead of in, where it would get the most stimulation during intercourse.

He touched it again, gently rolling the rounded tip, tucked inside its protective hood, with the tip of one finger.

She snapped her legs together, and her hand darted out to slap his. She knew her mistake immediately, and though she shielded that curiously misplaced clit of hers with one hand, the other dart back behind her in a vain attempt to protect her rosy bottom.

"No," she whimpered.

He pulled her down off the sink and dragged her to the tub, "Pani does not get to hit her Papa."

"No!" She was shrieking before he even got her fully across his lap, but his hand quickly filled the bathroom with the quick hard claps of palm meeting bare flesh.

He was actually starting to enjoy this. Oh, not the spanking. Not really, anyway. Although even that had some appeal. She had a very bouncy bottom, and every time his hand slapped down upon it, the chubby nates wobbled and jiggled almost seductively. But that kind of feeling wasn't one he was prepared to feel towards his pet, no matter how closely she came to resembling a real woman.

No, the part that he liked best was being in charge. He was totally, thoroughly responsible for this naughty little miss, squalling and crying across his lap, trying so hard to cover her bottom to keep him from landing even one more smack upon the crimson mounds. Everything was up to him, from her nutrition to her creature comforts, to her very survival. If he didn't see to her needs, who else was there? No one. She would flounder and quite possibly even die. That was an awesome realization and oddly enough, for a man who had never considered himself much of a pet owner, it was one that made him happy.

The beginning of bruises were forming where the rounding curve of her nether cheeks meet her thighs. And yet he would have continued to spank her until she drooped limply across his lap in total, abject submission, a penitent pet with an aching bottom to help her accept the error of her misbehaving ways. Unfortunately he had to stop, not because she had reached that phase of absolute repentance, and not because the condition of her bottom had degenerated to the point that spanking her further would have been abusive, but because from an outer room he heard the sedate 'beep-beep' of the computer alerting him to an incoming call.

Bach set Pani on her feet. Without giving her pause to rub out the fire he'd lit into her flanks, he took hold of one beribboned braid and marched her out to the living room.

"All right, young lady," he said, above her self-pitying sobs. "Into the corner. Nose to the wall."

He put her into the nearest empty one, placing her hands upon the wall to keep her from rubbing her smarting bottom and prematurely soothing away the hurt. A gentle hand between her shoulders pushed her right up to the paint.

"You stay right there until I tell you you may come out." He pulled up the hem of her dress, tucking it up into the back of her neckline to bare her backside completely. "If you chose not to mind me this time, little one, there will be another spanking, and that one won't be stopped prematurely!"

Sitting down at his desk, he opened the cupboard that housed his monitor and tapped the keyboard to activate his computer.

"Hello," he said, leaning back in his chair and swiveling it around so he could watch the struggle as Pani tried to pull herself together.

Through the computer, the low, rolling voice of Councilman Remeik said, "Well, can I assume by that caterwauling in the background that you actually did it?"

"My pet is malformed," Bach told him. "Thank you for putting in that good word for me, by the way."

"Any time, my boy. You were one of my best. Besides, I think she'll be good for you."

"What makes you think I got a female?"

"Males don't sound like that when they cry. It also takes an immense amount of punishment to reduce most males to tears, and, by malformed, I assume you mean the odd little bump within the folds of the female genitalia."

"Her clitoris is outside her body."

"Strange, isn't it. They probably don't feel much by way of sexual stimulation in the wild, poor things. Every time I take my little female to the breeder's, the males rarely do more than mount her. At least with me, she knows she'll have her pleasure before I take mine. But that's just one more reason the human species is substandard. Evolution wasn't very kind to them sexually, and those small brains provide just enough intelligence to make them vaguely interesting."

"Pani is more than just vaguely interesting," Bach said. "I've had her one day and some of the things she does seems to go beyond animal instincts. It's as if she's...I don't know, self aware."

"You've been bitten by the human bug, my boy," Remeik chuckled. "Perfectly understandable. It was the same for me. I've had my male for forty years now, and the old boy is coming upon the end of his days. When he goes, I'll get another one. One young enough to keep up with my female. She exhausts the hell out of him, the ornery little flirt. There aren't a whole lot of people who get a human and who don't fall head-over-heels in love with the species. They truly are the most unique of pets. But still only animals."

"Mm," Bach grunted. "An animal leading me on a merry chase in obedience."

"Ah, but the mischief is part of her charm, my boy."

In the corner, Pani hesitantly turned her head just far enough to look back at him.

"I didn't say you could come out," he warned, and she snapped back around, cringing closer to the wall.

Remeik chuckled again. "I can see you need to get back to it, so I'll let you go. Humans are a fascinating breed, and can be a whole lot of fun. But let me give you a word of advice. When you're done smacking her bottom and she's cuddling into your arms as sweet as can be, don't be fooled for a second. The only thing you've taught her is you can't spank her when you're holding her close to you. They are quick, clever, and it will take time for you to win her trust. But if you don't have that, you'll never tame her."

Chapter Four

Bach turned off the blender and poured the thick, homemade protein drink into a child's sized bottle. "Okay," he said as he screwed the nipple over the top. "Your name is--?"

From her high chair at the dining room table, arms and legs both strapped down so she couldn't make yet another coveted escape attempt, Pani all but rolled her eyes to the ceiling. An exasperated puff blew her bangs up while a quick jerk of her head to one side got them out of her face. She then gave him a barely veiled look of bored disdain.

Bach held up his hand, ominously flat, fingers together, showing her his very threatening palm. "Do I have to spank you again?"

"Pani," she said sulkily.

He crossed from the kitchen to the dining room with the bottle in his hand. As he checked the temperature against his wrist, he said, "What's my name?"

"Papa." If such was possible, she sounded even more sulky than before. He was going to have to do something about that.

"If someone comes up to you, what do you say?"

"Pani, property of Papa, 11355921."

It might have been a more note worthy accomplishment to get her to repeat all of that if only she understood what she was saying. She didn't. Humans, he discovered, were first rate mimics. She was copying the sounds he'd taught her over the last week because past experience had already convinced her, twice this morning alone, that 'Papa' was not a man to be ignored when he made a request. She was also learning that he had a very hard hand, a willingness to apply it frequently and vigorously to her bared backside, and the resolve to do so as many times as it took to secure her cooperation. She was being particular in how she obeyed, following for the most part what he wanted her to do, but there was still a very obvious contest of wills taking place between them.

Bach sat down in his chair, turned her highchair to face him as he said, "Open your mouth."

He held up the bottle to signal his intent, and she glared first at it and then at him. She clamped her lips together and rebelliously turned her face away from the foul tasting protein drink.

She had a stubborn streak in her at least a mile in width. She seemed determined to make him work for every inch of acquiescence that he managed to pry from her.

"All right," he said again, and set the bottle on the table with a sigh. "Have it your way."

He took his time rolling up his shirt sleeves, an action he was hoping she'd pick up as a signal for her to either change her behavior or a good, sound spanking would be quick in following. It was too late for her now, but Pani didn't seem to care. She showed absolutely no hints of repentance, but instead stubbornly glared at him with mutinous eyes. That was fine, she'd come to realize her mistake soon enough.

"You're going to discover that I don't respond well to defiance, my little miss."

He began to unbuckle her ankles first, saving her wrists for last. Since she had yet to go quietly over his lap, he kept a firm hold on her right arm, which was the last to be freed from the highchair straps. She didn't disappoint him, either. Just before the last buckle came off, her eyes narrowed to thin grey slits. Her slight muscles tensed in his grip. Defiant to the end.

He couldn't help but chuckle. With a shake of his head, he sighed, "All right, Pani. Over my knee you go."

And the fight was on. When he tried to bring her up out of the highchair, Pani locked her legs against him and grabbed onto the arms, clinging as if for dear life. It was the shortest lived revolt in the history of his planet. She lost--miserably.

Being both bigger and stronger, he had her down over his thighs despite her wild attempts to do otherwise. Her arms and legs scrambled for the leverage to fight him, but he still pinned her down, wrapping his arm around her tiny waist and centering her bottom so that her toes barely scraped the floor.

When she reached back in a final, last-ditch effort to halt the inevitable, he merely caught her hand and pinned that against the small of her back. Well and truly captured, her struggles came to a highly frustrated end. Pani lay panting across his lap with nothing gained for herself but an excellent view of his kitchen tiles.

He, on the other hand, had an excellent view of a pert, round bottom, slender legs and a graceful well-spotted back, fully revealed in all its unusualness as he raised the back of her baby girl dress. When he hooked the elastic back of her panties, her buttocks clenched as if squeezing tight enough might keep them up. It didn't. He not only pulled them down, he took them all the way off her.

"Shall we start again?" he asked, the epitome of patience. "Maybe this time with a good deal more respect and cooperation on your part, hm? Your name is--?"

Pani stayed stubbornly silent, her breathing hard and angry.

Her stubbornness made him smile, and Bach shook his head again. "You should know by now that, although I'd probably find your obedience quite pleasing, your disobedience is nowhere near as displeasing as perhaps I should. This," he patted her already spank-reddened bottom twice, a gesture of fondness but with little of the bite that his coming blows would hold, "has become a gratifying undertaking, rather than a chore."

Her shoulders sagged as though she understood him. "Pani," she finally said.

"Thank you."

His hand cracked across her bruised buttocks. Not very hard, really. But hard enough to make her yelp. She began to struggle all over again, but it was short lived and he had no trouble holding her until she settled down again.

"What's my name?" he then asked.

"P-pa--" she groaned, trying to squirm to take the sting out of the impact that couldn't even be seen over all the redness and the black and blue marks that covered her flanks nearly top to bottom. "Papa."

"That's right." He spanked her again, five sharp times, with each crack of his palm just a little harder than the last. One after another, they elicited louder and more frantic shrieks until the final swat bounced off her fiery buttocks and Pani stiffened with a hoarse, tormented shout.

She collapsed immediately again, gasping and groaning, on the verge of tears. Barely able to wiggle, she struggled to break out of his grasp until she was exhausted.

Bach merely waited until she was still again. "Last one," he told her, gently running his hand over each clenching buttock in turn. "If someone comes up to you, what do you say?"

Moaning, Pani pulled meekly at her imprisoned hand. She grabbed onto his leg with her other and tried to roll over. When that failed, she went still again.

"Pani," she sniffled. "Property of Papa, 11355921. NO!" she wailed when his hand abruptly left her battered rump. Like the breaking of a dam, she burst into tears at the very first 'CRACK!'

Bach made her bottom dance under a barrage of strong-armed swats. He wasn't spanking very hard, but with a bottom as battered as hers was, hard wasn't necessary. It wasn't her spirit he wanted to break anyway; just her defiance. He did his best to avoid the worst of the bruising, his open palm slapping upward as he caught the plump base just above her thighs. Each impact jolted her over his knee and made her hidden sex wink out at him from behind the cover of her clenching thighs.

Even her pretty little bottom hole winked at him. Until the more he held her, the more curious he was to make her a full-fledged recreational pet. He'd never been much of a man for the fucking of animals, but Pani was an animal who looked like a woman. Soft in all the right places. Welcoming in all the ways that women appealed to men.

His hand began to burn and throb, but still he continued to spank her until she fell still over his lap, and Bach finally stopped.

He left her to cry in position, resting his hand on her blazing skin so he could feel the rising heat. Her bottom was so swollen and raw now, the flesh upon the summits felt hard to the touch. He was quickly coming to love the sight of her like this. Penitent in pose, sobbing so hard that she could barely catch her breath, writhing in his unyielding grasp so intently focused on the fire burning her from behind that she didn't even realize the spanking had stopped. Mindless to everything but his immediate touch.

Bach even liked the noises she made: hoarse and ragged "Ow, owie" sounds that she repeated again and again as she cried.

He waited patiently for her to come back to herself, and while he waited, he rubbed her bottom to show that he could be gentle as easily as he could be harsh.

Instead of trying to get up, when his grip finally relaxed, Pani slid off his knee and fell to the floor. Her hands went behind her, tenderly framing her blistered backside, either unable or perhaps unwilling to touch her wounded flesh directly. Like a tormented beast, she crawled away from him to cower against the nearest wall.

"No," he told her, and she looked up at him, tears trembling on her lashes and spilling down her spotted cheeks. He beckoned her back to him. "Come here."

Her mouth quivered. But after only a slight hesitation, she reluctantly crept back to stand in front of him, clasping her bottom in a way that was increasingly more protective and less reflective of the pain.

Taking a napkin from the table, he wiped the tears from her cheeks, then held it to her nose. "Blow," he said.

She tried to turn her face away, then opened her mouth so she could breathe when he caught the back of her head to keep her from squirming away. He wiped her nose anyway, then stroked the stray wisps of copper hair back from her flushed face.

"That's enough of this kind of attitude, young lady. Like it or not, you're going to learn to behave yourself."

Her mane was a mess. Bach untied the ribbons that bound it so he could untangle the braids. When he got up to get his hairbrush from the bathroom, he half expected to find her scrambling to get out the door or window again. But she remained standing where he'd left her, in front of his chair, her hands rubbing slowly up and down around the edges of her sore bottom, her head bowed and her shoulders sagged in defeat.

Bach caressed her hair as he sat back down, then gently began to brush it. He was as careful as he knew how to be, smoothing out the tangles as painlessly as he could until her long mane was flowing as soft as silk all the way down past her waist. Parting the thick mass in the middle, he wove new braids neatly one to each side of her head and fastened the ends with the green ribbons again.

"There you go. All beautiful again." Laying a finger under her chin, he tilted up her head so he could see her face. Once more, he swiped away the lingering tears with the napkin, then leaned down and gently kissed her mouth.

The thin copper dashes of hair above her eyes quirked together as he pulled slowly back again. He looked at her, then at the pink ribbon bow of her mouth as she touched two fingertips to her lips.

There was a tingling in his groin. She had felt so...good. Bach stared at her, hardly able to believe how good. Hesitantly, he leaned down once more, cupping her chin gently between thumb and forefinger, and he kissed her again. Less like an owner with a favored and darling pet--certainly not anything like a parent comforting the child that her mane and dress resembled--but more like a man kissed the attractive woman that her breasts and hips suggested she was.

His hand cupped her cheek, his lips coaxed hers to part, and he invaded the sultry heat of her mouth with his tongue.

Pani mewed, and he pulled back to look at her. Her eyes were closed. Her arms, held straight down at her sides, ending in tightly clenched fists. She was breathing very quickly, panting even, her chest heaving.

"It's all right," he told her. "You don't need to be afraid."

Her eyes fluttered open again.

He wasn't quite sure what amazed him more: how hard he was from kissing her, or that she reached up to lay her hand along the side of his face and kissed him right back. Admittedly,

it was a very brief and shaky touch. But the instant she pulled away, she touched her mouth again.

Bach held out his hand, welcoming her into his lap. She'd surprised him with her kiss, but she shocked the hell out of him when she climbed up to straddle both his legs. She leaned into his arms so she could lay her head against his shoulder and caught her bottom with both hands again.

With soft sniffles and breathy gasps, she cried against his chest and let him comfort her.

* * * * *

The best part about being retired was that he never had to go anywhere. The worst part was that, consequently, he never went anywhere, either. He didn't have to go to work, so he sat at his computer all day or puttered about making minor repairs to a house that really didn't need it. Pani promised to put a stop to that.

As he sat at his desk watching her play--in actuality, she was more just sitting there, trying not to look as though she were staring back at him--he couldn't help but think of all the things he ought to buy for her. The first being a better formula, something specially designed for the human digestive system. He wasn't sure what her dietary needs were, but he was pretty sure that a continuous diet of protein drinks wasn't going to meet them.

Pani shifted onto her knees on the blanket and, in between casting him surreptitious glances now and then, began to sift through the array of toys spread out around her. Some were flashy with color, some made noises, musical and otherwise, and there was even the same maze that she'd hurled at him her first day home. It was undamaged and, remarkably enough, that was the one she reached for.

He made no secret now of watching her, ready to intervene with a sharp word or even another spanking if it looked as though she were going to throw it again. But she didn't. Instead, with a small sigh, Pani turned it on its side and began to work the marbles through the maze. Every now and then, she glanced up at him, but never held his gaze for very long. Even less often, the direction of her eyes would shift off towards the door.

She hadn't given up on the idea of escaping yet. Obviously, she was still thinking about running in the wild. Maybe she always would. Too bad there was no 'wild' for her to run to on his world. Just a few well-protected federal woodlands full of big animals that would consider her a tasty tidbit of a snack. There were also a lot of two-legged predators that thrived on the capture and sale of pets to medical facilities for cruel scientific experiments. Or to the sex trade, where a human's body became quickly worn-out from improper or non-existent pre-copulatory stretching and males, who pandered to their avarice and lacks of self-restraint while indulging in a cheap but exotic thrill.

If Pani were lucky enough to avoid that kind of fate, there were still more than a few unscrupulous breeders, who would take one look at her unusual coloring and promptly over-breed her for whelps with red manes and spotted skins.

There was a sharp 'clunk' as Pani rolled the first marble out of the maze and onto the floor.

She did have beautiful coloring. She bent forward a little as she set the maze back on the floor, and the bare and quite rosy cheeks of her bottom peeked out at him from beneath the short hem of her baby doll dress. He could see the plum-colored outline of his fingers in places, and the purplish-blue blotching in others where he'd struck often enough to make the shape of the bruising nondescript.

"Pick up the marbles and put them back in the maze," he said when she seemed inclined to leave them on the floor.

Pani sat back on her haunches, blinking at him with uncomprehending eyes, her hands on her knees.

"Go on, Pani." He added some hand gestures. "Pick them up."

She glanced down at the multitude of play things around her. Then, looking back up at him for confirmation, slowly reached down to pick up the maze again. She blinked at him, her head tilting to one side.

Bach got up and came over to her. Her look turned very nervous as he squatted down at the edge of her blanket. He made a show of retrieving the marbles. "Pick them up," he said, careful to keep his tone light and cheerful. "And put them--" one after the other, he dropped them back inside the plastic maze, "--away."

He smiled; she didn't. She put the maze down again.

"Here," he beckoned to her even as he reached out to take her arm. "Come here, Pani. Let me see your bottom."

Her eyes widened and her nostrils flared as he pulled her to him. When he started to bend her over on the blanket, she let out an ear-piercing wail. Her legs shot out behind her and she scrambled across the blanket--not to get away, but to get as close to him as possible, squeezing herself tight up against his chest and clutching his shirt in both hands. Most of what she chattered was gibberish, with sporadic words thrown in. "No, Pani, Papa! No spanked Pani! No, no, Papa!"

Bach pried her claw-like fingers off his shirt and through gentle prods and pushes, slowly got her to bend over on her knees.

"Pani hasn't been a bad girl," he said over the increased volume of her wails. "I'm not going to spank my Pani. It's okay, sweetheart. Don't be afraid. I just want to see how bad the bruising is. There's my good girl. That's right, all the way over."

She did not go willingly, but when he did finally get her all the way down, with her head on the blanket and her bottom in the air, she stopped fighting and immediately switched instead to covering her cringing cheeks with upturned palms. When he took her wrists, pinning them up behind her back and raising her dress to bare her, she burst into tears.

Her bottom became a tense little target, but Bach only gently traced the worst of the bruising, sliding the tips of his fingers beneath the plump curve and along the crease of her thighs. Her forlorn sobs tugged at his heart as he pried her buttocks apart. First one side and then

the other, noting the tiny round bruise, which he'd somehow landed right next to the dusky little rim of her anus.

"What a lot of fuss over nothing," he teased as, inspection completed, he gave her bottom a fond pat and let her up.

She was an instant scramble of mobility, hurling herself into his arms so forcefully that she pitched him over backwards. Bach landed flat on his butt on the floor, arresting his fall with one hand and grabbing hold of her with the other.

She shook in his one-armed embrace, burying her face into the crook of his neck, pulling her legs up to her chin so he had no choice but to hold all of her at once.

"No spanked!" she wept. "No spanked!"

He wasn't laughing now.

"It's all right, Pani," he whispered and hugged her just as tightly as she'd come to him. "I'm not going to spank you. I've got no reason to. You're being very good right now. You're okay. Shh, shh, no more crying, sweetheart. My misbehaving little miss."

He'd made a mistake. He'd taken her discipline too far too soon. Unfortunately, there was no going back in time to fix it.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Bach held her until his legs went to sleep.

Twice an hour every hour for the rest of the morning, he made it a point to bend her over his lap again. While she begged and cried and pleaded for 'No more spanked Pani', he softly stroked her. He massaged and rubbed her quivering bottom to show that not all touches from his hands were going to mean pain. From the small of her back to the bottoms of her feet, he made sure that he caressed every inch of her, and he didn't stop until her tears slowly turned to sniffles and her frantic words to the softest of moans.

While she still came to him with tears clinging to her lashes and trepidation all over her face every time he beckoned, by noon and her eighth trip face-down over his knees, at least she was no longer crying.

* * * * *

"We have a wide variety of leashes, colors and harnesses. A veritable rainbow array of colors to suit both your and your pretty pet's fancies," the man behind the Pet World sales counter said. He beamed a smile at Pani, who stood beside Bach, but only because he'd wrapped one of her braids around his hand like a leash. If he hadn't, he'd probably have had to chase her around the store the same way he'd had to chase her down when she'd ducked away from him in the parking lot. She'd only made it two steps before he snagged the back of her dress. A stern 'no' with an equally stern smack delivered to the seat of her bottom had stilled her struggles quite nicely.

Now, Pani alternated between looking from him, to the Salesman, to the rest of the store, its patrons and, in particular, to the other pets. This was definitely the place to come if you were the owner of a very spoiled human. Of the dozen or more in the store, Bach had only seen one so

far that was unclothed, and that had been a big, muscular male--a champion stud, as the brand on his hip had clearly shown. All the others had been dressed in short childish dresses or little service suits. There were bells and bows, chest as well as hip halters, and leashes clipped to waist, neck or hip collars, and even affixed to nipple rings worn by a black-skinned, black-haired beauty, who pranced behind her owner on shoes with four-inch-high heels, her nose in the air at least as high as her owner's. Funny how pets and people came to resemble one another after a while.

"We have six different kinds of formula," the man continued. "The best is, naturally, the most expensive, but it is also the most complete and nutritional meal on the market today. Scientifically balanced to tempt the palate as well as to meet the dietary needs of even the most finicky eater. It is flavorful, easy and quick to prepare, and can be fed to her through a syringe or bottle, if you prefer the intimacy of cradling her while she eats."

"Sold," Bach said. "Which aisle will I find it on?"

"Twelve." The Salesman smiled at Pani again. "Beautiful coloring. I don't believe I've ever seen such a vivid spot patterning before. Usually you only get a few faded dots on the face or arms, but to have so many..."

"They're all over, too," Bach said helpfully. Proudly even. As though he'd put her spots there himself.

"Absolutely beautiful."

"Thank you," Bach told him, with a slight bow of his head.

"Will you be breeding her?"

This question came from the woman who'd come up just behind Pani. She was the owner of the nude breeder male, who she held close to her via a short, black leash. She trailed the length of it through her slender fingers.

"I haven't decided yet," Bach said honestly.

The woman reached out to stroke the length of one of Pani's braids. "Such a lovely shade."

Pani jerked her head away, half turning when she felt the woman's fingers graze her mane.

Bach tightened his hold on her braid. "You be a good girl," he warned her.

"Flighty?" the woman asked.

"Spirited," Bach corrected. "And new. I've only had her for ten days now."

"I've had Mogo six years." She swept a regal hand back to indicate the champion male at the end of her leash. "I've been showing him for four. He's won more first place awards than I've got walls to display them. I've put him out to stud more than a hundred times. Impregnation is guaranteed if your female is healthy. You won't even need to stretch her first. He's not so large that he won't just slide right into her as easy as can be."

Bach looked down at the male, who was watching his Pani without a hint of betraying expression. "I'm not sure if I'm ready to have her bred."

"For a champion whelp with her coloring, I would stud him to your pet three times for free."

Bach didn't like the look of the champion male. He was a good deal bigger than Pani, and was exhibiting no signs of curiosity towards her. Not even the basic friendly behavior that he'd seen the other pets in the store displaying as they passed one another in the aisles: the touching of hands, waves or smiles.

Politely, he said, "Thank you. I'll keep that in mind." Then turned around and pulled Pani well out of the male's reach. "Come along. Let's get you some food and a leash."

He started for the food aisle, but the woman stepped in front of him. She touched Pani again, her fingers lightly skimming her cheek, then smiled up at Bach. "I'll make it worth your time. You can get double what you paid for her off of each champion whelp. And not only that, but wild females have been known to settle into domestication once they've given birth to young here."

Bach picked Pani up, shifting her to his other side and out of the woman's reach. "Thank you," he told her, still polite, but in a tone that was only barely so. "I'll keep that in mind."

This time, when he walked away, the woman stepped out of his way and let him go.

The formula was Stense's Just-Add-Water-and-Stir. Bach held onto Pani's braid with one hand as he read the back of a can of the powder. Optimal temperature was between ninety-eight and one-hundred-and-three to avoid burning the inside of her mouth and had to be mixed up fresh each meal to avoid the growth of harmful bacteria.

"Help Papa carry the cans," he told her, handing her two containers. He moved onto the harness and collar aisle next, leading her by her mane. "Let's see, what are our choices."

He picked through the display of organic weaves, plastic and finally settled on a brown leather leash, thick enough to let her pull and fuss if she had to, and thin enough to lay a whippy snap across her disobedient flanks. The edges were even nicely rounded so it wouldn't cut her skin if he did.

The collar he picked had a series of small bells all the way around the front, giving her movements a musical jingle. He bought her a gold, heart-shaped tag and had it engraved with her name and his home number and address.

"Will that be all for you today?" the Salesman asked as Bach set the formula on the counter.

"Do you have stretch kits here?"

"Only the finest in the industry. What size?"

"Beginner."

The Salesman disappeared below the counter, resurfacing a moment later with the kit of twelve vaginal inserts ranging from small to ever larger sizes. "We also have fitted sleeves, if you'd like to see them."

Taking the kit, Bach glanced up at him. "What are those?"

"A sleeve?" The Salesman leaned over the counter, lowering his voice just a little. "Well, unless your pet is modified..."

The man left it hanging like a question between them until Bach said, "She's not."

"Then you won't be able to fit all the way inside her female parts. So you slip a sleeve on before you enter her there. Not only does it provide a safety buffer in case you should, in a moment of passion, forget your strength and push too deeply, but it gives that extra bit of stimulation to make you feel as though you are all the way inside her." The Salesman straightened again. "Would you like to see our selection?"

"No, thank you." Bach cleared his throat. "Just the stretch kit, please."

"Would you like her microchipped as well?" the Salesman asked. "Pet-nappers can remove a collar, but there's no easy way of disguising an owner's chip. We can do it right here in the store. Only takes a minute."

"Isn't that a surgical procedure?"

"Oh no," the Salesman said. "We just tuck a chip under her skin between her shoulders. There might be a momentary twinge of discomfort, but they don't feel pain the way we do. Once it's over, she'll forget all about it."

Bach looked down at Pani, hugging the two cans of formula to her chest, her collar and leash dangling over her arm, staring back at him with unblinking eyes. "How much?"

"Ten dollars. It's the best way to keep your pet as safe as possible. Pet-nappers as a rule rarely mess with the microchipped ones."

Bach had his reservations, especially about the pain part. He'd smacked Pani's bottom enough times by now to know she certainly did react to pain. But he bowed to the Salesman's expertise. "All right."

"Microchip her?" he asked with a smile.

"Microchip her."

Despite the Salesman's assurances that she wouldn't feel much more than a twinge of discomfort, as Bach lay Pani face-down on the table in the tiny back room and held her arms so she couldn't squirm away from the knife mid-procedure, the instant the man cut the first tiny incision into her back, Pani sucked a startled breath and her whole body went as stiff as a board. She screeched when the microchip was inserted into the wound and writhed beneath Bach's restraining hands the whole time the hole was stitched together again.

"There," the man said and wiped away the last trickle of blood from the edges of the wound. "That wasn't so bad, now was it? She must think herself a little princess. All that fuss over one little cut."

Sitting on the edge of the table, Bach glared at him as he pulled the tearful Pani into his lap. Never again would he believe pets incapable of feeling pain.

"I'm sorry, baby," he patted her shoulders, rubbed her arms and kissed the tears from her cheeks. "You're okay now, sweetheart. My pretty little pet. You're okay now."

Already the wound on her back looked angry and red, the edges swelling around the ugly black stitches. He was sorry he'd done it. By the time she stopped crying enough to be gathered up for the trip back to the front of the store, she was hugging his hand and pressing her cheek into it.

"Good Pani," she whimpered. "Good Pani."

"Let's go home," he sighed. "Come on, Pani. No, I'm not going to carry you; you can walk. Come on."

He herded her back through the store, leading her by the braid again until they got to the sales counter. Without thinking, as he reached for his wallet, he let go of Pani.

She actually stayed by his side for several long seconds as he dug for his credit slip. She looked up at him and he down at her as he realized what he'd just done. Then like a flash she was gone, dashing past the shop aisles and nearly crashing into the automatic door which almost didn't register her approach.

"Pani!" he shouted, abandoning his wallet on the counter and running after her. "No, Pani!"

She dashed off the sidewalk and out into the street. His heart leapt into his throat when he heard the honk and squeal of tires as a transport vehicle slammed on its brakes in an attempt to avoid hitting her.

Flashbacks of the accident that had taken his family skidded through his mind even as he heard the squeals of the second vehicle. Pani jumped back as it slid screeching on the road top in front of her. She stood rooted to the concrete as the monstrous machine narrowly missed her and Bach caught up to her.

He grabbed the scruff of her dress, yanking her clean off her feet and hard against his chest. He caught several nasty looks from the irate drivers as he jogged with her back to the sidewalk, then traffic started up again.

Luckily, she hadn't caused an accident.

Luckily, she hadn't been killed.

His anger hit him so hard that for a moment he felt completely blinded by it. He dropped to one knee on the sidewalk.

Pani became unfrozen right quickly the instant he flung her over his make-shift lap. He flipped up the back of her dress, grabbed a hold of the back of her panties, and skinned them right down to the backs of her dimpled knees. It wasn't until he saw his own hand that he realized he was still holding the unpaid for collar and leash.

Just what he needed.

Just what she needed, too.

He stared at that strip of leather, his blood boiling for a full minute before he dropped the collar on the sidewalk. Pani screamed as he lashed into her with strong and angry strokes, the leash raising welts upon welts from the top of her bottom to the middle of her thighs.

"Don't you ever," he bit out, punctuating each word with a snap of the leash, "run out into the road like that again!"

He barely heard her shrill wails as he whipped her, but the comment that did finally sink through the anger to his ears came from a perfect stranger. The woman turned up her nose as she stomped past him. "Shameful conduct! To beat the little beast so!"

Bach flung the leash down on the sidewalk. He grabbed the scruff of her dress and hauled her upright again, jerking her yellow, ruffled panties back into place.

Pani immediately grabbed the back of her underwear. Through gritted teeth, she hissed breath after pain-filled breath. Her hot bottom all but sizzled, and he knew the scrape of elastic against the purpling welts couldn't have been comfortable, but he folded his arms across his chest and glared down at her, a veritable mountain of disapproval.

"You, young lady," he growled when she peeked sadly up at him, "will either learn how to mind, or be one very sorry, very sore little pet sitting down."

He buckled the collar around her neck and dragged her back into the store, with her fighting the leash every step of the way. As he paid for his purchases, he picked up the stretch kit and opened it.

"It's obvious I gave you too many privileges too soon," he said as he removed the instructions. He opened them, skimming the page for how the inserts should be used, then picked one up. He turned it over in his fingers, examining the penis-shaped plug from all sides. "Well, that's all going to change as of right now. You need a routine, Pani."

Holding onto the leash with both hands, she looked from the plug in his hand to him, her eyes wide and salty tears still flowing down both cheeks.

"A regular disciplinary routine will do a wild sprite like you a world of good." He replaced the implant and snapped the kit shut again. "When we get home tonight, my naughty little miss, discipline is exactly what you are going to get."

Chapter Five

"Since I can't trust you not to run away," Bach said as he tightened the straps around her legs, "you're going to be kept on a very short and confining leash."

Pani moaned into her gag, but she couldn't move to protest. He'd tied her legs and waist, bent over the back of a cushioned chair. Her feet dangled off the ground by a good six to eight inches, and he'd slipped a pillow beneath her hips to protect them from the bruising bite of the wooden back. Her arms were completely encased from her fingertips to above her elbows in a black leather sleeve, which bound her forearms parallel to one another behind her back.

"You're going to have to prove to me that you can be a good girl, before I give you a little freedom back."

He fetched a bottle of soothing lotion from the bathroom to rub into her bottom. The leash had definitely done its job. Her wounded flesh was hot to the touch and her muscles tightened--the only movement she could manage--as he massaged the lotion into plum-colored welts, some as thick as his smallest finger. It had to hurt; she moaned almost continuously, tossing her head and rapidly blinking back tears when he touched the worst of them. But Bach continued to rub until her quivering bottom was slick and slippery beneath his hand.

She twisted her face back, her grey eyes pleading with him to stop, but he ignored her.

"Pani has been a naughty girl," he told her implacably. "And Pani is going to bear the consequences of her actions. But, first things first..."

He went to the bathroom, returning a short time later with a shallow pan. Narrow and long, he inserted the cold metal between her splayed thighs and held it just beneath her hips.

"All right, now," he said. "Go potty."

She only whimpered, her taut muscles straining at her bonds.

"Pani," he warned.

She glanced back at him with her huge and uncertain eyes.

Lowering the pan, Bach first cupped her womanhood, and then he spanked it. Just hard enough to make her jump and gasp.

"Go potty, Pani, or Papa will have to spank you again." His fingers clapped five times in not-so-gentle succession against the fleshy folds between her legs. "You've already earned yourself more than you want to take, I promise you."

Other than her name and the one she knew to be his, he knew she didn't understand a word of what he was saying. But when he flattened his spanking palm over her small bottom, her whole body stiffened in anticipation of another swat. Then Bach tapped the pan between her legs again. Her head bowed and she whimpered once, before urinating, the trickle of fluid pattering softly against the metal bottom. Her face flushed miserably, and she didn't look at him. But when she was done, he didn't take the pan away, either.

"Come on." He shifted the pan between her thighs and tapped the dusky rim of her bottom hole with one finger. "I know you have to. You haven't gone since I brought you home. You're going to be uncomfortable enough in a few minutes. You don't want to make it worse."

He knew she understood him when her face flushed even redder than her sore buttocks. He waited patiently, holding the pan beneath her while she didn't move. Just when he was about to lay a motivating swat upon her, he saw the tiny brown bud of her anus begin to work.

When she was done, Bach carried the mess from the living room, returning a short time later with a warm washcloth in his hand. He cleaned her from front to back twice before dropping the cloth in the bathroom clothes hamper. At the sink, he mixed together a solution of soap and lukewarm water, pouring it into a Gerfel-brand personal cleanser. It was really just an oversized metal and glass syringe, with a long, narrow nozzle that was capped at one end with a removable rubber plug and a rotating handle at the other. Eight complete turns would push a rubber plate through the syringe, emptying it. After rinsing out the metal pan, he took it and the syringe back to the living room.

He spread out a towel on the floor between Pani's splayed legs, and another behind her just in case. From the open stretch kit, Bach took a tube of clear lubricating gel and applied a liberal dab directly to the end of the nozzle as well as to that nervous brown bud, winking as it was between rosy cheeks that were trying so desperately to clench together to hide it.

"This isn't going to be comfortable," he said as he uncapped the end of the nozzle and tucked it right up to her anal opening. "But I want you to be all cleaned out for Papa."

Despite her instant clenching, the nozzle slipped effortlessly past the dusky rim and deep inside her bottom. Because she was so tiny and the syringe was not made for pets, he only pushed it halfway inside her, before eight slow turns of the handle gradually forced the soapy solution up into her bowels.

Pani's whimpers turned to growling groans and, despite the discomfort, her bottom automatically struggled to hold onto the solution. With the syringe nozzle deeply imbedded, he sifted through the stretch kit, picking up and discarding different sized vaginal as well as anal inserts until he found one no bigger than the thickness of his thumb. As he withdrew the nozzle, he quickly replaced it with the insert, effectively plugging the mixture within her with little more than a slick pop as it forced her body to accept it. She stiffened sharply, squeaking her indignation at being so invaded, though the gag all but swallowed the sound.

Bach tapped the plug all the way into her and held it pressed as deep as it would go with the tip of his finger against the wide black base that parted her buttocks. When he was sure it would stay and that Pani couldn't expel it before he deemed it time, he took his hand away. He had nothing to do now but take his time.

He mixed up a second syringe in the bathroom, the water this time hotter than the last since it would have time to cool before he could use it, then washed his hands.

Back in the living room, he lay the syringe on the floor between her legs and settled upon his knees to explore her narrow sex with its strangely inside out clitoris.

Pani groaned and grunted, her whole body trying so hard to contort in her bonds, to expel the awful liquid having its intended effect within her, and to somehow evade his finger as he pressed it up to her woman's passage. She was smooth as silk inside, the walls of slick muscle

clamping down and squeezing his finger, a very welcoming feel despite the teary-eyed look of pleading she gave him.

There was one sweet spot, he noted curiously that, when caressed, brought Pani's whole body into a jolt of motionlessness. She sucked a startled breath, and when he caressed the spot again, closed her eyes and bowed her head, pressing her forehead into the seat of the cushioned chair.

"Do you like that?" he asked. He was barely able to reach the spot and had to press deep in order to stroke it with the tip of his finger.

Her thighs clenched and the length of her silken sheath squeezed around him, shivering much the way a real woman's would as her orgasm came upon her.

So, Pani could have orgasms, he thought, a slow smile spreading across his face. That gave him an advantage.

He parted the folds of her labia with his other hand. Licking two fingers, he gently peeled back the hood that shielded her misplaced clit. Her head came up, and she sucked in another deep breath through her nose as he stroked the sensitive tip of the tiny nub he revealed.

"Oh yes," he rumbled, chuckling as her hips tried to bucked against his hands. "Pani is going to be a very good girl for her Papa, now isn't she?"

Her bonds held her so tightly that she could barely move an inch in any direction. But as he began a rhythm of flicking and circling that hitherto hidden nub, her squirms to get away became grinding motions as she used her meager inch of mobility to ride her hips upon his fingers.

She was growing wet and quivery and more silky feeling deep inside. Bach withdrew his fingers, piercing her with two now, stretching and filling her to her accompanying moan as she struggled to move on them.

She dropped her forehead back to the cushions again, long low moans fighting their way past her gag. She was very tight, her sheath squeezing the twin digits he was stroking long and as deep as he could reach inside her. He removed them after barely half a minute, added a third finger and thrust them hard inside her. She was so stretched now to take him that he could feel the plug in her bottom against the back of his knuckles.

Pani whimpered, thrashing her head, alternately stiffening upright as far as her bonds would allow, then collapsing back on the cushions. She shook, but the wet, slick sound of her sex as he pounded his fingers in and out left him with no doubt of just how much she was enjoying this, despite her pleading expression and the plaintive noises she was making.

He watched her body carefully, and as the pitch and desperation of her cries intensified. The inner walls of her womanhood locked down on his fingers, holding him fiercely close, shivering, her hips grinding and humping upon his hand. He abruptly stilled his fingers, pressing them firmly between her legs until the threat of her coming had passed.

"Not just yet," he told her. "Pani has been a bad girl, after all. If you want to spend with me, my little miss, you're going to have to show me you can be good."

He got up and walked out of the room while she wailed her protest into her gag. He went to the kitchen and made some coffee, then brought it to his desk so he could check the news on his computer and keep an eye on her.

She was trying hard not to look at him, but the discomfort of her soapy enema had her sniffing soft breathy sounds and whimpering out tearful, "Papa" sounds around her gag. He got up to check the temperature of the next enema. Still a little hot, but almost right. So he gave her another minute before picking up the pan again.

The plug popped out of her with very little difficulty, so while she groaned and cried, expelling violently into the pan he held beneath her, he set it aside and selected the next largest size. When she was completely empty, he got the second syringe and slid it right up inside her bottom, ignoring her cries as he emptied it into her. She tried to expel right away, but he pushed the second insert deep into place, the widest section of the plug causing a mew of pain as it popped past her reluctant rim and settled into place. He left the enema to work its humbling magic and carried the pan down to the bathroom to empty it and wash his hands a second time.

Once more, he knelt down behind her, wasting no time in finding her inside out clit and inserting his three fingers back up to find that sweet spot that heightened her enjoyment. This time she tried hard to feign indifference to his touch. She turned her face away, closing her eyes and holding herself still. As still as a model of stone, all but her hips, which could not maintain the lie. They moved upon his caressing fingers in tiny concentric circles.

He didn't allow her completion this time either. He let her come right to the brink of her first heavenly spasm, before he took his hands away. She shouted her frustration as he sat back on his heels, and for that he landed a volley of sharp swats all over her exposed rump.

"That is not being good," he chided as he spanked her.

He left her sobbing on the chair's cushions while he got another cup of coffee from the kitchen, and sat at his desk while he sipped it. Listening to her sniffles and gag-muffled mews, he studied her round, vulnerable backside.

There was no way he'd ever be able to sink himself all the way inside her, at least not vaginally. Not unless he had her modified--an expensive and, for Pani, very painful procedure, that would result in his never being able to breed her at all. The idea of that didn't particularly hurt his feelings, but there was a long line of people who'd probably shoot him if he did that.

Ah, but her bottom--he leaned over to pat one blushing cheek fondly. Now that he could sink into as deeply as he liked. Once he got her stretched, of course. He caressed two fingers in to tap at the wide black base of the stretch plug, pressing it in as far as it would go and eliciting a deep groan from Pani in the process.

He'd probably tear her terribly if he tried to mount her right now. As disobedient as she'd been, she hardly deserved that kind of punishment. And to be honest, the idea that she might actually want to receive his affections enough to present herself to him for the mating wasn't exactly an unappealing one. To hurt her so badly now would all but guarantee that she never came to him willingly.

It took three enemas total before he deemed her cleaned out enough to proceed. Pani was quite miserable by the time he took away the final pan, but if she thought her ordeal over, she was in for a rude surprise.

After Pani's last failed escape attempt, Bach had gone back through the pet store and added a number of new items to his purchase. Most he had found down the training aisles, like the waist halter with a leather strap that ran up between the legs and could be cinched so tightly as to keep a disobedient pet extremely mindful. Others--like the darling little Bad Girl chair, which was just the right size for Pani and which now occupied her 'favorite' living room corner--he had found in furniture.

Untying her from the chair, Bach led her by the braid to his desk and sat down. After draping a fresh towel over his thighs, he lay her across his lap, adjusting her bottom so it was centered and well elevated. Her feet left the floor behind her, and she muffled a apprehensive moan as, with hands still restrained in the sleeve, she remained completely dependent on him to keep from pitching forward onto her nose.

Bach removed her current bottom insert and upgraded to the next size. Instead of just popping it in as he'd done with the rest, he took his time re-lubing both her tender, small anus as well as the length of the thick plug. This one was quite a bit larger than the last and would not go in as easily as the others had.

He settled the tip up against her anus and gradually pressed in to open her slowly. Her breathing changed as he nosed it in and out. Her initial hums as she comfortably took the small end changed to gasps and then to grunts as the length of it sank nearly halfway to the widest point. Bach knew at which point the procedure turned painful because Pani clenched down in an attempt to keep him out.

He spanked her once, a reprimanding swat, "Relax your bottom!"

he mewed, thrashing her legs as she fought--not so much to get away from him, for a change, but to get away from the discomfort of being so invaded.

"I said be still, Pani!" he snapped.

Two hard smacks to the already bruised summits of each buttock froze her mid-squirm. She went limp over his lap, her moans rising to wails in volume, climbing to higher and higher pitches the deeper he push the plug. She raised one knee, trying so hard to remain still and relaxed because each time her bottom clenched, he swatted her again.

"You relax your bottom like I've told you, young lady. I'll have you wear this all night if that's what it takes before you'll mind me!"

He swatted her again for good measure, and Pani's cries switched to low, guttural grunts of agonized relief as her tender bottom hole finally took the widest section of the base and accepted its brutal passage.

Her tears spilled unhindered down both cheeks. She drooped back down over his lap, panting and sobbing with the pangs of hurt that ravaged her. Bach didn't let her rest long. This was for punishment after all, and she had well and truly deserved this.

He gave her no time to get used to the plug before he pulled it out again. With one arm wrapped tightly about her waist, he began a slow and deliberate thrusting rhythm that made the aching rim of her bottom's entrance give way to the passage of that bulbous base over and over again. In and out. Until she was sobbing, her feet scrambling on the floor, and her face drenched with tears she didn't bother to blink back. Then he seated it deep inside her again.

He fastened her into her brand new waist harness and ran the strap up between the wet lips of her labia. The leather strip cut into her sex as he cinched it tight enough to keep her from being able to remove the insert, either deliberately or due to the pressures of her body as it fought the plug.

Then, sitting her onto her Bad Girl chair, he left her to face the corner while he worked at his desk until lunch.

He got his first encouraging sign of success in regards to her taming when he brought her that first bottle of specialized formula and said, "All right, Pani. If you're all done being naughty, you may come out now."

Very slowly, trying to keep her legs apart, Pani stood up. With tiny limping steps, she gingerly turned around. Every movement must have felt as though the strap were slicing her in half, and if she could have walked without moving her legs, she probably would have done so. But at last her back was to the wall and she stood staring up at him, miserably silent, her eyes red-rimmed and her nose running.

"Are you going to behave?" he asked.

Her bottom lip wobbled. Slowly, her eyes squinted shut and her lips peeled back from her teeth in a grimace of sheer misery. Her shoulders shook as she cried. She neither reached for him nor tried to get away when he came to her, but covered her face with both hands instead and sagged against the wall, her back arching in an attempt to relieve the pressure between her legs.

She looked so forlorn that, punishment or not, Bach picked her up and carried her back to his chair. Murmuring nonsensical words of comfort, he cradled her tightly with one arm as he unfastened her harness and dropped it on the floor with the other.

"Oh Papa, oh Papa," she mewed, burying her face into his neck. The words became whimpers as he took hold of the plug. He pulled it out with far more care and gentleness than when he'd put it in, but still her cries turned to screeches when the widest section forced her sore rim to expand one final time and it came out of her.

"Good girl," he comforted, and set the plug on top of the harness.

"Good girl, Pani" she cried, and he pulled her very, very close, cupping her bottom, two fingers dipping between her wounded buttocks to massage her sore anus. It opened very easily to the slightest touch of his fingertips, and she felt very warm inside.

"Lay down," he said with a final, fond pat.

"Lay down, Pani," she sniffled, but didn't move.

The corners of his mouth quirked upwards. "Good girl, Pani," he told her, and stroked her hair, the long coppery braids that went all the way down to her waist.

"Good girl," she whispered, but she turned her head, looking directly at him.

"Good girl." He stroked her hair and her soft cheek, his thumb passing once across the bow of her small mouth.

Her moist lips parted, and she hesitated a moment before saying, "Good girl, Pani."

He smiled. "That's right. Lay down." His hand settled on her chest and he gave a gentle push to help her understand.

Slowly, blinking at him several times, Pani leaned backwards until her head was cushioned in the crook of his elbow. She shifted halfway on to her side so she could face him. And when he picked up the bottle, she sighed, but reached for it with no more than a resigned grimace.

"No." He pulled it back out of her reach. "Put your hands down."

Body language was a wonderful thing. When he pulled the bottle back, she automatically hesitated, then dropped her hands to rest against his chest between them.

Bach lowered the bottle to her mouth. "Open," he said, and slid the oversized nipple past her lips. It was too big for her, filling her mouth and putting her in a swallow or choke quandary. From the look that crossed her face the instant the formula crossed her tongue, he could tell that swallowing was the last thing she wanted to do. She hated the taste.

He wasn't very sympathetic. When she tried to turn her head away, he pursued her with the bottle and kept it firmly lodged. "You had a chance to eat real food and you chose to be difficult. So you can eat this now."

She also chose to choke and gag, although that lasted only until he swatted her.

"Be good," he told her firmly. "Drink your lunch."

Pani settled down, her eyes--which had widened when he'd smacked her bottom--now narrowed to sulky slits. She glared at his chest, no longer brave enough to attempt defiance, but certainly nowhere near to submissive, either. He pretended to ignore it. Halfway through her bottle, he heard the computer beep with another incoming call.

From his favorite chair, he could barely reach the answer key without having to get up.

"Greetings, Sir Bauer," came Nil Ralhan's disembodied voice through the monitor. "I hope the day finds you. . .hello? Is anyone there?"

"I'm here," Bach said as he continued to feed Pani. "We are halfway through our lunch bottle at the moment."

"Splendid!" Ralhan gushed. "How is she working out for you, if I may presume to ask? We here at Exotics, Inc., are dedicated to providing excellent matches between owners and their pets. We didn't know her personality before we sold her to you, so naturally making a match was a little difficult in this case. Being fresh from the wild, we didn't get to see her personality except under extreme medication. But if an exchange needs to be made, our dedication to customer service dictates--"

"Absolutely not." Bach didn't raise his voice, but the firmness came through well and clear. Not only did it stop Ralhan mid-sentence, but Pani stopped drinking. The look that came over her face was distinctly nervous, as though she were afraid that sternness was directed at her.

"Good girl," he told her soothingly, and her quirked eyebrows slowly smoothed out as her face relaxed. To Ralhan, he then said, "I can't say we haven't had our difficulties, but I have no desire to give her up. Although she did try to run away earlier, she is right now lying as sweet as can be in my arms and I'd like to keep her there. She is my family."

Ralhan smiled. "I'm glad to hear you say that. That's how I feel about my pets, too."

"She is also building quite the vocabulary, and I'd like to see how far it goes."

The agent's voice dropped, but the note of excitement was obvious. "She's talking? Already? What is she saying?"

"Pani knows her name already."

"Good name, that."

"She knows Papa."

"Splendid, splendid!"

"And she can say 'no'. . ."

"Amazing how quickly they learn that one," Ralhan chuckled.

"She just said 'good girl' and 'lay down' for the first time a few minutes ago. Although it's a toss up as to whether she understands what those two phrases actually mean."

"That is still very good, especially since she is still so wild. Neither of mine said a word for the first several months! I take it then you would not be interested in trading her for a tamer pet?"

"No, I would not." Almost finished with her bottle, Pani again paused to look at him, making sure the sharpness of his tone wasn't directed at her. "We are still working on proper discipline, but I am content to keep her."

"A good spanking can certainly help them learn the rules," Ralhan said sagely. "In fact, I spank both of mine on sheer principle at least once a week, whether they bring me their paddles or not."

Mildly surprised, Bach turned his head towards the computer monitor. "They bring you their paddles?"

"Oh yes. I encourage it. Whenever they feel they deserve a good spanking, they're to bring me their paddles--they each have their own, you see--and I blister their little bottoms quite soundly. The spanks are naturally hard for them to bear, but the sessions are nowhere near as severe than as if they'd tried to hide their naughtiness and I catch them in the act of deception. Or if they go too long--which generally means they've done something, but I failed to catch it--then I'll give them a reminder lesson. As I'm sure you've seen, Pani, like most of her species, is fairly intelligent beyond simple mimicry. Pets have been known to attack their owners if not given the proper obedience training. Humans respect spankings. It doesn't take them long at all to learn that biting the hand that cares for them will result in a swift and uncomfortable consequence."

Having finished the last of the formula, Pani spat out the nipple and with a grimace of disgust turned her face away. Bach couldn't help but smile, although her disgruntled look was enough for him to roll her over onto her stomach.

Suddenly finding herself face-down over his lap again, her disagreeable expression vanished and her whole body became as stiff as a board. She grabbed a hold of his leg, her eyes saucer-wide as she twisted back her head to stare forlornly up at him when his hand settled on her bottom. He patted her twice.

"That sounds very effective," he said.

"If you'd like to learn a few tricks to make the taming easier, perhaps we can arrange a pet play-date. I could give you some training pointers to use on Pani."

Bach patted her bottom again, then rubbed. Realizing that she wasn't about to be spanked again, Pani relaxed beneath his caresses. Very hesitantly, she spread her legs to give him better access, catching her breath as he obligingly shifted his hand between her bare bottom cheeks.

"I suppose I could use some pointers," he said, smiling as she let go of his leg to reach beneath herself. Before his eyes, she stroked between her own thighs with trembling fingertips, parting the folds of her narrow sex and holding them open for him.

"Call me tomorrow," Bach heard himself say, and for the life of him, he couldn't say whether Ralhan got a chance to reply before he terminated the call.

Pani lay as if frozen on his lap, hardly even seeming to breathe as she held herself open to him. Soft, wet and pink, like the petals of a flower unfurled, she waited for him.

Once more, Bach smoothed his hands over her body, stroking down her shoulders to her back, to the round, battered flesh of her buttocks, and her tense and widely spread thighs. She shivered when he reached for the stretch kit and removed the next largest-sized insert, this time the longer one specifically made for females.

Pani whimpered when he spread a small amount of cool gel into the narrow slit framed by her fingers, but made no effort at all to resist him. Instead, she lay her head upon his thigh when he found her inside-out clit and resolutely closed her eyes.

Chapter Six

"It's a weakness," Ralhan said, when he answered the door to Bach's knock and Bach first saw the plump blonde from Exotics, Inc., sitting cross-legged on the floor, clutching a stuffed toy to her chest. "When that breeder came through and set his eyes on her, I just had to have her. She's much too sweet to go to that kind of place. The scoundrel, I told him she was already sold and refused to buckle, not even when he doubled his price."

"That's the last of them, isn't it?" a woman said from the back doorway. A stately and comely creature, her black hair was piled high in a graceful tower of curls atop her head, her dark eyes glittered warmly and there was a knowing smile upon her face in spite of her tone.

Nil Ralhan closed the door behind Bach. "Sir Bauer, may I introduce to you my wife, Etle."

Etle glided into the room on a wave of soft perfume. She clasped her hands before her and bowed low to Bach's superiority, the square neckline of her full-length gown revealing the soft curve of her breasts. "We are honored to have you as our guest."

"I am grateful to have been invited into your peaceful home," Bach nodded back.

"No home with seven children and three pets is ever peaceful," she laughed, her dark eyes twinkling. "But I thank you all the same." Her gaze fell to Pani, who was standing very close to Bach's right leg, her hands clinging to his trousers. Without a change in her ethereal expression, Etle thwacked her husband on the arm with the back of her elegant hand. "You should have brought her home."

"You said--"

"I was wrong."

Ralhan's eyes widened. "My, my," he said. "This is the--"

"Don't start," she told him, neatly ending the conversation.

Bach swallowed hard, but managed to smile. He missed those kinds of arguments.

"She is attractive, isn't she?" Bach extended his hand down the short length of Pani's leash, pulling her out from behind his leg. She came, but reluctantly, and stood in the middle of the Ralhans' living room with a thoroughly unnerved look on her face. Bach could understand it. After spending the last two weeks alone with him, it must have been very disconcerting for her to suddenly find herself in a strange house with three other female pets.

She gargled something in human-speech at them, but Minmin and Binnie only gave her blank looks. Sassa spoke back at her, but whatever she said unnerved Pani even more and she looked up at him with ill concealed frustration. He could see it in her eyes; she thought he was going to abandon her here. From the glare she gave him, he was pleased to note, the idea didn't strike her as a happy one.

He had dressed her this morning in a small child's white play dress that tied at the back between her shoulders, but left her exposed bottom a very open and available target. Matching tights and a baby's soft shoes with pink bows on the toes completed the image of a very spoiled and pampered pet. Her coppery mane was done up in the three ponytails--two on top of her head

and one at the back of her nape--which was customarily worn by very young school children. She mixed right in with Ralhan's quite obviously cherished pets.

"This is my oldest one, Minmin," the agent said, pointing to the taller of the three. Slender as a twig, she was dressed in a sunny yellow jumpsuit, with a white bow in her short brown hair.

"Binnie, get your feet down," Etle told to the smaller of three.

Laying on her back with her shoes kicking at the arm of the sofa, Binnie gave Etle a mutinous look, but took her feet off the cushions and put them back on the floor. Her little blue dress had a white bib front with a stitched flower on it. Her curly blonde hair was just long enough to pull into two pigtails at either side of her head.

Etle looked to Ralhan, who frowned and nodded, and she stepped in amongst the pets to take Binnie by the arm, hauling her to her feet.

"No, no, Momma!" Binnie cried out as Etle lead her from the living room and down the hall to one of the back rooms.

Bach heard the pet begin to cry a short minute before a distant door closed, muffling the sound.

"She's been a little pouty since we brought Sassa home," Ralhan explained. "Jealousy, you know. She'd grown used to being the baby of the family."

Sassa hugged her toy closer and Pani jumped when, despite the muffling of the door, they heard the first crisp smack of what quickly became the sounds of a regal spanking. Binnie's wails reached ear-piercing decibels within the first twenty vigorous swats, and still the spanking carried on for a good long time.

"I do believe Etle's had enough of that attitude," Ralhan stated.

The shrieks escalated into frantic howls, and Sassa began to cry. Pani turned around, tangling herself on her leash to look up at Bach. With very wide eyes, she tried again to hide behind him.

Minmin was the only one that seemed unaffected by the sound. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she opened a picture book in her lap and flipped through the pages.

Ralhan stepped around Minmin to pick up Sassa. "She's a sensitive thing," he told Bach. "Cries every time the other two get their tails reddened. In fact, she hardly needs any spanking at all herself."

He lifted the back of her pink dress and pulled up the leggings of her panties to show the fresh bruising that decorated the curve of her rump. "She got that last night. I was very gentle with her really. Of course, she carried on like I was killing her. Her first weekly spanking. She was truly devastated. I had to hold her for an hour afterward, poor thing sobbed herself dry. What's worse, she doesn't understand anything you say to her unless it's 'hello', so I couldn't even explain to her that weekly spankings were going to be a permanent part of her life with us."

Ralhan stroked her hair, dropping a fond kiss onto her forehead when Sassy wrapped her arms around his neck and lay her head on his shoulder. "I do think from now on, though, I'll only give her a fraction of the paddling I give Binnie and Minmin, who need it more."

Bach admired the marks on Sassa's flanks, then pulled Pani from out behind his leg again. Unclipping her leash, he set it on a small table and turned Pani around. Lifting the back of her dress, he pushed her panties down just far enough to bare the summits of her buttocks.

Pani squirmed to yank them back up and even tried to grab his hands to keep him from pulling her underwear farther down. In the end, Bach pinned both her wrists behind her back and hugged her close to still her struggles. Lifting the back of her dress once more, he revealed the cluster of purplish lines crisscrossing all over her otherwise cream-colored buttocks from the top of her crack to the top of her thighs.

"My, my," Ralhan said. "Are those switch marks, or cane?"

"We had a bit of a tantrum yesterday when it came time for her daily stretching. It took two switches before she'd settle down enough for me to strap her over the chair." Bach patted her hip when he let her go, and Pani, blushing furiously, pulled her panties back up in one yank.

Facing his chest, she sidled herself back into his embrace and stared off down the hallway. Binnie's cries were loud and gaspy sobs, and the crisp smacking sounds, while no longer landing as frequently as before, could still be heard quite well.

Pani's chest heaved as she breathed. She glanced up at Bach with wide, solemn eyes. "Good girl Pani?"

"Yes," he reassured, caressing her long mane. "Pani's a good girl."

Ralhan's eyes bugged. "She said that so clearly!"

"I told you. She's building quite the vocabulary. She says something new almost every day now: more, potty, night-night, bowl, cup. Just this morning, she had the nerve to say 'Bad Papa' when I spanked her for going back to bed after I'd already got her up twice."

Ralhan laughed.

And in the back of the house, the spanking stopped. The only sounds still audible were Binnie's breathless sobs and the low murmur of Etle's voice as she comforted and lectured the thoroughly punished pet.

"When she comes out," Ralhan said, "you'll be astonished at the transformation one little hairbrush can make. Binnie gets a good one like that at least once a week. It's a good training technique."

"Speaking of which," Bach said as he patted Pani's back and let her go. "I could use some advice."

"On?"

"Eating," Bach said simply. "Pani won't. I have to force her just to get her to take a bottle, but when it comes to solid foods, she won't even try it. So tell me, Sir Ralhan, and I will bow to your expertise: How do I get Pani to eat?"

* * * * *

Pani was positively swallowed up by the sheer size of the table and chairs Ralhan had set up for the pets. There were now five, plus one child. Ralhan had placed a call to his neighbors,

who'd sent over their daughter, Rasha, and her pet, Mot. Mot was a dark-haired, dark-eyed male, dressed in a soft blue- and green-striped dress, floppy floral hat, and holding a matching hand pouch two-sizes too large for him. When they all sat down to tea, on Rasha's command Mot poured. Mot was a very long-suffering pet.

Party or no, Pani did not look like she was having a good time. Every time she blinked, her eyes shifted from Mot to another pet to the child--which made Bach a little nervous, since Pani was still considered quite wild and not very predictable under the best of circumstances--then to him, then back to Mot again.

"Biscuits all around," Rasha said as she extended the plate of cookies to each pet in turn.

They all took one except for Sassa, who took two. When the plate was offered to Pani, she made no move to be cooperative.

Finally, Bach said, "Pani..."

Her gaze slid across the room to his, then she made a face and took a cookie.

"Everybody eat," Rasha said, and she began very delicately to pick up her biscuit, a messy piece stuffed with cream, and neatly bit into it.

Leaning back in his chair, one hairy leg swinging idly, Mot unfolded one arm from across his chest long enough to snag a cookie and all the pets ate. Except, of course, for Pani, who stared at hers.

Bach sighed. He had to pick out the most difficult pet. "Pani," he warned again.

She ate, but very grudgingly.

"She'll get it," Ralhan said. "Patience is the key, you know."

"With her stubborn streak, it'll take the patience of Booj to gain her cooperation."

Ralhan smiled.

"Does it ever make you wonder though?" Bach asked, and both Nil and Etle looked at him. "What kind of thoughts go through their heads? There has to be more there than blind animal instinct and the vague intelligence of a wild, natural mimic. Some of the things she does are more than just clever. Every so often I find myself wondering if humans can actually reason."

"They're animals," Nil Ralhan said. "I am most infatuated with the species. They are funny, smart, and cute. They seem so much like little children, and I think that's part of their appeal. And maybe even why, upon occasion, we might be inclined to think them something grander than what they are. But it all comes down to brain size. Little brains equal limited intellectual capacities. They are animals. Intelligent to a point, but no more so than well-trained monkeys from our world. As clever as they are, sadly," Ralhan gestured to the tea party with one long hand, "this is all they are capable of."

"Everybody drink," Rasha commanded.

It only took a look from Bach for Pani to pick up her cup with the others, but she didn't drink. She was saved from that by the distraction Mot made when he accidentally bumped elbows with Minmin and dumped his teacup into his lap.

"Mot, bad boy!" Rasha scolded as he jumped up from the table with a shout, yanked his soiled dress off his burning legs and sucked a pained breath through gritted teeth. "You got my dress all dirty! I hope Mama spansks your bottom!"

Etle was significantly more sympathetic as she hurried to look at his legs. "Oh dear, look at that color. Rasha, dear, take your pet home. He needs to see a vet."

Rasha looked at the red marks on his thighs, then made a face as she got down off her chair. "Oh, all right!"

Pani dropped both her cookie and tea cup the instant Rasha led Mot from the table and dragged him out the door. Minmin and Binnie leaned their heads together to quietly gargle back and forth, while Sassa leaned over and helped herself to another biscuit. Swinging her legs and humming happily to herself, she took a big bite and, noticing Pani staring, offered her a bite as well.

Pani got down from the table. She stalked into the living room to get her leash, clipped one end to her collar, then marched herself to the front door. Folding her arms across her chest, she glared at it and waited.

It couldn't have hit Bach any plainer than that. Regardless of Ralhan's and perhaps even the rest of the world's opinions, Pani definitely had a thought process. There was more than just a sub-standard intellect at work behind those cross, grey eyes. There was reasoning and logic. Pani was sentient.

Pani was people.

Etle clasped her hands before her. "A session or two with my hairbrush will take care of all that naughty pridefulness."

Pani turned on her heel and gave him the most blatantly irritated look. She began to tap her foot.

She couldn't possibly be people, Bach thought with a sudden irrational anger all his own. She was a mimic. A clever little pretender who had the moves down right, but none of the thought behind them. This was a force of wills. She was being defiant, nothing more.

"Do it," he said darkly.

From the moment that Etle caught hold of her arm, Pani fought, kicked and howled the whole way down that dark hall to the back room. From the sounds of it, she fought, kicked and howled the whole way over Etle's lap.

"Why you silly bit of nuisance," Bach heard Nil's wife say, a mild expletive stated in her mild, unhurried and unconcerned tone.

Then the crisp smacking began, hard and quick and Pani's howls became screams. It was everything Bach could do not to run down to that room and grab Pani out of hairbrush's reach, especially when she began to scream for him by name.

"They all sound like that when Etle wields the brush," Ralhan said. "She'll be sitting tenderly for a day or two, but then she'll be fine."

He was getting that nervous look on his face again, so Bach smoothed his expression into the same unreadable mask he'd used so often while working as an agent for Remeik.

"She's getting only what she deserves," Bach said, but he still felt guilty. And it was made even worse when, presumably realizing that he wasn't coming for her, Pani's wails turned wordless and forlorn.

Bach was so intent of Pani that he didn't even hear when Sassa broke down, covering her ears with both hands to block out the sounds. Ralhan got up to comfort her, leaving Bach on the verge of charging down that hall to snatch up his beloved pet and leave with her while she still had a bottom left.

The spanking seemed to go on forever. And just when Bach was sure he couldn't take one more smack, it stopped.

A few seconds later, the door flew open hard enough to send it crashing into the wall, and Pani came racing back into the living room. She fell even as she flung herself into his arms, but he caught her and hugged her fiercely.

"No more spanking, Papa," she wept into his shoulder, and Bach was instantly angry all over again.

He shook her by her shoulders. "Then be good!"

He marched her back to the pets' table and plopped her none too gently onto her seat. Ignoring her shout of pain when her bottom made contact with the chair, he took three cookies from the tray and slapped them onto her plate.

"Eat!" he ordered.

And she did, but she cried the whole time. She cried even harder when Etle came out of the back room with the hairbrush in her hand. Bowing her head, her tears splashed off her cheeks onto her plate of crumbs.

"Well," Nil Ralhan said cheerfully. "Now that that's settled. Let's have lunch."

He made soup and sandwiches, and Pani picked up and ate every single thing Bach put on her plate.

"There's nothing a good stout hair-brushing can't cure," Etle said with a smile. "I found mine on sale at Lady's on the Square last month."

Bach stopped there on the way home and picked one up.

* * * * *

"What's this?" Bach said, holding up stackable toy bowl.

"Cup," Pani answered.

They sat together on her play blanket on the living room floor, legs crossed, going through her toys. Pani was an incredibly fast learner where talking was concerned. Her vocabulary seemed to grow by leaps and bounds on a daily basis.

"What's this?" Bach held up her doll. Originally the hair had been the funny but popular blonde color that humans sometimes came in, but he'd had it dyed to match Pani's. She hardly ever touched it though, except after serious punishments, when she'd would curl up around it if he didn't hold her and hug it while she cried.

When she was slow in answer, Bach shook the doll and asked again. "Come on. You know this one. What is it?"

Pani stared at the doll, but what she eventually said, she said in her gargling, gibberish of a language. He could tell from the expression on her face that whatever she'd called it wasn't likely to have been kind.

"Pani," Bach warned.

She sighed. "Bad girl Pani doll."

"No, this is Pani's doll."

She rolled her eyes and sighed, propping her elbow on her knee and her chin in the palm of her hand.

Bach frowned and picked up the wooden-backed hairbrush, which he'd kept close by his side all morning. He held it up. "What's this?"

She dropped that look immediately. Folding her hands in her lap and ducking her head, she contritely said, "Bad girl Pani's hairbrush."

He cocked his ear. "What's this?" he asked again, holding out the brush again. Had he really heard that?

Pani fidgeted, squirming where she sat. "Bad girl Pani's hairbrush. Spanking Pani's bottom hairbrush."

He had heard it. Pani's. She was using possessive word structures. Bach grinned. "That's right. Pani's hairbrush." He put the brush down, and the set of her shoulders relaxed slightly. He went back to the toys and tapped a red block with one finger. "What's this?"

She blinked at him twice, then exhaled noisily and said, "Block." Then hurriedly she touched her own nose and blurted out, "What's this?"

Bach frowned. There was that disturbing flare of individual thought and reasoning again. He cleared his throat, not entirely sure he liked it when she showed how smart she might really be. Owning an intelligent pet was one thing, but having an intelligent pet that rose beyond pet smarts into people smarts was downright scary.

"Papa?" She tapped her nose again. "What's this?"

"Your nose."

"Your nose," she repeated.

Bach frowned even more fiercely, before reaching reluctantly out to touch first hers, "Your nose," then his. "My nose."

Her grey eyes flickered in that by-now familiar glimmer of understanding that he was alternately growing to both dread and, curiously, to anticipate.

"My nose," she said, then crawled up onto her knees and, watching carefully for the slightest sign of refusal, hesitantly slid into his lap.

He accepted her closeness, taking great care to keep himself motionless. It was still so rare when she initiated physical closeness--at least not that didn't first start with a sound bottom smacking--that he was always a little surprised when she came to him to be held.

Straddling one thigh to bring herself eye-level with him, she scooted close, her belly touching his, her soft breasts pillowing his chest. "What's this?" she asked, lightly trailing the tips of her fingers over his lips.

"My mouth," he murmured against her hand.

"This?" She touched the end of his jaw.

"My chin."

Her hands flowed down his arm to lift his hand. She caressed his fingers and looked his curiously.

"Fingers," he supplied.

She touched each one slowly in turn.

He didn't know what got into him at times. He should have gone back to cups, but instead, when she started over, catching hold of each one in turn, he began to count them for her. "One finger...two finger...three finger...four finger or thumb, as we call it. Four fingers total." He wagged them at her.

She smiled, then held up her own hand and pointed to the outside digit first. "One finger or..." she looked at him questioningly.

"Thumb," he supplied.

"One, two, three, four." She wagged her extra finger at him.

"Five," he said.

"Five." She looked at her hand. "Five fingers."

It was unnerving how quickly she was putting things together.

Pani scrambled up from his lap and went to the door. "Papa, what's this?"

"The door."

"This?" she patted the latch.

"Door knob."

She pointed up to the lock high above her head. "This?"

"That's the lock."

Her eyebrows quirked. "That?" she parroted, then looked about her. She touched the lamp beside his favorite chair. "This?"

"Lamp."

She pointed across the room. "That?"

Very unnerving. "A picture."

She went to the window. "What's this?"

She was doing more than improving her vocabulary. She was identifying escape routes.

Lesson over.

"Go get your stretch kit," he said, and stood up.

Pani stopped at the window. Her shoulders drooped in disappointment, and then tapping her fingers together with nervous anticipation, she trudged slowly upstairs to his room to get the kit from his bedside table. It was the daily treatment she disliked most. Hated might even be closer to the truth. But he had seen a remarkable transformation in her submission levels that

began the first day he made her set up the room for her own session. So now, like it or not, she not only had to prepare for the uncomfortable procedure herself, but he made her ask for it as well.

Bach sat down in his favorite chair just as she came back downstairs. He liked to watch her expressive face as she argued with herself every step of the way. She had the most woe-be-gone 'Do I Have To' look about her when she handed him the kit.

"Go on," he told her, crossing his legs and folding his hands in his lap to watch.

Her shoulders drooped again and resignation settled across her features. She gathered up her blanket and toys, and he got up long enough to bring out the padded horse he would fasten her to, the only article of furniture that was too big for her to move on her own. She heaved a big sigh when he went back to his chair. Then sighed again and moved in to unstrap the buckles that would hold her legs in place.

She paused to look at him again.

"You're not done yet, now are you?" he told her.

She went and got the sleeve for binding her arms, and the pan and syringe that would begin the session. When everything was out, Bach got up.

Pani began to snifle, a forlorn and sad sound.

"Now, now," he said as he undressed her. "None of that. I should think you'd be grateful for tonight. Finally, no more stretching exercises." He brushed her hair back from her face, cupped her chin and tilted it up so he could look into her eyes. He hadn't really been sure if he wanted to do it or not until that moment. Oddly enough, what decided him was the very same flicker of knowing intelligence within her brilliant eyes that at times so unnerved him. Strange how something so simple could stir his interest.

She looked so much like a real woman, and he was growing really quite fond of her, despite all her eccentricities. Especially after several weeks of sleeping beside her, those soft breasts and round buttocks pressing against him night after night.

"Tonight," he told her, "will be the real thing."

Chapter Seven

She was absolutely gorgeous, a miniature version of a woman, spread out and splayed for him. Her quivering buttocks clenched anxiously as she mewled into her gag. Resigned though she may have been to his authority, she still didn't like the procedure and her mew became an indignant squeak when he inserted one finger past the tight rim of her little brown anus and into the moist passage of her bottom. Three large, soapy enemas had left her well and truly cleaned out for him, and all her previous stretchings meant that she couldn't tighten her muscles near enough to keep him from smearing a thick lubricating gel deep inside her. As deep as he could reach, his questing finger moved gently in and out to make sure no part of her escaped his touch.

"Good girl," he told her soothingly, and she squeaked, twisting her head back as if to beseech him mercy. He had blindfolded her so she couldn't see him or anticipate what he was doing. It made her very uneasy, so he touched her, constantly, never letting his hands abandon her skin for longer than a few seconds at a time.

He loved the feel of her pretty vaginal folds, slippery with gel and her body's own unwilling responses to being touched just right. He made her clit swell with lust, despite her whimpered protests. That wasn't a new torment, though. He liked to play with that part of her during her stretchings, distracting her from the pain until her whole body was straining against her bonds, every muscle tense with an ecstasy so intense and unstoppable that it soon had her sobbing and shaking like a leaf in a summer gale.

If he slipped his fingers inside her at just the right moment, her sex would contract around him in the most delicious sucking motion, trying to pull his fingers further up inside her while she groaned out rough, hoarse gasps of absolute ecstasy. The larger the insert, the harder it was to make her do that. But he was determined that she should find some enjoyment in this. Especially the first time he skewered her on the length of his cock (no larger really than the largest insert) and rode her tiny body for his own gratification.

So he touched her and caressed her, slipping the first of the inserts into her well-greased anal opening and fondling between her trembling legs, slowly loving it in and out of her. It took only a few thrusts before she began to make those reluctant little sounds of pleasure and her squirms to evade him became squirms to push back on the plug.

He removed it, upgrading two sizes to the third insert. She made a muffled sound, not so much protest now as anticipation when he pressed the round oblong tip to her back entrance. She was trying to mount it, he realized, and the corners of his mouth turned upward.

"Would you like to seat yourself, Pani?"

He nosed the tip in and out, gradually making her take more with each gentle thrust. She threw her head back, her long braids whipping across her back and a low harsh grunt escaping her gritted teeth as the widest section forced her bottom to accept it. As it settled into her, her hips began that by now familiar humping motion.

"Mm," she hummed into her gag, the soft sound holding the slightest note of reserve for the size of it.

"It's going to get much bigger than this, my girl," he told her and lightly smacked her bottom. The swat was barely hard enough to pinken her cheeks and leave the print of his fingers behind. "Ride it."

Pani's first movements were tentative at best, and he slapped her bottom again.

"Ride it," he told her and unstrapped her legs to give her no excuse for lack of obedience.

She pulled her hips forward almost to the point of the insert leaving her entirely, and a low moan sighed past her lips as she sank slowly back on it. Blindfolded, her arms still in their binding sleeve behind her, she struggled to use the chair for balance and yet undulated her hips in quick bursts that threatened to topple her with each pump. She wanted hard and she wanted fast, and Bach wrapped his arm around her waist to help steady her. Gripping the plug tightly with his other hand, he gave her exactly what her body begged for.

Her pants turned to grunts and then to lusty cries. Her whole body shuddered and rocked as she threw her legs far apart to give him total access. Bach was as hard as stone, the front of his trousers a tightly confined torment, as she began to wail.

He promptly removed the insert and set it aside to cover the contracting lips of her sex with the flat of his hand. He massaged her, rubbing to bring her slowly back from the edge of completion.

"Not so fast, my dear," he laughingly chided. "If I can't spend, then neither will you."

It was too bad that he couldn't fit himself entirely within the wet folds. He should have bought a cock sleeve while he was at the pet store, then he could have felt her clenching tight like this all around him, her sweet sex shivering as she gasped and moaned with sensual delight.

When Bach set her back on her feet, her knees wobbled weakly and tried to buckle under her. Each time Pani sagged, his hand under her hips helped to prop her back up until she was finally able to stand on her own.

Poor thing.

He stroked her mane, running his hands gently down her back, buttocks and thighs. The human pet was really quite fragile. She weakened so easily. He would have to proceed with care until he saw how well she stood up to the battering he intended to give her.

Bach skipped another two plug sizes with the next insert. He took his time greasing it up, and with one hand, spread her bottom cheeks to place the rounded nose into place against her small rim.

"All right, young lady." He gave both her right and left buttock a playful swat. "You wanted to do this yourself. Ride it. I want to see the whole thing all the way up inside your pretty bottom."

Blindfolded, she turned her head as though she were looking back at him over one shoulder. Then, gingerly, she shifted her legs for balance and seated herself on the plug. The first little bit went in with very little trouble, but as she continued to push back, she began to wince and gasp expressively.

"Come on," he encouraged, and slapped her bottom twice more. "Take the whole thing. All the way in now."

She groaned plaintively, and Bach wrapped his arm around her waist, sliding his free hand between her thighs to give her some encouragement.

"Come on, you're only halfway there. You had this whole thing inside you just yesterday, so I know you can do it."

Her groans turned to dry, sobbing grunts. "N-no m-more spanking, Papa," she whimpered.

"This isn't spanking. This is stretching."

"No m-more s-s-stre-e-etching! Oh!" She grit her teeth as she pushed back even more. Her head fell forward until her chin touched her chest, her face a mask of intense discomfort. "Ooo-o-ugh!"

"You'll be grateful I made you do this in a minute when it comes time for Papa to take his turn. Papa is bigger than this. You don't want your pretty bottom to be torn apart, do you?"

"Ah!" A tear trickled from out beneath the bottom of the blindfold.

"Good girl," Bach said. "You've only got the largest part to go now. Come on, push, Pani! I want this all the way inside you."

She began to cry and tried to withdraw, but he caught her hips, lifting her all the way up off the ground. Keeping the plug firmly lodged, he said, "Spread your legs, Pani. Relax your bottom, and I'll help you."

He had to tell her twice before she would obey, and she let out an agonized shout as he pushed the worst and thickest part beyond her sore, distended rim. He left it seated deeply, letting her grow accustomed to the feel while he helped her back over the chair.

"No more," she begged, her small voice cracking tearfully.

"More," he told her firmly, but knelt down behind her, positioning her well forward and spreading both her bottom and her legs. "There will be a good deal of 'more' for you tonight."

She sucked a startled breath and held it when the heat of his mouth closed over her funny little inside out clit. Being backwards built made it awfully convenient to get at, and oh but did he like the taste and smell of her. Her arousal was a heady musk and the liquid on his tongue both salty and sweet to the taste. He nibbled and sucked, laving up between the folds of her sex. He took firm hold of the base of the insert and really made her buck and cry out when he pounded it rapidly in and out of her a dozen times or more.

If he had only her sounds to judge her enjoyment by, Bach would say Pani greatly disliked the large plug. But the copious flow of cream between her legs told an entirely different story. The naughty little thing, he chuckled and gave her vulnerable round bottom a handful of quick spanks for trying to hide her pleasure from him.

Each clap of his hand made her wiggle and jump, humping her hips against the back of the chair as the lingering sting chewed into her nether cheeks. It was a delicious dance to behold, the lascivious bounce and wriggle as she blindly tried to evade his hand. And yet she also splayed her legs, opening herself back up to the ministrations of his hungry mouth.

Bach shoved the plug deeply home again and pressed it firmly into place. The narrow slit of her sex was so very wet, it glistened in the lights, and suddenly it couldn't have mattered less that he wouldn't fit entirely within her, just so long as he could feel her squeezing all around him.

Pani's head turned as she cocked an ear when he unfastened the front of his trousers. Her lips quivered uncertainly. In a small, trembling voice, she asked, "Papa, what's that?"

He hadn't been this hard in ages. The whole length of his burgeoning cock seemed to throb for a chance at sinking into the heat of her and riding until she squealed those delicious cries of unwilling enjoyment.

"What's that?" she begged again, a trickle of fear creeping into her tone as he took hold of her braided mane and put her well over the back of the chair.

Her entire body went taut as the thick head of him nosed up against her slit.

"Oh! NO!" She tried to snap her legs together, but he only strapped them back down again, opening her up to his invasion regardless of how she squirmed. He spanked her for fighting him anyway, slapping her rosy bottom lightly until the surface of both cheeks were a brilliant pink.

Gripping the root of his cock, he rubbed the bulbous head up and down along her moist little slit, letting her feel him and parting the folds despite her desperate "No's". She was so wet, he simply slid right up inside her.

"My god, how tight you are," he breathed over her low groans. But he fit. No all the way in, of course; there were still a good four inches of him that he was unable to submerge in her silken heat. But as he butted up against the soft wall of her womb, he felt her sheath squeeze so tense and tight around him that he almost lost control.

He moved, barely, experimentally. The whole of her contracted on him like a hot fist, milking along the length of him. When he carefully withdrew, the most delicious sucking sensation engulfed his entire cock.

"Oh Pani," he sighed.

She moaned, "No...no..."

He pulled back on her braids so he could see her face, her open-mouthed expression as he pressed slowly back up to her womb. She moaned again and shivered, and Bach laughed. It was a sound of sheer ecstasy coming from her trembling lips.

"Yes, my girl," he corrected. "You say 'yes' when you like something."

"No-o-o!" Strapped down as she was, she could barely wiggle, but the way she tightened around him told him just how desperately she wanted to rock back on him.

"Say yes," he coaxed, reaching beneath her to caress the stiff little nub that had long since come out of hiding to greet him.

"Ooooh!" She buried her face in the chair's cushioned seat.

Very gently, he gave her clit a spank and she jolted beneath him. "Say yes, Pani."

"Papa," she whimpered, her breath catching in her throat.

"Say yes," he repeated and gave the sensitive nub another slightly harder spank.

"Oo-o-oh!" she wailed, and he spanked her clit again. Her whole body shuddered and she gargled a long, drawn out, "Yeeesssssss!"

"Good girl, Pani." He smoothed his hands down the plain of her spotted back. Her every muscle was tense, her hips so tightly confined to permit her to buck in orgasm, but he could feel the long sheath of her sex working convulsively all around him. It was heaven, and he bent down to kiss her shoulder, more than ready to lose himself in the sensation. "You may have your pleasure," he said, as he wrapped his hands around her waist. Now it was his turn.

He wanted to be gentle. He tried not to thrust too forcefully or too deep. But as she convulsed around him, the slick, wet sleeve of her drawing him amazingly in another inch, he could feel himself pounding harder and faster. He couldn't take much at all that way. The threat of his own spending was racing up to meet him.

As she moaned and shivered her way through a second orgasm, he froze himself mid-stroke, hanging on tightly to her hips and riding the squeezing, clenching waves of ecstasy with gritted teeth and barely maintained control. Panting, Bach took hold of the insert in her bottom and, as he withdrew it, pulled out of her.

For several long seconds, her lovely anus remained open, a perfect round little 'o' gaping moist and pink, the beckoning bulls'-eye of a recreational target. He skimmed the rim with his fingertips, and like a frightened flower, it suddenly closed up against him.

"No," she panted.

"You know better."

She cried, then screamed into the cushions when he entered her. Despite the stretching regime, he felt as though he barely fit. Gentleness was an impossibility. So was restraint. It had been forever since the last time he'd loved a woman, and he'd already held back for so long...

"Oh, Pani." He bent forward, resting his head on her shoulders. He cradled her hips in both hands and began to thrust.

Pani screeched as the vigor of his mounting increased, but he simply could not last long. The feeling of being so engulfed, of being able to slam fully home inside the hot, tight sheath of her body, and to have her close so firmly around him as though she were milking his cock, was powerful. His spending came over him with a roar that drowned out her pained cries. He collapsed on top of her, his hips pumping into hers, his muscles shivering as he spilled his seed deep inside.

He leaned his forearms heavily upon the chair's padded rests, panting over her, the leaden weakness of satiety settling into his limbs in a way he hadn't felt since Laan had died.

Pani sobbed as he slipped limply out of her.

"Good girl," he soothed her, his hand caressing from her shoulders to her wrists. He kissed the small of her back, dotted as it was with salty sweat. "You did very well."

He removed her blindfold, soaked all the way through with her tears and removed the sleeve so she could stretch her arms.

She reached back with one hand to cover her bottom's sorely ravaged passage. But it wasn't until he reached down to massage her there that he realize just how wet and slick she was.

That musky cream that was her arousal was all over his hand when he pulled it back to look. She sobbed even harder when she saw his glistening fingertips.

He picked her up, pulling her onto his lap as he sat down in the nearest chair. "It's okay, sweetheart. You've pleased me no end. I'm glad you liked at least parts of it, because we're going to do so again, often. That's why you're here. To make me happy."

She was inconsolable, and yet the whole time she cried, not once did she try to pull out of his arms or to turn from the comfort he offered. Instead, she buried her face against his chest and, quite literally, cried herself to sleep.

* * * * *

The computer beeped twice, and Bach couldn't have cared less. He had no interest in answering. Just making the attempt meant that he'd have to move, and moving meant he'd have to disturb Pani, who was straddling his lap, her hands clenched just under her chin as though in prayer, sound asleep. She was darling.

And she was all his.

Then he happened to glance at the monitor and stifled a groan when he saw what signal the call was coming in on. Only one person in the world ever used that frequency: Councilman Remeik.

Damn.

It took some careful shifting to juggle Pani enough to be able to hit the right button.

"I'm retired," he said by way of a proper greeting.

The Councilman wasn't even phased. "Hello, my boy. And so you are. Who's said anything different? Can't an old man call his favorite protégé and see how he is?"

"That depends entirely upon the call's underlying motive."

The corners of Remeik's eyes crinkled as he laughed, then they flicked down to Pani. From the position of the monitor, he couldn't have seen more than just the coppery-red top of her mane, but he still said, "Lovely specimen."

"Don't ask if I'm going to breed her. I really don't know yet and there are half a dozen people in line ahead of you for her whelps." Bach stroked her mess of a braid, smoothing stray wisps from around her eyes. The tip of her nose was red from crying and her lashes were still damp.

"You look like a man stricken with Pet Lust," Remeik said.

"We've just had our first recreational session," he admitted.

The Councilman smiled. "And?"

"And it wasn't as revolting as I thought it would be."

Remeik laughed again. "My female hated it the first year or so. Kicked up a fuss like you would not believe every time she was ordered into position. My wife used to have to hold her down, otherwise she refused to stay put and would try to run from me. I'd spank and spank her, but it didn't matter. She'd still try to run. Then she went through a phase where she acted like she

didn't care. Wasn't happy, but didn't want to admit she liked it. Nowadays, if I go more than a week without touching her, she becomes depressed and cries all day."

"Mm," Bach said noncommittally, but he smiled. She couldn't deny that she liked at least parts of it, and he patted her hip, his long fingers trailing down around the curve of her buttock and just barely skimming the moist crevice between her soft thighs.

She shifted, snuggling closer and turning her head into his shoulder.

"So." Remeik steepled his hands before him. "Now that you are a pet owner and have a vested interest in the species, I don't suppose you'd be willing to do for me one last job?"

Bach shut the computer off. Lowering his head, he pressed a gentle kiss to Pani's forehead, then carried her up to bed.

Chapter Eight

"Blue," the tinny mechanical voice said as Pani pressed the wand over the electronic read-along book.

"Bl-oo," she softly mangled, then shook her head once. She passed the wand over the color spot to hear it one more time.

"Blue," the book said again.

Bach sat at his computer, sipping his coffee and watching surreptitiously. It took about six repetitions of a word for her to get it down well. He wasn't complaining. He'd had her less than a month now and she already had a vocabulary of over a hundred words and growing. He'd bought six of those electronic books in an effort to help expand her vocabulary. She was proving to be a very quick learner. Frighteningly so, in fact.

"Red," the book said, and she shifted restlessly on her play blanket.

"Rrr--" she purred softly.

It had taken more than ten repetitions for her to get the linguistic complexities of 'yellow' down pat, and earlier, numbers one through ten had proven especially difficult, although her meekly attempted, "Just one spank, Papa? Just one?" right before he paddled her bottom raw for throwing her breakfast on the floor, had almost made him laugh. Bach smiled now, just thinking of it. He set his cup down and softly clapped his hands to get her attention. When Pani looked up, he spread his hands.

Abandoning her book, she scrambled to her feet and came to him, throwing her arms around him as he scooped her up and hugged her tight. She squirmed, sucking a quick breath when he patted her bottom.

"Let's get some lunch," he said, and put her down again.

She reached the dining room ahead of him and climbed up into her highchair. He made up three cheese sandwiches, cutting off the crusts on one, since she refused to eat that part anyway. He gave her a crayon and a piece of paper to amuse herself with while she ate, and he brought the daily newspaper to the table for himself.

"Blue, yellow, r-r-red," Pani recited in between bites, while he flipped his paper open to catch up on what the world of politics was up to these days.

"Papa?"

"Hm," Bach skimmed an article on Councilman Remeik's impending election to a senate seat.

She reached out to pat the corner of the top of his newspaper. He lowered it to look at her, arching a brow at her presumption. "Yes?"

"Pani how?"

His expression turned confused. "What?"

She patted the tray of her highchair. "How Pani?"

He lowered the paper. "How what?"

She held up the paper. She'd nearly covered it from top to bottom in writing. Every color, shape and number from her electronic book had been meticulously copied down in green wax crayon.

Bach forgot how to breathe. Any last stubbornly lingering assertions that humans were mere mimics fell to pieces right there in his dining room.

"How Pani?" she asked again, putting the paper down and holding out the crayon to him. She wanted him to spell her name.

Damn. He'd gotten her the books to teach her how to speak, not write.

"Papa?"

He shouldn't do this. He knew he shouldn't. But Bach reached for the crayon and wrote it for her at the bottom of the page.

"How Papa?" she asked when he'd finished.

How could she possibly be writing? And why in the world was he encouraging it? He argued with himself the whole time he spelled it out beneath her name.

"More crayons?" she asked, and pointed to the rest of the box, which he'd left on his desk.

Against his better judgment, Bach got them for her and reluctantly placed them on the tray. Setting his paper aside, he watched her instead.

Pani flipped the page over to the blank back. She took the yellow crayon first and drew a big circle at one end. She then used the other colors to draw smaller circles of varying sizes in a line away from the yellow one. There were nine smaller circles total, the third one from the yellow was blue, the fourth red, and by the time she started to make a series of even smaller black circles around the multicolored nine, he realized what she was drawing. A solar system.

Damn.

She pointed to the blue circle. "Pani's home."

His stomach sank all the way to his feet.

Bach took the crayons and paper both away from her. The drawing he destroyed by lighting it on the stove. He watched it burn to cinders in the sink.

He had no idea what would happen if people found out that the creatures they were domesticating as pets were a species of people all on their own. Of course, if humans had been an equal race they'd have never allowed themselves to become domesticated in the first place. So they had to be a subspecies. His mind simply could not comprehend otherwise.

But even allowing her that much was dangerous. His own people weren't exactly known for their tolerance where competition with others was concerned. Hell, they had a hard enough time just getting along with one another, much less another race. The human world would be viewed as another place for domination and colonization, just like last year's Kadmier affair. Dissolving that civilization, barely perched upon the brink of space exploration, into dust and ruin hadn't been his peoples' finest moment in time. But that's what happens, he supposed, when power gets mistaken for superiority.

He washed the ashes down the drain, and marching back out to the dining room, he pointed to the floor.

"No more writing, and no more drawing," he told her sternly. "This is Pani's home. Get used to it."

* * * * *

Bach awoke the next morning to find Pani's sleep sack empty beside him and the bedroom door slightly ajar. He sat bolt upright, listening for the space of three panicked heartbeats; the house was totally quiet. Then he heard the whisper soft pattering of bare, five-toed feet down the hallway, and the toilet flushed.

Bach looked down at the sleep sack, with its open strings, which clever little fingers had somehow managed to untie, and his temper began to flare.

The soft pattering returned to his bedroom door. He quickly lay down, closed his eyes, and waited until he felt her slight weight shake the bed as she climbed in beside him. There was a pause in motion, and he could all but feel her leaning over to peer at him.

"Papa?" she whispered, and waited with bated breath for him to respond. He didn't so much as twitch. Satisfied that he remained asleep, she crawled back off the mattress and padded quietly back out of the room.

Bach threw off the blankets and got out of bed.

He followed her silently downstairs, watching with mounting fury as she stopped in front of the door and looked up at the lock, well out of her reach. She could have used a stool to reach it. Had she tried, he'd have been across the room in a flash to yank her off and paddle her backside raw. But instead, Pani turned and trotted into the kitchen.

Skirting the shadows, he followed at a silent distance, doing little more than peeking in at her around the corner of the doorjamb, catching bare glimpses of her as she pushed a stool up to the cupboard and climbed onto it.

She pulled down a container of dried fruit, tried some of it, then put it back. Leaning over, she picked up an egg from the collection in a bowl by the refrigerator, then turned to look at the stove.

Bach felt his stomach drop to his toes. Twice in two days. This really had to stop. But the level of her intelligence was getting harder and harder to ignore. That she had got out of her sleep sack at all was startling enough, but even that could be explained away by clever little fingers and a pet with a penchant for escape. When she pushed her stool to the stove, got out a pan, and turned the knobs to light the cook flame, visions of his house burning down around him galvanized him into action.

Pani almost fell off her stool when he came through the door. He caught her about the waist, yanking her hard against him.

"No!" he snapped loudly, and slapped both her hands until she dropped the pan on the floor. "Pets do not play--" Use? Cook? Act like a person? "--with the stove!"

He sounded like an idiot and he knew it, but she wouldn't be the first pet killed from severe kitchen burns. At the time, he'd discounted the stories as accidents--terrible, but freakish.

Once-in-a-lifetime incidents that closer supervision could have avoided. Seeing Pani preparing the cook for herself put a whole new prospective on the tales.

He shut the stove off and yanked the stool back into the middle of the floor. She began pleading when he grabbed a wooden spatula from the oven-side crock. Bracing one foot upon the seat of the chair, he threw her over his knee and blistered her backside as though possessed by a fury.

"I'd better not ever catch you in here without me again!"

She begged and kicked, her bottom bouncing under the fierce assault, her skin changing colors like a chameleon from pink to red to a brilliant shade of burgundy. White splotches appeared on the crowns of both cheeks, and still he spanked her, until those juddering nates were so hot they could have replaced the stove and Pani was incoherently draped over his thigh, too exhausted to do anything more than cry. Just to make sure he had her attention, he lay a final volley of smacks down the backs of her thighs.

The sharper sting on such a tender area made her howl and invigorated her struggles all over again, albeit only briefly.

"You do not get out of bed until Papa says you may! Bad, bad, bad girl!"

Each word was accompanied by a hardy smack and Pani's forlorn sobs. He could have willingly continued spanking her for another twenty or thirty slaps, except that the spatula broke. Pani continued to cry and to cry out. Her deeply burgundy bottom, splotched white and hard to the touch in places, squirmed over his knee as though still beneath the whuck of the kitchen tool.

He put his hand on her and simply held her bottom, feeling the heat of the scarlet cheeks. The hardness that he felt when he squeezed each buttock in turn merely meant this punishment would be well remembered.

He pulled her upright in his lap, cradling her as he carried her out to the living room. When he set her down in the corner, it was as if she couldn't even more. She just cupped her backside in both hands, held herself, and cried. He had to turn her around so she faced the join of the walls.

Arms folded across his chest, legs akimbo, he watched over her to make sure she stayed where she was supposed to. He couldn't trust her yet, that much was perfectly obvious. Every time he turned around, she was doing something she shouldn't. Bach frowned, shaking his head once. And now he had to go back to town and get a better sleep sack.

* * * * *

The best part about being retired was getting to stay at home. The best part about being a retired agent was being able to hang on to some of the old contacts. He drove Pani into town. She had to kneel backwards on the seat the whole way, and even though he knew it wasn't safe like that, he allowed it because she groaned so pitifully each time her bottom contacted the seat.

An old friend at Central measured Pani for a Disagreeable Coat--a heavy backwards fitting jacket, with extra long sleeves that ended in buckles instead of openings and which were

fastened behind anyone objectionable or aggressive enough to warrant wearing one. This included Pani only because the store that sold the more complicated sleep sacks did not allow pets inside unless they were highly trained working animals for owners who could not manage without them. Pani was neither. She was just a spoiled and naughty little thing, who was quickly proving to be an intellectual challenge just to keep, much less to keep safe.

He left her blindfolded and kneeling on the passenger seat of his vehicle, buckled tightly into the coat, while he went shopping. He bought the most expensive sleep sack with the best fingerprint lock ever devised--Ekjek: excellent electronics company.

He also picked up a replacement wooden spatula. The head was wide and somewhat concave; the handle long and lethal. After tapping it into his palm several times, he took another six just like it. If breaking them across Pani's bottom became a common place occurrence, he'd need a stockpile of these.

He bought some more diapers so she wouldn't need to get out of bed at night and then, just because, or maybe because he wanted to bring her close to him again after such a fierce disciplinary session, he swung through the toy department. He found a puzzle box, some coloring books and an elementary level electronic read-along story. He wasn't particularly happy about the idea of stimulating her reading abilities, but it was one of only a few things that Pani seemed to truly enjoy. So long as he didn't tell anyone, so long as he kept it hidden and secret, what hard could it do?

He paid for his purchases and made his way back out to his vehicle. As he came around the back and opened the driver's door, he noticed a spray of glass shards on the seat.

Chilled fingertips caressed his spine, moving down into his belly to grip his gut in an icy fist. Bach bent slowly down and looked inside. The side window had been smashed in, and Pani was gone.

Chapter Nine

Bach pounded on Councilman Remeik's door hard enough to rattle it in its frame and to hurt Bach's fist. He didn't care. When the Councilman opened the door, Bach grabbed him by the throat, shoved him back inside and up against the nearest wall. Two pets--both a male and a female--screamed in unison, followed by Remeik's wife.

The aged Councilman was much more sedate. He merely wheezed, "Hello, Bach. What brings you by?"

"Where is she?" Bach demanded.

"She who?"

Bach squeezed. "I am not a untried recruit fresh off the training field, old man. Keep playing with me and the Council will have to find someone else to nominate for the senate seat."

"By she, can I assume you mean Pani?" Remeik asked. Bach squeezed even tighter, causing him to wheeze out a rasped and high pitched, "I can't answer if you won't let me."

Slamming him back against the wall, Bach let go and stormed off through the house, yelling, "Pani!"

Rubbing his throat, Remeik waited until Bach came charging back through the living room, heading for the stairs to the second floor. "Pani!"

"I don't have her." The old man spread his arms in an all encompassing gesture. "Why would I? What could I hope to gain by taking your pet?"

"Leverage!" Standing on the bottom most step, Bach rounded on him, "So I'll do this last damn mission of yours."

The Councilman laughed. "If I wanted you that badly, I'd have you arrested and tortured into compliance."

Glaring angrily, Bach came down off the stairs. "If you don't have her, then you can find her."

"Of course I can," the old man said readily enough. "But if I find her, you must be willing to return a favor for me as well."

His expression turning extremely dark, Bach growled, "God damn you." Turning his back on Remeik, he ran a hand through his own dark hair, an expression of deep aggravation. He frowned at the wall for a long minute, then turned around again. "All right. Find her, and I'll do it. Whatever it is, I'll do it. But you'd better damn well never ask anything more of me again."

"Right." The Councilman turned to his wife. "Theni, take the pets upstairs, if you would. Baths and bed time. And don't forget to triple lock Aven. If I find him in Obra's crib again tonight, everyone will get a spanking, starting with you."

He leveled a stern look at his wife, who seemed more concerned about Bach than her husband's threat. She took hold of both pets and led them up the stairs.

Remeik held out a guiding hand. "My study is right down the hall. So, tell me, my boy. Did you get her microchipped?"

* * * * *

It looked like any other farm on the outskirts of town to Bach. Small house secretly surrounded with police and in need of some roof work, an ancient barn out in the middle of a vacant but neatly-mowed field, and a huge crop of almost harvestable tandii growing everywhere else for miles on both sides of the winding country road. Bach couldn't even see the pet breeding facilities or hear the humans until one of the eight well-armed officers that Remeik had brought with him opened the barn door. As silent as assassins, they all crept inside, crouching down to hide in the shadows as they invaded the structure.

The stalls down both sides had been modified into cages, half of which housed four to six males, while the other half, the breeding pens, provided a buffer that ensured no two groups of males were caged back-to-back.

Only two of the breeding pens were actually occupied. In the first, a plump brunette had already been strapped down on a T-shaped post affixed to the cement floor. The top of the bar

was padded to support her hips, but that was all the comfort she was given. A second bar fastened to each of her ankles forced her legs wide apart, and both the bar as well as her chained wrists were fastened to rings in the floor. She had a gag in her mouth and a plug in her bottom, leaving only her quivering female sex open to mounting from the aggressive males who were lined up on either side of the chain fencing. Doors linked each cage to the pen, but neither was open. High on the wall above each door, was a set of lights, red and green. So far, the red was the only one lit on both sides.

Though as close as Bach was, the males--focused intently on the female, some already in states of extreme arousal--never even turned their heads to look at him. But the female did. Snuffling softly around her gag, she looked back at him through her elbows and knees, her brown eyes pleading with him for intervention.

"Activating three," came the low, faint tones of a man's voice from the shadows somewhere to the very back of the barn.

As one, both groups of males looked up at the lights. The set above the far right door switched from red to green and a loud buzzer signaled the remote controlled unlocking of the cage. The female shook, mewling in her bonds as the males spilled into the breeding pen.

There was an obvious pecking order, as blackened eyes and bruises on some of the males obviously showed. The alpha male took up the coveted position behind her, while the others pulled at the gag over her mouth, rubbing their burgeoning penises against her face and squeezing and fondling her breasts with rough, hard hands.

No attempt at all was made to arouse her, and she made the most pitiful sounds from the moment the alpha male thrust himself inside her until Bach finally turned from the scene, sick to his stomach. Was this what humans did in the wild, or was this what they did when forced into captivity?

It didn't matter. It wasn't going to happen to Pani.

Already Remeik and his men were making their way into the shadowy back sections of the barn towards the owner of that masculine voice, and Bach followed.

Halfway down the row, three mutilated bodies had been stacked like cords of kindling in front of an empty breeder pen. Two were males, so battered and bloody that there was nothing left of their facial features at all.

Likewise, the female was only recognizable as such by her bruised breasts and the battered folds of her genitalia, crusted in blood from a multitude of bite marks. Her bloody head was bald, the hair and bits of scalp having been ripped out by the roots. Her face was badly mauled and one eye was missing entirely.

Remeik signaled to him from two cages ahead, and Bach gratefully abandoned his position beside the corpses.

Inside a pen by himself was the aggressive blonde male from Exotics, Inc. Both fists were swollen and raw and he bore the signs of brawling all over his body. He squatted against the back wall, glaring into the affixed breeder pen with dead, pitiless eyes. Pani had already been

strapped down, gagged and harnessed, with a plug fixed securely in her bottom to help ensure the success of the breeding.

There were lash marks on her back, buttocks and legs; she must have tried to escape and the attempt been received nowhere near as kindly as he'd done. There was also a hole in her back where they had dug out the microchip. The wound looked red and raw around the ugly scab, the coloring of which suggested infection might already have set in.

Remeik's staying hand on his arm was the only thing that kept Bach from charging into the pen to get her. It was only then that he noticed Pani wasn't alone.

The same stately woman who had so admired Pani at the pet shop all those weeks ago, reached down to stroke her long copper hair with a gloved hand. In her other, she held an electric shock prod.

"Imagine," she said softly. "A pet with his strength and her coloring; we'd never be able to keep up with the whelp orders."

From a control box on the rear side of the cage, a man said, "We'll never breed him. He was more interested in fucking his cage mates than the female we gave him, and even then he killed them first. He'll probably just tear this one apart like he did the other. I think we should cut our losses and put him down."

The woman lay the prod against her shoulder. "No. He's an animal, but he's not stupid." Leaving Pani's side, she went to the door of the male's cage and boldly opened it. "He's going to behave himself properly this time," she said as she slowly stepped inside. "He's going to impregnate our pretty little red-mane the way he should," the prod came off her shoulder and the male followed the end of it with his eyes until it pointed safely down at the ground. "Or I'll be very displeased."

She activated the prod and the end crackled with blue sparks. "Move," she told him.

The male's nostrils flared. The look he gave her was nothing short of absolute hatred, but he got up just the same. So did Bach.

Bach shot the breeder male through the head even as it stepped through the cage door. He salved his conscience with the belief that, at this point, it was probably a mercy for the savage human beast.

"What--" The man froze mid-charge out of the control box, his eyes all but crossing as he stared in shock at the gun one of Remeik's men had thrust in his face. He slowly put his hands up in the air.

The woman was a good deal more vocal. "This is private property! You have no business here!"

"Where's the keys?" Bach demanded as he pushed through the door into the breeder pen.

At the first sound of his voice, Pani began to squeal and wriggle to get out of her bonds. Hers were the happiest, most relieved and yet muffled sounding 'Papa' noises he'd yet heard. They were also very welcome to his ears.

"Get out before I call the authorities," the woman ordered him. She hefted the prod as she stormed towards him. Then he saw her eyes flicker as she recognized his face. She stopped, and the prod lowered by the barest of inches.

"Let me save you the time," he snapped. "I brought the authorities with me."

She stared at the fully armed men that were literally coming out of the shadows. Then she glared at Bach again. "Trespassing is against the law."

"So is theft of private property," Remeik stated.

"Possession is nine-tenths of ownership," she countered. "Besides, I have the sales' slips for every one of my breeders. Including the one you destroyed. I want compensation for that."

"I don't care what you claim to have." Bach took the gag off Pani, releasing a volley of 'Papa, take Pani home's. "This is my pet!"

There was no change in the woman's beautiful, yet emotionally void face. "You're mistaken, I'm sure. My pet simply looks like yours, has similar coloring."

"Where's the damn key?" Bach growled. He'd used a knife to cut through the hip strap, but the chains on Pani's wrists and ankles were another matter entirely.

"Here's one," one of the men at the control box said. He handed it through the fence of the pen into Bach's outstretched palm.

Councilman Remeik stepped inside the breeding pen. "Hri Mosk, you've ben found guilty of theft."

"I didn't steal her," the woman insisted. "How could I have known she belonged to another?"

"You saw her with me in the pet shop on Forte Street," Bach stated.

"Not to mention there's the obvious chip removal from her back. Whether you did that yourself or not is irrelevant. The procedure was done here, at this farm, so you can't say you didn't know. It was the frequency of the removed chip that led us to you."

The woman's serene look faltered. "Those chips don't emit an outward frequency. They don't emit any kind of signal unless scanned."

Remeik smiled. "Not as far as the public knows, true." He unholstered the gun at his hip. "Have you anything to say before I pass sentence?"

Her mouth thinned and she looked from him to Bach. "I ask for acquittal, since there is no actual proof of my involvement."

"Denied," Remeik said simply. "Possession is nine-tenths of ownership and, therefore, proof enough for me."

"Then I ask for mercy."

The Councilman frowned. "I hate it when they beg. Bach?"

Kneeling in front of the 'T', Bach had got her feet loose but the pet manacle's locks were stiff and he was still working on her wrists. He looked at the marks on her back and legs and at the ugly gash that would certainly scar between her shoulders. "I don't think I believe in mercy right now."

"I didn't think so." Remeik shot the woman between the eyes and almost had his gun back in its holster before her body hit the cement floor.

Pani squeaked, and her struggles to get free died suddenly as she found herself staring into Hri's lifeless eyes.

The Councilman sighed. "I love my job. The beauty and swiftness of justice are unequaled by any other profession."

Pani squeaked again, and Bach finally got the antiquated wrist locks to turn. The manacles popped open, and she was free.

She scrambled into his lap, flinging her arms around his neck and even wrapped her legs around his hips. "Take Pani home."

He patted the small of her back, the only part that wasn't marked by welts, and softly kissed the side of her neck. "Anything you wish."

She blinked and drew her head back. "No more spanking?" she asked hopefully.

The clever little thing.

He smiled. "Don't press your luck."

* * * * *

Every one of the breeder males was put down. Aggression being the core of their natures, they could never have made good family pets. Not even Mogo was spared, though they found him in the house, chained in Hri's bedroom. He didn't move so much as an inch. All he did was watch them with passionless eyes as Remeik's men came through the door, pointed their guns at him and pulled the triggers.

The breeder female Bach took home with him, even though he suspected she was too far gone as well. He had no idea of what he was supposed to do with her. She sat all day by the window, staring outside. And at night, she looked up at the stars. She never spoke. He practically had to force feed her. He gave her Pani's old nursery and for the most part just left her alone. Bach didn't even bother stretching her.

Pani, on the other hand, he took as often as he could. Every night and sometimes during the days. He buried himself in her body and loved her with all the passionate desperation of a man who knew what he had to do, but who was still not yet resigned to a miserable task.

Four days after getting Pani back, Bach stepped on board the diplomats' shuttle that would carry him back up into the stars so he could complete his 'favor' to Remeik. And though he'd never taken his family with him on any of the countless missions before, this time he took both Pani and the brunette with him.

Chapter Ten

The ship was extremely primitive. Sausage like in shape, void of imagination, still burning petrol, for crying out loud. It was hard to believe humans had got the thing off the ground, much less out of their atmosphere. But here was the proof of their achievement, floating in the blackness of space in front of his diplomatic vessel. It was also the final proof that Bach personally needed; humans did not belong as pets.

"Cruel," one of the shuttle's pilots said, jarring Bach from his thoughts.

Standing at the viewing station, his arms folded across his chest, Bach turned to look at him. "What is?"

"Putting pets in space like that. Stranding them out in the middle of nothing, no way to get home and leaving them to starve or run out of air."

"Yes," Bach agreed slowly. "That is cruel."

Unless the humans launched themselves, an observation that no one would believe. While those that did, would likely cast their votes for invading and conquering, and it would be another Kadmier tragedy all over again. Instead of seeing humans as exotic, intelligent pets, they would be seen as threats and eliminated.

"The distress signal is cycling," the communications officer said.

"Record it," Bach told him. "How many life forms remain?"

Studying his controls, the man replied, "Three. But one of those is almost gone, as well."

"How much air do they have left?"

"Two percent."

"All right," Bach said. "Pull the ship in, establish an external hook up, and give them air. I'm going over."

Bach left the navigation bridge to get Pani and the brunette from his quarters. While the brunette trailed along behind, he carried Pani all the way to the exit. He wanted to feel that extra closeness, smell her female musk, this one last time.

When Pani saw the ship in the viewing window just before they reached the outside hatch, she became as still as stone in his arms.

The brunette also stopped in her tracks and refused to move. Bach snapped impatiently for her to come to him, but she ignored him, staring out at the vessel floating beside them, linked by power cables, oxygen lines and stabilizing tethers. He had to go back, catch her by the ear and drag her to the door that way. A good sound spanking would have done her a world of good, but he just did not have the time.

In his arms, Pani hardly breathed as he unlocked the hatch. He stepped onto the crossing arm and sealed the door behind the three of them. Taking the brunette by the ear, he crossed over to the humans' vessel and only when finally just outside the foreign vessel's entrance did he dare say, "Pani, can you talk to them?"

She was staring at the door as if it were a communicable disease. Despite all her escape attempts, she didn't look happy to be here.

"Pani," he said again and, reluctantly, she turned her head, shifting her eyes to his. "Can you tell them what I'm saying?"

She had that crafty, trying-to-figure-him-out look all over her face when she nodded.

"All right." He unlocked the human's hatch and pushed the brunette inside ahead of him.

The lights were dim, but growing gradually brighter as his ship recharged and repaired the damaged power cells. The air smelled musty and thin, but he could hear the steady hiss as oxygen was pumped into the depleted reserve tanks. There was also no gravity.

Very primitive.

And very narrow. It took a lot of swatting before the brunette would cooperate. But with Pani clinging to him with both arms and legs, he alternately spanked the reluctant female to get her moving and pulled himself along the ladder from the bottom of the ship up through a very small portal of a door into the next area. He could barely squeeze himself through the claustrophobic hatches. In the end, he had to put Pani through ahead of him and pick her up again afterward before moving on.

His insistence on carrying her made their progress through the four-layered ship slow, but eventually they reached the humans' command center. Strapped each into his own chair, were four suffocated corpses and three barely living men.

The men sat weakly immobile, the color slowly seeping back into their lips and skin as the air improved. They all three stared up at him as not entirely sure that they could trust what they were seeing.

Bach told Pani, "Ask them if they can land this thing safely when they reach their world."

She looked at him for a long time, then turned her head and softly spoke her gargling gibberish to the human astronauts. One nodded back at her.

"Tell him we will give him a boost in that direction." He paused to give Pani ample time to translate. "Tell him if he or his kind ever come out this way again, their ship will be destroyed. And so will their world."

Pani looked at him again, but obediently translated his words.

Bach said, "Ask him if he understands."

As she spoke, one of the astronauts nodded.

"As him if he understands that his planet will," Bach put emphasis on the word, "be conquered and the human race made extinct if they ignore this warning. That there will be nothing I can or will do to help them."

Again, although more slowly, the man nodded.

"They will take you and the brunette home with them." Bach put Pani down. He made himself let her go and turn away, squeezing back through the hatch even though he didn't hear her translating to the man behind her.

"No," she told him. "Pani goes home."

He kept going, following the ladder down through the next layer of the shuttle and squeezing himself through the claustrophobically narrow hatch.

"Pani goes home with Papa," he heard her call, a hitch of panic trembling in her voice. "Papa?"

He looked back to see her on the verge of following him but for the astronaut, who had her by the arm.

"Papa!" She reached out to him with both hands.

He didn't stop, but went through the last hatch that emptied into the bottom of the rocket. As he opened the escape door, Pani began to cry.

"Papa, Pani be good! More good! Papa!"

Sealing the hatch behind him cut out the sound of her voice, but it still felt like a knife stabbing into his chest as he walked down the arm to his own ship. A soft tapping, like the plinking of a stubborn moth fluttering against a glass light, made him look back. She was beating her fists against the hatch's insulated window, screaming for him without sound, tears rolling down her face.

He stepped backwards into his own ship, then shut and locked the door, sealing out the sight of her forever.

* * * * *

"Well," Councilman Remeik asked as he handed Bach a steaming cup of coffee. "So, what was it all about?"

In Remeik's downtown office, Bach held the cup in both hands. He stared into the thick brown liquid as though it held an answer to that tricky question.

It had been only two days since he'd given Pani back to her own kind. It had been the right thing to do, but they had still been two of the longest days of his life, dominated by an oppressive silence in a house filled with unbearable memories.

"Bach?"

"Mark it down as an act of cruelty. Someone stuck a bunch of humans in a vessel and launched them into space."

Remeik barked, a gruff and unamused laugh. "Don't lie to me, boy. I'm not that stupid. Remember, I've got two pets of my own. Aven has an immeasurable vocabulary and can even write. That is an ability belonging only to sentient beings."

Bach put the coffee cup down. "What are you going to do?"

"Declare the wild human an endangered species, adversely impacted by careless scientists and over-hunting for the pet trade. We'll cordon off the entire solar system, and make it illegal for anyone to approach it."

Bach kept his face utterly neutral. "You're not going to suggest observation?"

"Are you kidding? And have another Kadmier on my hands? We aren't exactly known for our fair or ethical first contacts." The Councilman leaned back in his chair. "Humans may be advanced far beyond what we gave them credit for, but as a species, they've still got a lot of growing up to do before they can stand up as equals to us."

"What about the pets?"

"Only captive bred will be legal for sale or trade from here on."

"They should all be returned."

"I'd be lynched for the attempt alone, and you'd better believe I won't go out alone," the Councilman growled. "Some of the Senates' biggest financial backers deal in the pet trade. There's big money there, boy. As it is I won't be popular when I shut off the supply of wild humans. But if I demand everyone give up their beloved household pet, I'd not only lose my chance at a senate seat, I'd lose my council spot as well."

"They are an intelligent race in their own right. Sentient beings."

"It is also in their best interest that no one else know it," Remeik snapped. "Coldly stated, I know. But there it is. For a few to suffer captivity to preserve the rest of their race is an acceptable situation, and you know it. You took great pains not to share your thoughts with the rest of your crew, even though they thought you rather odd to return your pet to the wild the way you did."

Bach stood up. "She never should have been taken. It's our arrogance to think otherwise."

The old Councilman shrugged with his eyebrows. "Nevertheless, I'll be keeping mine until the days they both die."

"Your prerogative," Bach told him.

"As freeing Pani was yours."

Bach walked out the door, certain that for him to have done anything less would have been the height of all wrongs.

* * * * *

Bach was celebrating the anniversary of his third year alone with a glass of red taluc berry wine--all right, it was his sixth--when the computer beeped with an incoming call. He groaned as he settled himself into the chair at his desk. Rubbing his eyes, he cast a fleeting but half-hearted wish that the room would quit spinning. He didn't expect it to be answered, but there was no harm in the wishing.

He tapped the key. "Hello."

Nice. He even sounded vaguely sober. Tired, but sober.

Nil Ralhan's perplexed and apologetic face appeared in the monitor. His hands were steepled and he was tapping his fingertips in that entirely Ralhan-ish nervous gesture of his. "Good evening, Sir Bauer. A thousand apologies--all sincerely stated, I assure you--for disturbing you at this late hour."

"Sir Ralhan," he greeted in turn, then looked at the time. "I would bid you good evening as well, but it has just become morning." Tap-tap, went Ralhan's fingers and he blushed uncomfortably. "How are you and yours?"

Exotics, Inc., had been only one of many pet wholesale distributors to go out of business when the Human Preservation Act was implemented, wholly approved by the newly appointed

Senator Remeik two years ago last fall. Bach had heard Nil Ralhan had gone into business for himself and was doing quite well as an experienced Pet Behavioralist.

Ralhan looked both surprised and pleased to have his family so remembered. "Very well, sir. Very well indeed."

"Minmin, Binnie, and Sassa?"

He beamed. "As mischievous as ever."

Bach nodded, idly swirling the last swallow or so of wine in the bottom of his glass. "Always good to hear. How may I help you?"

"Well, sir." Ralhan tapped his fingertips again. "I believe something of yours has been passed into my possession this evening."

About to drain the last of his wine, Bach paused and lowered the glass. "And what would that be?"

In the back ground, a very distinct and familiar voice piped up, "Pani, property of Papa, 11355921. Pani's a good girl. Property of Papa, 11355921."

Bach almost dropped his wine. "Pani?"

He didn't mean to shout it, but she squealed in response and jumped out of nowhere into Nil Ralhan's lap. She cast a grin into the monitor, touching it with both hands. "Papa! Take Pani home! Right now!"

Right now. That was new.

"A smuggling ship was raided this morning. The other pets were released back into the wild, but they kept her. She wouldn't quit talking, and with the chip scar...well, the authorities brought her to me. They didn't know what else to do with her." Ralhan blinked at him. "I confess, neither do I. Do--do you not want her?"

When Bach didn't talk back at her, Pani's grin slowly faded. Like a flash of black thunder, she turned abruptly irritated. She scowled at him. "Take Pani home. Right now! Now, Papa!"

She was beautiful.

And oh, did she ever need a spanking!

Etle seemed to agree because off screen in the background Bach heard Ralhan's wife tsk, "Why you naughty, demanding little thing! You come over here and let them talk."

"No!" Pani snapped back at her, even more irritated than before.

Bach felt himself start to smile. "If you would be so kind, Sir Ralhan, please put my disagreeable pet in the corner until I arrive."

The set of Ralhan's shoulders relaxed. "You do still want her then?"

"Oh yes," Bach said. "I'll be there in twenty minutes to collect her."

And spank her.

And love her. All night long. No, forget all night. All day, too. Several days, in fact. They might just not get out of bed until week's end.

She folded her arms across her chest and harrumphed. "Now!"

Etle snatched her off Ralhan's lap and out of monitor range.

Oh yes, she was definitely going to get her little bottom paddled a deep, dark shade of beautiful red.

Now, if he could just remember where he'd packed that very effective and obedience-inducing hairbrush...

The End

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