

# New Technicolor Dreams

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Will A. Sanborn

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## Author's Notes

It's hard to believe it's been 15 years since I discovered furry fandom, and that I've been doing creative writing for almost that long. Where does the time go? I was lucky to discover the fandom while I was in college. Back in the summer of 1992, before the internet was as ubiquitous as it is now, I was using the primitive search tools to look for Disney artwork and I came across a couple of furry FTP servers. There was something magical about anthropomorphic animals that just hooked me. I found a lot of interesting stories and artwork and I loved how the furry characters could be used in a blending of multiple genres, from comics, to science fiction and fantasy, and yes even some entertaining adult work.

I read all I could find in the fandom, and the stories really inspired me. It was a year later when I decided to try my hand at writing some tales of my own. My first stories were pretty embryonic, as can be seen in a couple of my early works here, but I learned as I went along and steadily improved. The important thing for me was that I'd found a wonderful creative outlet and I really took to it. I've found that writing can be an extension of daydreams and I've really enjoyed the vast playground of the mind it has opened up for me.

When I was invited to be the guest of honor at Midwest FurFest this November, I was surprised and very honored. I have my periods of dry spells and waning creativity, so I wasn't sure how much my writing was still remembered. It wasn't until I started talking to people about the convention invitation and I looked back on all the writing I'd done over the years that I realized just how much of it there was. Time really has a way of sneaking up on you, and I've become an old guard in the fandom without even realizing it.

It still warms my heart when I meet people at conventions who've read and enjoyed my work. Thank you to my readers. I do really appreciate your compliments and feedback, and it's for you, as well as myself that I've created this new collection of my stories. I also owe a lot of thanks to the many talented artists who shared their visions with me in illustrating these stories. Your work has helped illuminate these worlds of wonder even more.







# Reversal

*Story illustrated by Sara "Caribou" Palmer.*

*This is one of the first stories I wrote. It definitely shows my humble beginnings as a writer, picking up the art as I went along.*

Jack Smith sighed rather loudly as he trudged alone through the fields of New England. He was home from college for the long weekend of Thanksgiving and was feeling extremely bored. The cold grayness of late autumn didn't help his mood either. He'd been feeling morose for quite sometime, and it seemed as if nothing interested him anymore. Classes hadn't been going that well, and he was beginning to wonder just exactly what it was that he wanted to do with his life. There were times when he felt as if he were trapped by his daily routine. He did have a few friends, but they'd been strangely distant over the past few weeks, perhaps put off by his moodiness.

He let out another sigh, wishing that he could snap out of this depression. About the only thing that seemed to give him any joy now was his reading. He'd always been an avid reader, but over the past few months he'd been reading more and more, drawing himself further inward. Now he was using his books as an escape, anything to get away. During the past several weeks, he'd become quite the armchair explorer.

His let his mind drift to his latest fantasy, one based on the story he was currently reading. He liked reading science fiction the best, because of the strange and wonderful opportunities it offered him. "Just imagine of all the worlds out there, just waiting to be explored" he mused to himself. "If only I could get out of here."

It was starting to get dark, and he realized that he should turn around soon, since he'd gotten himself a good distance away from home. Looking up into the sky he caught the sight of the Evening Star. "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight..." he whispers softly to himself.

Suddenly, as if in answer to his dreams, a bright light appeared on the horizon. He watched, transfixed, as it grew steadily nearer, taking on a distinctive shape. He was left breathless as he saw the craft hovering briefly overhead, then coming down to rest not more than fifty yards from where he stood.

Not believing his outstanding fortune, Jack walked briskly towards the ship, not for once feeling any fear, for he was far too excited to feel anything else. He reached the ship and paused, standing in awe in front of it. The hull was made of a smooth, shiny material, with no apparent breaks on its surface. Looking it over, he estimated the ship's length to be about one-hundred and fifty feet long.

“It’s a lot smaller than I expected,” he spoke to himself, “it must just be a scout ship.”

As he stood there, looking upon the spectacle confronting him, a seam formed on side of the ship. As he watched, the split in the hull stretched to form a hatchway, and without making the sound, the portal opened. A moment later two helmeted figures emerged. They noticed Jack but made no moves towards him. Instead they consulted their hand-held instruments, apparently testing for the atmosphere’s compatibility. After what seemed like to an eternity to Jack, as he stood there, his heart pounding in his ears, they finally removed their helmets. Even all of his reading could not have prepared him for he saw.

The aliens who stood before him were bipedal, but they could not exactly be considered humanoid, at least not in the strictest sense. Their species seemed to have descended from foxes. Foxes that had not only learned to walk upright, but had also most-assuredly developed a method of faster-than-light travel to bring them to his corner of the universe. He stood there, a mixture of confusion and awe on his face, studying them, as they in turn also studied him.

Both of the creatures before him were female, which would make them vixens he thought to himself. He then chuckled softly, briefly finding humor in the situation, as a strange idea for a movie title popped into his mind, Teenage Vixens from the Planet X. Staring at the pair of aliens in front of them, his mind stirred with many thoughts. Although they were rather odd looking, he did find them intriguing, as well as strangely attractive. Their fur was not the same color; one of them was a deep red, while the other’s coat was of a reddish brown. Both of the vixens had a white patch of fur on their necks, which continued downward into their flight suits. He saw that they also had tails protruding from the back of their suits. He also noticed that those suits managed to cling quite tightly to their bodies, greatly enhancing their well-built physiques. He chuckled inwardly once again, thinking how this was really turning out to be a B movie after all.

The three of them stared at each other for a few moments, and then the vixens began talking to each other. At first their speech was incomprehensible, but as one of them made adjustments to her instruments, he was then able to understand what they were saying. He could tell that they were still not speaking English, but his mind somehow managed to perform the translation. He felt a shiver run through him as his brain got used to the feeling of it, then he felt another jolt of excitement hit him as he heard what they were saying. “Yes, I agree, he is rather cute. I think we should invite him aboard” the brown vixen was saying to her companion.

Turning to Jack, the red one then addressed him. “Hello, my name is Tarna, and this is Leela. We are explorers from the Alpha Centauri system.”

“Uh, hello, my name’s Jack” he managed to stammer out.

“Nice to meet you Jack. On our brief stop here, we were looking for a companion to accompany us on our journeys. How would you like that?”

He couldn't believe the sudden turn of events. The prospect of exploring space with these attractive aliens seemed almost too good to be true. It took him a couple of seconds to get over his excitement and then answer them. "You mean you're offering me the chance to travel with you, just like that?"

"Yes Jack," Leela replied with a slight giggle, "doesn't that sound fun?"

Realizing that he was faced with a chance of a lifetime that he could not pass up, Jack nodded to her, then said "of course it does, where do I sign up?"

Smiling at him, Tarna reached out for his hand. "Well then, let's get going, we've got adventures ahead of us." Taking his hand in hers, she then led him towards the ship, with Leela following closely behind.

Inside the cockpit, Leela sat down in front of the control console, while Tarna brought Jack back to a couch which they both strapped into. The takeoff was incredibly smooth, in fact had he not been looking out a view-port, Jack wouldn't have known they were moving. As the landscape retreated away below them, he only felt a slight pang of sadness at leaving his old life behind, which was overwhelmed by his excitement at the adventures that lay ahead of him.

The ship moved quickly, and within minutes they were in orbit, out there amongst the stars. It was then when he noticed Tarna's hand lightly caressing his upper leg. Another shiver ran through him, but he had no time to sort out the strange mix of feeling her touch gave him. Instead his attention was drawn to the sight of their ship, as it came into view. His mind was overwhelmed by the image of it; the sheer size of it mesmerized him.

After they docked their craft, they un-strapped from the couch and headed out through the portal into the ship. Jack followed them as they led him out to a large corridor that seemed to span several hundred feet in either direction. As he gazed around with wonder, Leela turned to them and spoke. "I'll go to the navigation room and set in our course. You can show Jack around a bit. I'll meet you two for supper in an hour and a half." With that she turned and was off.

Turning to him, Tarna then smiled again. "I'm really glad that you decided to come with us, Jack. I think you'll like it here. We're going to have a lot of fun together." She then threw her arms around him, surprising Jack by pulling him a tight embrace. As she moved her hands up and down his back, he was stunned and confused. His hands did however manage to think for themselves and return the hug, a little clumsily at first, but then relaxing slightly. After several minutes, Tarna released him from her grip. "Come on, I'll show you around."

"Oh there is just one more thing Jack" she added. "I need you to put this on." Reaching her hand inside her flight suit, she fished a narrow band of black fabric from it. Attached to the middle of the band was a metallic strip lined with several small flashing lights.

"What's that for?" he asked, looking at her holding it up to him.

"Why it's a collar of course. This way we'll always know where you are. Our last pet ran off and managed to get himself killed..."



## The Experience

*This is another one of my early works, showing my writing style in a very embryonic state. While some of my early stories were pretty much written for purposes of escapism, this is not one of them. Some of my poetry does show that I've had blue periods in my life, but I've never been anywhere near this depressed. This was just an interesting idea for a dark and moody story that I came up with, and I thought it was a neat concept to examine.*

William Jones sighed softly as he sped his car through the rural roads of New England, which were alive with autumn splendor. He'd hoped that this nice quiet drive would help lift his spirits, but even the bright sun and beautiful scenery did nothing to ease his brooding. His angst had been building for quite some time now, and it felt like it was about to reach critical levels. His troubles at work, combined with some serious personal issues, had grown over the past few months from sadness into full-blown depression.

As he gazed wearily at the colorful landscape speeding quickly past him, his thoughts remained murky and dark. His eyes were hollow and his expression almost blank. His total lack of feeling was ironically complemented by the slate-gray business suit which he wore; it too seemed devoid of any meaning or personality.

He sped through the countryside as if in a trance, looking but not seeing anything. His dark brooding thoughts held most of his attention, leaving only the necessary cognitive functions needed for him to pilot his vehicle like an automaton. The sun illuminated the colors of the trees all around him, but still he didn't notice.

And he continued to brood. His thoughts were caught in a tight spiral of depression and self reproach, circling tighter and tighter, drawing him deeper and deeper into the muddy depths of his psyche. There was no way for him to stop that wild descent, and there was a part of him that wanted it to happen, and maybe was even enjoying it. As his mind was drawn further downward into despair, his foot seemed to gain a mind of its own, and started to apply a slow, but steadily-increasing amount of pressure on the accelerator.

Caught in this confused act of self torture, he didn't notice when the car started gaining speed, as if on its own volition. He continued racing through the landscape, while in his mind he was traveling towards his doom at the same hell-bent pace. He didn't notice the sign warning travelers of the hairpin turn up ahead. He didn't notice the turn until it was too late.

When he started into the sharp bend, he was jerked back to consciousness by the scream of the tires, and the centrifugal force as he tried to keep his vehicle on the road. His efforts went un-rewarded though, as the car sped off the road, crashing through the guard rails. The vehicle was briefly airborne,

giving the illusion of flight before the earth reached up and extended gravity's pull. He felt the illusion of his weightlessness shatter quite brutally as the car was pummeled by the ground below.

In these fleeting moments before the final impact, time was stretched wide and his consciousness expanded. He could see every detail of the landscape below him, he could hear every single scrape of the metal, and sense every fracture in the car's body. Memories from long ago flooded vividly before him: old friends, lost loves, forgotten dreams and ambitions. There was so much more to do, so much left to see, so much living yet to be done. The few seconds stretched on to eternity, leaving him ample time to ponder those regrets.

It was then when the car struck the tree and brought time and space back in on themselves, collapsing in an instant of brutal awakening. His last experience was that of the airbags in his masterpiece of European engineering engaging, exploding against him. Then there was complete and utter darkness.



He came back into consciousness slowly, as if waking from a dream. Opening his eyes all he saw was darkness. His body seemed to be weightless as he floated in this void. There was no pain though, neither physical nor mental, in fact all there seemed to be there was nothingness, completely and totally surrounding him. He drifted in that state for what seemed like hours, but could just as well have only been a few minutes, before he noticed the soft light diffusing all around him.

Turning his head he saw in the distance what appeared to be a bright light in a tunnel of darkness. It was just like he had heard it described countless numbers of times on talk shows and in the tabloids, but now that it was actually happening to him, it didn't seem at all foolish. In fact he felt a great peacefulness wash over him as he headed for the light at the end of this tunnel.

As he was moving slowly forward, he felt something grab him by his ankle and give a light tug. Whirling around to face the darkness, he was snapped to the realization that he wanted to fight this. It wasn't his time yet. Running crazily in the darkness trying to find his way back, he lost his footing and was sent careening into the void.



"No, I'm not ready yet. There's so much more that I want to do. I can solve my problems, I can figure things out. Just give me another chance!"

"Relax, Mr. Jones, everything's alright. You've been in a bad accident, but you're going to be okay."

Opening his eyes, he looked up to see a paramedic talking softly to him as he finished securing him to the stretcher. "I've been given another chance, haven't I?" he asked.

"Yes you have, everything's going to be just fine" the paramedic replied.

"Life's a really precious thing isn't it?"

“Yes Mr. Jones, but you need to rest now.”

As he was carried to the ambulance, he had the time to notice the beauty around him and how bright and blue the sky was that afternoon. Once in the rescue vehicle he allowed himself to drift peacefully into sleep, while quietly enjoying the gift he'd been given.



“Mr. Jones, how do you feel?”

He opened his eyes as the doctor looked quizzically down at him. “Okay, a little confused, but peaceful” he answered after a slight, confused pause.

“That’s good Mr. Jones, but do you remember why you’re here?”

“I... I was in an accident.”

“No Mr. Jones, try harder, where are you?”

“I’m in the hospital... the emergency room.”

“No, you’re in the hospital but you’re in the walk-in psychiatric ward,” the doctor corrected him.

“Psychiatric ward? But that doesn’t make sense...”

“Try and remember Mr. Jones, why are you here, how were you feeling this morning?”

“I was... I was tired, and miserable. I was depressed” he answered as the haze slowly lifted from his memories.

“Yes, and do you remember why you came here?” the doctor probed further.

“I wanted to feel better; I wanted to feel happy again, before it got too much to take.”

“That’s right Mr. Jones, you can sit up now.”

Sitting up, he found himself on a couch of the psychiatrist’s office. As he continued talking, the doctor removed some electrodes attached to his forehead and temples. Those wires connected at the other end to a small computer on the table next to the couch. The video display on the unit had gone black, and the few lights that remained on were all shining green.

Looking around the office, he felt a wave of disorientation flood over him, but it passed in a few moments. Everything had snapped back into focus, leaving him with a feeling of happiness and tranquility. “I remember it all now doctor, I came to you to help me feel better.”

“That’s right Mr. Jones, ever since they perfected the experience- simulation unit; we’ve found it quite useful in our field. It’s been noted that people surviving near-death experiences have come out of the situation with a newfound love of life and an improved state of mind. We’ve been using simulations like these to help many patients recover from depression. It’s especially helpful in suicidal cases like yours.”

Quickly standing up, he grinned at the doctor and headed for the door, with a noticeable bound in his step. “Well then that’s that isn’t it doctor? This is truly wonderful, I can’t thank you enough. I’ll settle the bill with your receptionist

and then I'll be on my way." He paused briefly and smiled again, before continuing, his voice sounding with energy. "I've got so many things I want to do, so many people I want to see, and I'm eager to start back to work. I just know that I can do my job much better than I have been. Thank you so much for this."

"Wait one moment, Mr. Jones, aren't you forgetting something?" the psychiatrist called out to him.

Turning to him, with a surprised look on his face, he asked "like what doctor?"

"Like the fact that you've felt this same way the other times, and that it never lasted. We've treated you this way three times over the past two years and after the initial euphoria you slip back into your depression within a few months."

"But doctor, it won't be like that this time, I feel great. Nothing can get me down. I'm cured."

"I'm afraid not, a cure doesn't come this quick. You need to seek counseling before things get bad again, and then maybe things will turn out differently this time. I'm worried about you Mr. Jones. We had to take the simulation up to level eight this time. We can't go much higher before we run into the problem of safety risks."

"Oh you worry too much," he replied, casually dismissing the psychiatrist's worries. "You've cured me; all my problems are over now. Things are going to be different, nothing can go wrong. It's a beautiful day outside, I think I'll go for a walk in the park and enjoy the afternoon. Thank you again and good-bye doctor."

He walked triumphantly out the door, a smile on his face. After he was gone the psychiatrist looked sadly at the door for a moment before he turned to the machine on the table to shut it off. "Good bye Mr. Jones, try to stay happy this time" he muttered softly to himself as he stood alone in his office.







# Team Player

*Story illustrated by Sara "Caribou" Palmer.*

*This was a fun little tale I wrote up for the AnthroCon 1999 con book, playing off the theme "The Furry Revolution." I was struggling for inspiration, when a friend was joking around with me. He threw out an idea that I really liked, and I ran with it.*

I had to smile as I watched Christian interact with Tasha, seeing him loosen up and treat her with genuine adoration. He'd seemed so out of place here in Alaska, having made his way through the desolate backcountry to check up on his childhood friend. He'd clearly been expecting my living quarters to be far more austere than he found, though I knew Christian still felt out of place without city conveniences at his disposal.

The moment he'd arrived, the dogs had of course been overjoyed at seeing a new visitor. He'd been a little overwhelmed at their jumping and pawing at him in their enthusiastic greetings, so I'd led him into the sitting room to escape the ruckus. We'd found Tasha there, and Christian had seemed a little taken aback at seeing her quite at home, curled up in one of the chairs. He'd made little mention of it however, and had taken his spot on the couch, doing his best to ignore the tufts of husky fur attaching themselves to his clothing. Tasha worked her usual magic on him in short order, and soon he was sharing his tea biscuits with her, patting her head gently as she smiled up at him with those ice-blue eyes.

Eventually, Tasha had gotten her fill of attention, and had nuzzled his hand affectionately before excusing herself from the room quietly.

"Wonderful dogs, aren't they Christian?" I remarked as Tasha was leaving.

"Yes John, they are quite unique, but a little rambunctious" he replied.

I just smiled at that. I'd spent more time than I cared to remember around huskies in general, and these ones in particular. I could certainly appreciate his statement.

"Well yes, they can be a bit of a handful at times, but that's what also makes them so perfect for this climate; they're very intelligent and independent. Out in the wilderness you need a team of dogs that can not only look out for themselves, but for you as well."

Seeing Christian's acquiescent nod, I continued. "Not only are they smart to begin with, but I got them from a breeder who promised me these dogs were smarter than average, and quite loyal as well... I have to say I agree with him on both counts. They took a bit of getting used to, but they took a shine to me and we've made a good team. It's funny, but once you've been around them for a while, you can really tell how smart they are... We almost communicate on a certain level."

I read Christian's dubious expression and smiled. "Oh, nothing earth-shattering, but their moods are easy to read, and sometimes they even get a bit more than that across..." I paused briefly, and then continued. "Anyway, they were with me when I found that lucky strike, and if it hadn't been for them, I would've never gotten it all out of the backcountry. I'd never seen so much gold hauled out of one place before!"

"That's what I don't understand, John," Christian interrupted. "If you struck it rich, why are you still up here? Why haven't you come back to civilization and lived it up? It's what you always dreamed about."

I smiled and gestured around the well stocked cabin. "Oh, things here aren't that bad. It may not be as nice as a house down in the lower forty-eight, but this place still has some things to offer, especially if you have the money for it... Besides, the dogs like it here."

"You mean you're staying here for the dogs? You've become that attached to them?"

"Well, not exactly, it's more like it's the other way around," I let out a small chuckle, glad to share my unusual story with him. "You see, the dogs had become very fond of me. I was planning on selling them to another prospector, even though I liked having them around. However, it seems they had other ideas. That night, after hauling the gold back to the cabin, I'd unloaded the sled, taken care of the dogs, then gone off to bed, ready to make the trip to the assayer's office in the morning. Heh, imagine my surprise when I woke up to find the gold missing."

"The dogs... they took it?" The incredulous look on Christian's face was enough to make me laugh once again.

"Yup, I told you they were smart, didn't I?"

"But why, what use would they have for the money?"

"None whatsoever, my friend, except that they knew that's why I'd be leaving, and they didn't want that. It seems they would much rather stay with me than have a new master."

"So the gold is gone? It can't be!"

"No, of course not, they weren't that mean to me, they just played a little trick to keep me around... You see, they hid the gold out in the woods somewhere. They've hid it quite well as I haven't been able to find it. I tried following them a couple of times, but they'd split up and run in different directions to confuse me. Oh, they had fun with that game."

"So, they're keeping you hostage here then?" Christian asked, his voice ringing with disbelief.

"Oh no, not hostage, I could leave anytime I wanted to, but then I wouldn't have the money now would I? They bring me some of it from time to time, enough to live quite comfortably here, but if I ever want to see it all, I understand they want me to look after them for the rest of their lives. It's a pretty good life, and the summers here can be quite nice. I enjoy having the

dogs around too, they're a fun team, and I know I'll miss them when they do finally leave me my inheritance..."

I was interrupted as the door was pushed open and Tasha made her return to the room, her ears perked up at attention and her tail wagging merrily behind her. With a cursory glance in my direction, she trotted over to Christian and dropped something in his lap. Picking it up, his eyes went wide as he examined the small lump of gold.

He turned to stare at me, while I chuckled, having figured that was what she'd been up to. "See? Tasha is quite taken with you! It's not every day we get visitors here. She likes you and wanted to repay your kindness." I urged him to keep the thing. "Go on, take it. There's plenty more where that came from, even if I can't get at it just now..."



# First Song

*Story illustrated by Sara "Caribou" Palmer.*

*This was sort of an experiment for me, playing around with a culture with a nature-based mysticism, and looking at its rite of passage into adulthood. I probably could've done a little better job with this, and shown the world in more depth, but I do like the mood and idea of the story.*

At the first touches of dawn, even before the sun's rays had completely broken across the rim of the horizon, Shadow Runner awoke from her light sleep, refreshed, but anxious for the coming day's events. Rising quietly, as to not disturb the others, she began her morning grooming, and quickly smoothed out the sleep-worn patterns in her sleek coat of solid-black fur.

As Shadow Runner was donning her buckskin tunic, her mother awoke with a contented yawn. Licking the last vestiges of sleep from her gray-furred, lupine muzzle, she turned and warmly regarded her daughter. "I see you're up early for your big day child," she said softly, sitting up on her sleeping pallet, a gentle smile forming on her lips.

"Yes mother," the girl replied, her hushed voice still showing her anticipation. "I hope it won't take too long for nightfall to come."

Her smile widening, her mother's reply came with a soft chuckle. "You remind me of myself child, on the day of my first night song... I am so happy for you, the first of my cubs to reach adulthood."

At that, Shadow Runner reached out to hold her mother, bringing them close in a loving embrace. The two stayed like that, hugging each other silently for several moments. There was no need for words to express the bonds between them, bonds which would change with the girl's passage into adulthood, but remain just as strong.

Easing up on their embrace, the older lupine looked at her daughter momentarily with glistening eyes, before tenderly scratching behind one of the girl's ears. Then dissolving the moment, she said "the sun is rising and you've got a full day ahead of you. You need to finish your morning duties and be off as soon as you can;" a quick smile shared between them before the girl was up and out of the family's dwelling.

Just after breakfast, as expected, Night Singer, the tribe's seer met with Shadow Runner. "How are you this morning child?" was his greeting, a slight gleam evident on his knowledgeable and serious visage.

"Very excited, wise one" was her reply, a shy smile playing across her muzzle.

"As would be expected." His warm voice was tinged with a hint of laughter. "Tell me Shadow Runner, do you know the full significance of this day?"

“Yes, tonight’s moon marks my passage to adulthood, the time of my first night song,” her eyes aglow with excitement.

Regarding her carefully, as if picking up on deepest feelings, the seer then asked “so are you ready for the journey before you?”

Her gaze furtive for a moment, her voice slightly hushed, she replied “I think I am...”

His face softening, the older lupine placed his paw on her shoulder, and gently reassured her. “I know of your doubts child, we all have them at this time of transition. I remember long time ago when as I cub I was in your place, and just as nervous about it... perhaps even a little more so.”

Smiling slightly at her look of surprise, he continued. “We all feel uneasy before this big night, but while it marks the journey into adulthood and is very important to our people, it is something that is deeply a part of us, and is woven into the hearts and minds of every cub, and becomes known as they near their time. You will do fine... besides, I’ve heard your singing before, and you have a wonderful voice.”

“But that isn’t the same as the song tonight... I was just singing to myself while working.”

“Yes but you still sang with the happiness you felt, letting it flow out of you, and tonight you will simply expand that, singing with the deeper feelings of the power around you... and I’ve managed to hear you practice a couple of short notes of the deeper kind while you thought you were alone out in the woods these past few weeks...”

He was quick to offer a reassuring wink, his eyes gleaming, to offset her guilty expression, as her eyes widened at being discovered. “Don’t worry my child, again it’s something that almost every cub does, sneaking off just before nightfall and practicing their voices; trying to echo the faint notes they’ve heard from the adults, carried some nights down from our communal circle to the village.”

“Besides, as you will soon learn, it isn’t the notes themselves, but the power you feel, drawing from everything around you, losing yourself in the song called up from that power. After tonight’s song you will have joined with the song of the night and all of nature, and when you return you will be ready to take your place with the other adults in our circle.”

After her talk with Night Singer, she was ready to make her way through the wilderness, beginning her journey into adulthood. She left, like all cubs before her, with little ceremony, saying warm good-byes to her family, and happily greeting others in the village who saw her leave, wishing her well. That day was to be hers alone, as was the night, and when she returned to the village the following afternoon, she would be welcomed back enthusiastically, as an adult.

And so she walked alone through the lush forest, her heart and mind on fire with thoughts of the night before her. As she walked, her thoughts calmed somewhat, and she contemplated the significance of the journey she was



making. As the morning progressed, the quiet of her surroundings drew her thoughts even deeper, preparing her for the transition the night would bring.

In the early afternoon, she stopped for lunch, skillfully hunting a large rabbit, as she'd been doing for a few years. Then after washing up in a cool mountain stream, she napped in the warm sun, peacefully readying herself for the long and wondrous night ahead.

Coming awake slowly and peacefully a couple of hours before sundown, she smiled to herself, both content and excited, and started her journey once again. Just as the last rays of the sunset were fading in the darkening sky, she came upon the hill, her desired destination, and reaching its grassy crest, she was ready to embark on the final leg of her journey, this being a mystical one.

Kneeling down, feeling the soft, cool grass intermingle with the fur of her legs, she watched the sky, quietly waiting. As the minutes flowed by, the shades of the sky gradually deepened, blooming into brilliant shades of dark violet, then as the stars slowly appeared, falling into a beautiful, inky blackness. Watching the heavens come alive before her, her eyes gleamed in the darkness, mirroring the subtle spectacle before her.

Then with her breath deepening, and her tail wagging ever so slightly, she watched as a brightening of the horizon foretold of the moons' imminent arrival. For the next hour she waited and watched, as the twin moons made their appearances from their corners of the sky and gently rose above her; the excitement within her building, yet also tempered by the quiet peace of her solitude.

Then finally, with the larger of the moons shining down on her with all the brilliance of its fullness, she knew it was time, and that she was ready. Closing her eyes and deepening her breathing, she paused, then opening her mouth, let a single note, a small and tentative howl, escape her throat.

At first, the notes came a little forced, breaking the silence around her, the chords not sounding quite in place. Then, opening her eyes to look at the beauty around her, taking in the crystal points of light of the stars, and the soft glow of the moons bathing the wilderness in their luminance, the nature and feeling of her surroundings seeped in upon her.

Taking another breath, she let out a longer note, one single chord spilling forth from her open muzzle. This time the sound of her voice, a melodic howling, didn't disturb the beauty surrounding her, but instead echoed with it. Something clicked deep within her then, and she continued with another note, this one slightly lower, but just as beautiful.

Spurred on by the vision of the sacred night before her and the newfound effect of her voice, she continued to sing, the notes of her voice flowing together, complementing the mystery and power of the night around her. Her gaze moving around the heavens, the notes of her primal song reflected the essence of the wondrous views before her.

Then her eyes focusing on the primary moon, her gaze slowly narrowing on its white fullness, the intensity of her song began to grow. For as her senses

were pulled to the moon, the silvery orb gently overwhelming her, her notes deepened in strength, taking on the moon's power.

As the essence of the moon poured over her, she transformed it with her voice, then echoing it across the wilderness. As her song continued, she became aware once again of the soft grass against her legs, the scope of her senses widening. Still echoing the beauty of the moon, she then felt the cool night air brushing against her, and closing her eyes, she could still see scene before her, its crystal clarity driving the notes of her song.

With the beauty and power of her voice increasing, her senses were widened even more, encompassing every detail of the world around her, the feelings growing until all of nature was flowing through her, to be radiated by the low peals of her wondrous song.

Finally, the last threshold of her journey was reached, as her newfound consciousness was expanded to take her across the wilderness to the sacred circle of the adults from her village; her mind's eye whirling about them, her voice joining with theirs as they too howled out the beautiful tones of nature. As their voices mixed, they became a single note, joining her with the other members of the circle.

Their songs all continued, becoming as one, linking all their minds together, each others spirit radiating through the voice of their neighbors, tying them all together in the spectacular echoes of the world around them. And so it continued like this, her voice for the first time melding with the others, singing long into the night, until she passed into a sound sleep, only to wake peacefully from her dewy bed the next morning, her journey into adulthood complete.

## Technicolor Dreams

*I occasionally write poetry, as well as prose. Back when I first discovered furry fandom, it really took a hold on me. I used to daydream a lot back then, following all sorts of flights of fancy. Part of it was escapism, but part of it was also discovering a more-creative and imaginative side of myself. Since then I don't indulge in fantasies quite so much, as my life has come along to a point where I don't need to, but I still enjoy the occasional bits of creative stimulation that my writing gives me.*

Sometimes this world seems so gray  
Nothing more than the outlines of a pencil test  
Sometimes I feel trapped, by my daily routine

Sometimes I wish to jump through an astral door  
Going to a distant, faraway place  
Giving me the chance to meet, the chance to be  
Somehow something more exotic

I'd like to run through the fields at night  
Run with the wind, howling at the moon

I've seen the landscapes of worlds that don't even exist  
I've fallen in love with people whom I'll never meet  
I've been an armchair explorer, and a daydream believer

In these dreams I'm still myself  
But something has changed...  
Some basic improvements to my body and soul

I'm not quite as shy  
I've been given some boldness  
Been given a chance  
To find someone much like myself

And in these dreams  
Sometimes I can feel my tail



## Creative Urge

*When I first started writing, it was a real rush for me. I'd never even considered the possibility that I could be a writer, so when I got my first ideas for a story and started pounding it out, it was a pretty exhilarating time of self-discovery. Of course my beginnings were very humble, but what mattered was that I'd just found a new outlet for my creativity, and that discovery was quite exciting, and a lot of fun.*

Sometimes I can't sleep at night  
My head's a buzz with creativity

Sometimes my mind moves too fast  
I can't keep up  
I try to sit still  
While my muscles twitch

Sometimes I think of how much I could do  
If I had more time  
If things didn't get in the way

I'm a Renaissance man  
Trapped in the body of an engineer

There's so much I want to do  
I've got to hold myself together  
Can't spread myself too thin

Sometimes my mind's on fire  
I can feel my neurons fire  
I'm alive with electricity  
Tingling with creativity

Lately I've been manic  
Been in a creative panic  
And I don't know  
If I ever want it to end

I want to run, to paint  
To draw, to write, to fly, to be...  
Any and all of the above



# Learning to Fly

*Story illustrated by Heather Bruton.*

*Some of my stories are inspired by artwork that I've seen. I'd come across some drawings of winged furies, and found the concept quite interesting. There were a couple of pretty drawings of winged felines that captured my imagination, so the Somani were formed in my daydreams. This is pretty much a case of following flights of fancy, and wish-fulfillment, as the story isn't that complex. The idea may be a little silly, but I still kind of like it, and it was fun for me to write.*

Consciousness came to me slowly, as I drifted from my long slumber and realized that I was awake. I slowly opened my eyes, and blinking a couple of times, my vision cleared to reveal my surroundings: a typical Somani hospital room. I was disoriented at first from my long period of unconsciousness, but then everything suddenly clicked into place, and my memory returned to me. It was then that I excitedly craned my neck, looking over my shoulder, trying to see as much of my back as possible. I didn't have to stretch my neck too far though, as my large wings, lying there spread out behind me, now covered a substantial part of my field of vision.

Yes, it had finally happened, after weeks of eagerly waiting, what once seemed like a foolish daydream had now become a reality. Laying there in bed, my mind racing wildly out of control, I tried to fully appreciate how this was going to profoundly affect my life. Of course I'd thought of that before, thought it out to great lengths, but now that it had finally happened, my thoughts from the past months came flooding back to me.

I'd been living on the Somani homeworld for just about eight months now, as part of the newly-developed cultural exchange program between our two worlds. Having discovered hyperdrive a few years ago, Earth had sent several exploration missions throughout our part of the galaxy. It was our hope that we'd discover that we weren't alone out in the great cosmic expanse. We'd been very lucky, and by some phenomenal chance had met up with the Somani a little over two years ago.

The discovery of the Somani was absolutely wonderful for us, but not without its strangeness at first. The Somani were basically a race of winged felinoids, walking upright on two legs, which came as a bit of a surprise. Then again, these were aliens, and after the initial confusion, people from both worlds began to get used to the other's form.

After the settling-in period, when both races had gotten to know a little about the other, diplomatic relations had begun. Everyone had been optimistic, which proved to hold true, and both our planets came together in a friendly and open alliance. Since both our worlds were now at peace, we'd settled upon

several ways in which our two societies could help each other for our mutual benefit.

The Somani weren't as technically advanced as we were in the areas of space travel or artificial intelligence, but their general level of electronic and computer technology wasn't all that far behind us. They had many of the basic instruments that we had, just not a lot of the higher-end equipment. Anyway, to make up for some of their technical shortcomings, they'd surpassed us in a couple areas of science, especially in their medical techniques which were leaps and bounds ahead of us. Most of their scientific efforts had been focused on genetics, and their technology in that field was outstanding. Already several technological exchanges had taken place, and both worlds were benefiting greatly from them.

Then there were also the profound social implications of the whole situation. Soon after the initial diplomatic issues had been resolved, sociologists from both planets had flocked to the new world for the rich information and background they held.

It was also soon decided that in order to tie the two races closer together, that a cultural-exchange program should be set up, bringing members of both races to the other's homeworld. Humans and Somani from all walks of life were chosen to represent their people, as they were carted light-years away toward a fantastic, exotic and slightly strange new world.

Upon hearing of the program, I'd jumped at the chance, and made my appointment for the screening interview as soon as I could. I'd always considered myself a little shy, and would never have imagined that I'd be going so far from my familiar surroundings, but there was a reason that prompted me to be so adamant about wanting to make the journey.

I'd always had a secret dream of being able to fly like the birds, and had never quite outgrown it from my childhood fantasies. I still would sometimes lie on my back gazing into the blue heavens and imagine myself soaring up there amongst the ether. Knowing that the Somani were winged creatures, I held them in very high regard and was fascinated with their abilities of flight. I realized that just being amongst them would fulfill more of my fantasy than I'd ever dreamed possible. Just being able to see them fly would at least allow me to vicariously experience my dreams.

During the interview I'd been a little nervous and it had showed fairly obviously, but they were impressed with my eagerness. Of course I hadn't told them the real reason behind my desire to embark on the exchange. Afraid of being thought a little foolish, I'd skated around the situation by talking about what a wonderful race the Somani seemed to be and how I was interested in experiencing their society, which of course was by no means a lie.

The next week I'd waited in anticipation until they'd finally called me back with the wonderful news. For the cultural exchange to be the most effective, they'd said it was necessary to get as diverse a group as possible. Although many college students had applied, not too many of them had been in the technical



fields like myself, so that had almost assured my position. Also, they told me that my genuine eagerness had impressed them and had made up for my slight awkwardness. Secondly, although extremely-outgoing people would have an easier time adjusting to new cultural surroundings, to recruit only those types of people would give a false picture of our population. So a certain percentage of the selected few were chosen to be a little more reserved, such as myself.

I couldn't believe how outstanding my luck had been. I was walking on air for the next two weeks before I was to report for my indoctrination into the exchange program. First there was a rather thorough and almost grueling series of medical exams. There was also an operation we needed to undergo, in which a small translator chip was implanted in each exchange member's head. This wonderful device allowed us to become instantly fluent in both written and spoken Somani, as if it was our native tongue. These chips had been in use for close to a century for communications between members of foreign countries, and had been one of the driving forces behind global peace.

Once the exams were finished, and we'd received a few vaccinations against the new strains of diseases we might encounter, we were ready to embark on our fantastic journey. The trip took slightly less than a month at our extreme speeds. During this interim we were thoroughly educated on what was already known of Somani culture.

Then, after all of the waiting, we were finally there. It was such a wonderful, yet also an overwhelming experience to step out of the ship onto such vastly foreign soil. Their world was similar to ours in some ways, such as having a blue sky, but it was also strangely different. Even the sky was not the same as the familiar color from back home, instead its hue was of a deeper shade of blue. The landscapes had some similarities to Earth, but a lot of the vegetation was different. Like variations on a theme, the flora on their homeworld had some vague similarities to plants back on earth, but with their own strange twists on them.

Their architecture was also vastly different, using primarily curved edges in contrast to our straight lines and angles. Their cities were not as crowded as ours either, with their population density being a little less than half of ours. Therefore the cities didn't seem quite as crowded as ours, and they felt very spacious, sprawling out over the landscape.

Then of course there was the Somani themselves. I'd seen hundreds of images of them, but that didn't compare to seeing them in the flesh, face to face. They were basically large cats, whose spine had changed enough to enable them to walk upright. Although they were bipedal, they didn't have flat feet like we do, instead their feet and lower legs resembled that of a cat's. The feet and legs were thicker than ours to support their weight. Only their toes came into contact with the ground, while the rest of their foot came up at a slight angle.

From the knees up, they were roughly the same as humans, if you overlooked the thick tail extending from their lower back, reaching down to the ground giving them the balance they needed to offset the unsteadiness from the

construction of their feet. Their upper body, arms and hands were again much like those of humans, although small retractable claws extended from the four digits on each hand.

Their heads were pretty much what you'd expect to see on a large feline, although their eyes were easily much more expressive, reflecting their intelligence. There were two exceptions to the design of the feline head which immediately caught the eye. First of all, the top of their heads was covered in a mane of long fur, much like human hair, and their ears were larger than you'd see on a cat of that size. Their ears appeared to be a bit more vulpine than feline, but the added effect was rather nice.

The coloring and fur patterns of the Somani were extremely varied. Colors varied from blacks and browns, to tans, to yellows and oranges, with many individuals having wild swirls or stripes of various colors, or even leopard spots. Also, having dark mitts and boots of coloring on the hands and feet was fairly common. Some Somani had coats of uniform color, while many of them had a patch of lighter coloring along their abdomens. Just like terran cats, their looks were wildly varied.

Then there was the asset about the Somani, which I'd found the most exotic, their wings. Although they stood about equal in height with humans, as soon as you added the extra foot or so from the wings, they sort of towered over us. Their wings connected to the body just below their shoulders and ran down to about the middle of their back. When fully extended, their wing span was about seven or eight feet, which was very impressive. The wings had several vertical ridges of bones running through them, which not only supported them, but allowed them to fold inward against the body when not in use.

Their wings were covered in fur of the same color as their body, although it was slightly thinner there. The tips of the wings came to just over a foot above the head, while the lower edges extended to just a few inches above the ground. It was obvious that with their wings, the Somani took up much more space than us humans, and their buildings and vehicles reflected that. Every seat, table, doorway, couch and bed, was larger than its terran counterpart to accommodate their expansive wings.

Stepping off the ship and being confronted by all of those alien sights threw me for a bit of a loop. Standing so close to the Somani was quite an experience, but nowhere as wonderful as seeing many of them flying gracefully through the air above and around the city. They were so elegant and fluid; they were pure poetry in motion.

The first few weeks on the Somani homeworld were kind of hard for me. I was part of the first group of the cultural exchange, consisting of only one thousand people. This had seemed like a large group on board the ship, but once we'd landed we were quickly separated into much smaller groups. Each of these groups was spread throughout the surrounding continent so as to maximize the effect of the cultural exposure.

Being a college student, I was assigned a position at the local university, along with only fifty other humans. Since the university had over seven thousand students enrolled in it, we quickly became a vast minority. Then we were even further spread out throughout the campus. The dorm that I was assigned to only had three other humans in it, amongst the one-hundred fifty residents, so I quickly began to feel pangs of loneliness and homesickness.

It was particularly hard on me since I was a little shy to begin with. Also, since I was a little shorter than average, only a bit taller than five and a half feet, the height difference between the Somani and I was even more pronounced. That tended to make me feel even more uncomfortable, but luckily for me my floormates made up for it. There were several outgoing Somani who lived nearby, and who took it upon themselves to make me a part of nearly all of their activities. After we got over the awkwardness of dealing with aliens, and got to know one another as individuals, things began to go really well. By my first month there, I'd made several close friends.

So the last several months had been extremely invigorating, exciting and lots of fun. It hadn't been without its small upsets though. Sometimes the differences between our two societies would be remarkably profound, and there were a few awkward moments here and there. The biggest one of these was the fact that the Somani tended to be a lot more physically expressive than humans do.

To them hugging or lightly touching the arms, shoulders or the legs were just simple signs of friendship, nothing more than a handshake or a high-five was to us. This had caused a couple of embarrassing incidents early on as I received these attentions from both males and females. Noticing my uncomfortable reaction, they'd been confused and even a little hurt, which had caused both of us to become rather uncomfortable. Again I was lucky that my new acquaintances were very understanding. We'd been able to discuss the situations and easily resolve them. I'd then begun to adjust to the laxness with which they treated personal space, and as time wore on had been able to freely give and receive their acts of friendship.

I'd gotten quite close with one or two of the Somani, and our friendships had become very deep. We'd sometimes sit up talking until late in the evening, with topics ranging from discussions of our different cultures, to deep philosophical conversations, to random and rather silly ramblings caused by loose associations and our tiredness. Even with these aliens and their new world, some things were still the same. College was still fun and I had many good times with my new friends.

One of my closest friends had asked what had prompted me to come on the exchange program in the first place, noting the fact that I'd been kind of shy at first. I hesitated a moment, thinking of just what to tell her, not knowing if I could trust her with such a personal secret. I finally decided that if I wanted to strengthen our relationship, I should be totally open with her. Taking a nervous

breath, I'd slowly told her about my dreams of flight and how I admired and also slightly envied them for having that wonderful ability.

She hadn't laughed at me like a small part of my mind had feared; instead she'd been very understanding. Although, at first it was a little hard for her to grasp, and she couldn't comprehend not being able to fly since it was an innate ability of theirs. We talked late into the night, with her trying to explain to me just exactly what it felt like. It was obvious that I couldn't truly comprehend what she was telling me, but she did her best to try and convey it to me. Once again it helped me live out a little of my dreams of flight, trying to imagine what it must be like for them to soar through the air like that.

It was a couple of weeks later, when she'd come running up to me in the hallway. She was obviously very excited, and had thrown her arms around me in a friendly hug. She'd then begun talking so fast and in broken sentences that I could hardly understand her. After she'd calmed down, she was able to convey to me the wonderful news she'd just heard.

She was a research assistant in one of the many medical labs on campus, and had heard of an intriguing project that was in the works. She knew the doctor in charge of the project and had spoken to him at length that afternoon. It turned out that ever since our contact with the Somani, they'd been vigorously studying our anatomy and genetic structure. Using loads of medical data as well as some cadavers transferred from Earth, they'd succeeded, in a rather short period of time, in learning almost as much about us as they knew about themselves.

One of their big advances in medicine over us was their ability to re-generate damaged limbs, tissue and organs, thus restoring the body to its former state after any type accident. They'd already performed some of these small procedures on humans hurt in accidents, such as healing broken bones or replacing cut or smashed fingers. Since they had such a phenomenal success with these simple operations, they were eager to try something much more ambitious.

Seeing as how humans and Somani were relatively close in body structure, one possible experiment that had been suggested was trying to give humans wings like they had, reasoning that it would be something very useful and helpful to our race. This was where I came in; my friend knew of my desire to fly and had mentioned it to the head doctor. Upon hearing that, he was very interested in seeing me.

Many humans were not very fond of the idea of having new body parts grown on them, and for good reason since it had shades of Frankenstein written all over it. I however was intrigued by the possibility of actually being able to fly, and that had offset some of the misgivings I had to the whole idea. I was still worried about the idea of genetic tampering, and had several in-depth and frank conversations with the doctors working on the project.

They understood my concerns, but also showed me how their genetic engineering had been used to totally remove birth defects and many debilitating diseases. Realizing that this would be different, by adding something totally new

to my body, they assured me that the operation could be reversible, if I decided that the additions were something I didn't want. They also were confident of their abilities to perform the procedure with no major side-effects. Finally my curiosity and yearnings for flight had won over my misgivings and I decided to give it a try.

First off, they started me out with several simulations, using the latest technology in virtual reality that we'd given them. In these simulations they were able to let me experience what having wings would be like, how it would feel, and how my body would be expanded. I was able to experience what it would feel like to fly for the first time, and it was a totally incredible experience. Seeing what having wings would be like convinced me that I wanted to give this experiment a chance.

Over the next couple of months, several preparations for the procedure were undertaken. First of all, they told me that I needed to strengthen my upper-body, especially my chest muscles, in order to be able to support my wings. So in addition to my daily runs, I would also spend time in the gym lifting weights. I'd never liked weight workouts, but thinking of how I'd soon be able to fly made it all worthwhile. A few of my new close friends went through the workouts with me, helping me to keep up my ambition up. It turned out that upon hearing of the planned experiment, they were just as excited as I was.

In the last month of the preparations, they'd laid down a rudimentary set of artificial nerves running along my back. The operation, although involved, had been quick by Earth standards, only taking about four hours. Once these nerves were in place, they'd given me a small portable unit, about the size of a deck of playing cards, which would send wireless signals to this nerve array. The device would detect proximity information and relay that as tactile sensations, simulating the feel of wings. That allowed me to get used to amount of space my wings would take up, and learn how to avoid bumping them into objects.

At first it'd been extremely difficult, but the gain of the sensors had been turned way down, so that even when I hit my virtual wings hard against something, or managed to shut them in a door, the pain was very light. Trying to move phantom wings that I could feel, but not see posed some problems as well, but I was able to adapt to it after a time. As I got more used to them, the feedback amplitude of the unit was increased to more accurately simulate how real wings would feel. I soon got quite proficient at avoiding obstacles, and learned to sleep with my back propped against special pillows, or on my side with my virtual wings folded against me, so they wouldn't be crushed while I slept.

I must have looked rather strange standing clear of objects with my invisible wings, but by then a lot of people had heard about the project. One good thing about Somani culture is their respect of individual privacy. Even though most everyone knew about what I would soon be undertaking, they were all very polite about it, and only my closest friends would discuss it with me. Had this

been Earth, I would've been hounded by just about everyone from curious strangers to the media.

The media here was much different than from back home though. They reported only the essential news, not getting into people's private lives, nor did they have all the tabloids and commercialism which still plagued us humans. After the operation, I was told, there would be a small press conference, to be scheduled at my convenience. Even then they would be very courteous with me, I'd know all the questions ahead of time, and they'd try and keep it short.

As the date of the operation grew nearer, I became much more excited. I was still a little nervous, but I had complete trust in the miraculous Somani medical science. They answered any and all of my questions in a friendly and thorough manner. They explained that the operation would consist of the controlled activation of cellular growth, producing the construction of the wing structure from my back. The artificial array of nerves they'd laid down would be replaced by real neural pathways, and then the new muscles, bones, flesh and skin of the wings would be added.

Although the wings would be of Somani design, they would also be of human genetic structure. Fully understanding both Somani and human DNA, they would be able to tweak my genetic codes, adding the desired sequences which would grow the wings. The whole process was very involved, so it would take a little over two days from start to completion. During this time, I would be unconscious, suspended on life support, in a chamber of amniotic fluid which would promote tissue growth.

As for the operation being reversible, they assured me that this would be no more difficult than the original procedure. Instead of simply removing the wings, which would leave me an amputee, they would slowly reverse the process. They would remove the wings, but would leave the nerves intact. Then, just as I'd been trained to learn how my wings felt, I would slowly be weaned from their sensory input, until my body no longer expected it.

The extra nerves would then be removed, and I would be just as I had been before. There would be some residual mental effects from this though, since I would then know what it felt like to have wings, and would to some extent emotionally and intellectually miss their presence. They reminded me though, that if I liked the wings that much, then there was no need to have them removed, and if I absolutely hated them, then getting rid of them would make me feel better.

With that knowledge, I'd decided to go with my dreams and undergo the procedure. I was still a little nervous, but I knew that if I never took advantage of this opportunity, I would always regret it and wonder what it would've been like. Now lying in bed like this, with my real wings finally spread out beneath me, I was confident that I'd made the correct decision.

With my mind still racing from all of my excited thoughts, I was interrupted as the head doctor from the project entered my room. "Hello Will, how are you feeling today?" he asked in a very cheery, yet professional tone.

“Great!” I replied enthusiastically. “I can’t wait to get out and stretch my wings and see how well they work.”

Noting my enthusiasm, he smiled warmly at me. He was impressed with how strong my desire to fly had been, and had been very supportive throughout the whole experience. “I’m glad you’re so happy with the results so far, how would you like to take a better look at yourself?”

Seeing my second enthusiastic reply, he helped me out of bed and to a standing position. I was a little unsteady at first, since the simulations hadn’t been able to thoroughly show me what the weight of the wings would feel like. Their added weight was small, and not too uncomfortable, but they did change my center of gravity a little. It took a few minutes of adjusting my posture to figure out the best way to stand with these new additions to my body. It still felt strange, but the other sensations from the wings were very familiar to me and they felt comfortable, as if I’d always had them.

Holding me steady for a few moments, the doctor then led me to a full-length mirror on the opposite side of the room, allowing me to admire my reflection. I stood there clad only in the hospital pants, with my upper body exposed. Spreading out my wings I was impressed with their full span of about seven feet, scaled perfectly to my size. As with the Somani, their tips came to just under a foot above my head, and down to about two-thirds of the way down my calves. However, unlike the Somani, my wings were made of human flesh, with their skin color being the same as the rest of my body. They looked a little strange since they were just naked flesh, not covered by fur like the wings I was used to looking at. However, I’d seen projections of what I’d look like, so I was prepared for the view.

Standing there, I admired my new appendages as I vainly flexed them for my viewing, smiling as they moved with fluid grace. The simulation they’d put me through had helped train me for this and my new wings worked flawlessly to follow my commands. I got a little lost in the reflection and was brought back to reality by the doctor’s gentle touch on my shoulder. Turning to him, his smile reflected that of my own. “So I trust everything turned out to your satisfaction Will? You seem to be enjoying the view” he asked me with a quick wink of his eye.

“Yes” I agreed, feeling completely at ease with him, enjoying his warmth and personable demeanor which had been with me since the beginning of the project. “I look a little strange for the moment, but it is something I’ll get used to. Already I can appreciate how good they look on me...”

“That’s good, now how’d you like to try them out instead of just admiring them?”

Again I was very quick to agree to his suggestion, nodding eagerly. Seeing my response, he led me out of the room and down the hall to a very large and expansive room. I was a little sheepish about walking around in just a pair of hospital pants, but luckily they were full pants, unlike the ones commonly seen

in terran hospitals with the backs open. Also, at least in that part of the hospital, nobody else seemed to be around so I had some privacy.

Entering the room, which was the size of about two and a half gymnasiums, he explained, “this is our flying room. Sometimes we’ll have a patient whose wings are badly damaged and they’ll need to go through an operation much like the one you went through. Afterwards we need to make sure that everything came out okay, so we need to have a place where they can take a quick test flight. We’ve already done a complete physical scan on you, and things seem to be all in order, but we can’t be sure until you show us how they actually work.”

I practically jumped at the chance to finally test out my wings. Crouching down slightly, I spread them out and jumped lightly up into the air, flapping my wings the way I’d learned from the simulations. Again the training from the simulations hadn’t been totally accurate, and I was a little unsteady at first. With work though, I soon got the feel for it and before long I was swooping throughout the room, enjoying the ability to do graceful glides and quick turns and spins.

I flew excitedly around the room for ten or fifteen minutes before remembering about the doctor waiting below, and then grudgingly coming down to a skillful landing. I’d enjoyed the times I’d spent on the simulator learning how to fly, but there was always a slight bit of unreality about it. Now after really flying for the first time, I could see how pale the simulation had been to the actual experience.

When I finally landed, I greeted the doctor with an outburst of excitement, trying to describe to him just how wonderful the experience had been for me. He stood there patiently listening to my wild ramblings with an amused smile on his face. It was also obvious from his expression that he was impressed with the amount of skill my first flight had demonstrated.

As I was babbling wildly to him, overwhelmed by my excitement, I heard a familiar feminine voice behind me calling my name. Turning around I saw it was one of my close Somani friends come to see me. In fact she was the one who’d first introduced me to the idea of the whole project. “Hello Will,” she greeted me with a warm smile, “you look wonderful. Did I miss your first flight?”

“Yes you did” I said running madly at her, pumped up from the exhilaration, and extremely happy. I embraced her in a strong, friendly hug as I started to talk wildly at her. “Mazzi, it was wonderful, I never knew it could be like this, now I know what you were trying to tell me when you were trying to explain it to me. It’s just so wonderful, I felt so free...”

Seeing me all hyper and excited, she giggled with her usual bubbly personality. Finally she put one of her hands gently over my mouth and hugged me a little tighter with the other one, slowly calming me down. Smiling at me she replied, “it’s good to see you lose control like that. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so taken by anything quite this way before... It’s really amusing and cute.” Turning to the doctor who was watching the whole spectacle with



obvious amusement, she asked “so did everything come out okay, is he ready for his first outdoor flight?”

“Yes, he’s in wonderful shape, and a moderate flight would be very good for him.” Addressing me before he leaves the arena, he added “everything should be just fine Will, but I’d like you to come in for a quick checkup in a week just to make sure.”

I responded with a quick affirmative as he was leaving and then turned back to look at Mazzi. Over the past few months, she and I had gotten very close. I’d easily say that she was my best friend here. I’d occasionally wondered if things between us would develop into something stronger, something romantic, but I didn’t want to push the issue. I was extremely happy having her as such a close friend, and I was a little reluctant to chance that and try and pursue her as a possible lover. For the moment I was content with the way our relationship was. “Thanks for coming Mazzi, this really means a lot to me.”

“Well you know I wouldn’t have missed this, being such an important day for you and all. Besides, I wasn’t going to let anyone else take you out on your first real flight. I wanted the pleasure of that experience for myself... Oh and I brought you a present.” With that she picked up the small bag she’d been holding, but then dropped when I practically jumped into her arms. Reaching into it she brought out a Somani shirt, a slit running down its back to accommodate for the wings. In keeping with the Somani’s love of bright colors, the shirt was a nice radiant hue of red.

“Thanks Maz, that’s really thoughtful of you, it’ll go great with the blue shorts I’ll be wearing.”

“You’re welcome, I had the feeling that since you were so excited about everything you might’ve forgotten about needing a whole new set of shirts, so I went ahead and got you this. We can go shopping later if you want, but first I’d like to take you to a peak near here which has a really nice view this time of year.”

“That sounds great, how far away is it?”

“About fifteen kilometers.” At first that seemed like a long distance to me, since I was used to running for my exercise, then I realized that by flying it would be much easier to cover the same distance in a much shorter time. Therefore, this flight wouldn’t actually be too long. My exercise program had strengthened my muscles so I was ready for my first flight of any real distance.

“Okay, let’s go. Just let me get changed first” I replied eagerly.

We walked out of the large flight room, and back up the hallway to my room. Then after opening the door, I turned to her, and in keeping with our playful friendship, I jokingly flirted “so you can either stay out here, or if you want you can watch me change.” I finished up by winking at her a couple of times and flashing her a wide grin.

Returning my grin she playfully replied “oh I’d better stay out here. I don’t know if I could stand the show... I might get all excited and pass out or something.”

Laughing briefly at our silly joke, I closed the door and quickly changed, returning out into the hall to model my new shirt with my shorts. Standing there I posed playfully for her, keeping my posture as straight as I could, while flexing my wings slightly.

“Will, you look great” she complimented with genuine affection making me beam with pride. “Come on, let’s get going. I’m anxious to see you fly.”

Walking to the top of the building and then out onto the roof, we emerged into the sunlight of an absolutely gorgeous day. Following her lead, we ran to the edge of the roof, jumping out into the air spreading our wings, and taking flight.

Again the feelings were so new and wonderful that they almost overwhelmed me. My mind and heart almost exploded from the joy I was feeling from the realization of one of my innermost dreams. The trip to the peak took about fifteen minutes and we enjoyed every moment of it. Mazzi was a little surprised at the skill of my flight, especially as we were executing a series of complicated swoops and swirls around one another.

Finally we reached our destination where the view was extremely rewarding. We stood on the top of a small mountain, which was flattened out on top giving a small plateau of about an acre or so, and gazed out across the beautiful panorama. In all my time on the planet, I’d never been up this high; in fact I’d never really been outside of the city. Now looking out across the wonderful landscape I saw the city in the distance, surrounded by roaming countryside. The sun was bright and the sky was its beautiful shade of blue as small puffy clouds drifted lazily overhead. The whole picture was just so perfect, and it accompanied my exhilaration quite nicely.

Turning to Mazzi, I looked at her and once again noticed just how beautiful she is. She stood pretty much at my height, with her wings roughly the same size as mine. Her coat is a lovely golden color, dotted with leopard spots which are very attractive. Her hair is a light brown with light waves through it, coming down in the back to just above shoulder length. Her muzzle is covered in white fur, which runs down her neck, trailing down into her shirt. She was wearing red shorts with a bright green shirt, both of which nicely complimented her fur coloring. The whole effect was really quite adorable, and in the back of my mind I once again pondered the remote possibility of us falling in love.

In a wordless agreement, we embraced each other once again in a comfortable and friendly hug. I leaned my head against her shoulder enjoying the feel of her warmth, as I was still teeming with excitement from the flight. “Thanks for taking me here Mazzi, it’s just so beautiful. I can’t possibly tell you how wonderful this has been and what it means to me.”

She reached up to softly stroke the back of my head and ran her hand through my hair. Then with a gentle nudge, she guided my head up and back so we were looking face to face. She smiled at me with incredible warmth, and gazing into her beautiful blue eyes, I almost got lost in their depths.

In the back of my mind I realized that something was different here. There was something subtle in the way she was looking at me, a mix of emotions registering on her face. Looking up at me with those beautiful wide eyes, she brought her mouth to mine and gave me a soft, yet deliberate kiss.

As our lips made contact I was momentarily startled by the whole turn of events, yet also pleasantly surprised. I reflexively kissed her back, my lips meeting hers softly, and I also gave her a quick squeeze with my arms, holding her to me. Our kiss only lasted a few moments before she pulled away slightly and asked me “was that okay Will?”

“Yes,” I stammered slightly in amazement. “It was wonderful. It’s something I’ve been sort of thinking about for some time now... but I didn’t know that you felt the way about me.”

Smiling warmly at me once again she replied, “I’ve been becoming more interested in you over the past several weeks, but I sensed some hesitation or uncertainty in you, so I thought it would be best if we played it slow. Then lately I’ve decided that I should give it a chance and see how you responded... I figured today would be a good day to do it, with all the other wonderful experiences you were having. I also wanted to make the moment perfect, so I waited until I could take you out here where we could be alone in this beautiful setting.”

“Thanks Mazzi. I’m glad you made the first move, otherwise who knows how long we would have waited. I still want to take it slow though. We’ve come this far, and I don’t want to mess things up by moving too quickly.”

She answered me with a quiet nod. Then pulling her a little closer, I moved my lips toward hers and we kissed once again. It was just as softly as before, but that time we stretched out the moment, savoring it. The feel of her fuzzy muzzle and thin lips against mine felt so nice, and our embrace seemed so warm and natural. I enjoyed holding her there, as we bathed in the feelings of our close friendship, which had just grown even closer.

We held each other for moments that seemed to last for ever. Nothing could happen to make this a better day; right now it had obtained perfection and would be forever etched in my memory. I finally ended the moment by softly thanking her once again for all that she had done for me. Holding onto each other a little longer, we finally decided that since it was starting to get late we should be leaving.

“Why don’t we fly into town quickly and do a little shopping, since you need some more shirts? Afterwards, my parents would like to have us visit them for dinner, they are really excited for you... Then I thought we could spend the evening at the theater since there are several new movies we haven’t seen.”

I agreed with her on all counts. Her parents were extremely nice, and had become sort of a second family to me. Spending the rest of the day with her sounded wonderful, and the thought of cuddling against her while watching a movie was just so inviting.

Having decided how to spend the rest of our waking hours that day, we again took a running leap off of the plateau and glided gracefully into the wide blue sky. I let her get slightly in front of me for a moment so I could admire her beautiful form flying ahead of me. Then with my spirits soaring high, I rushed to catch up to her. Reaching her, I flew swooping by, and we continued the game of aerial tag we'd been playing earlier.





# Changes

*Story illustrated by Sara "Caribou" Palmer.*

*I was thinking about werewolves, and I wrote this story to play around with some ideas on the subject which came to me.*

The adolescent boy lay on the bed, lost in his thoughts, the pleasant surroundings of his room and the colorful posters on the walls ignored, his gaze fixed blankly on the ceiling. With his breathing heavy and his face a mask of confusion and concern, his mind labored over the same jumbled ideas once again. His thoughts coming in slow, jumbled spurts, they tumbled together, forming a half-shaped mass of understanding. Brooding over the situation facing him, he tried once again to conceptualize it, his uneasiness growing as he grasped only its shadowy outlines.

After lying still for quite some time, caught up in his worried confusion, his thoughts were interrupted when he noticed the slow and subtle change in the light bathing the room around him, the shadows stretching out along the walls. Glancing at the clock on the night-stand, then moving his gaze quickly to the window, confirmed the lateness of the hour. Seeing the sun sinking low in the sky, ready to dip below the horizon, his worries were escalated as the inevitability of the situation forced itself upon him.

His thoughts raced out of control at the idea of the approaching night. Over the past few days he had come to some understanding of it, but understanding did not make what was happening to him any easier, his mind struggling to place meanings and consequences upon the changes he felt welling up within him. Already he could feel the forces pressing in upon him, just as with the nights before, and they were slowly building, threatening to consume him.

What was happening to him? And yet he knew, or at least could give a name to it, but still it did nothing to ease his mind. As before, with the sun's rays slowly dying, he could feel the forces of the night reaching out to him, trying to impress its wishes upon his body. Soon the moon would be out, and the full power of it would wash over him, could he resist its call?

He'd tried to fight against it, but it was in vain, as the changes, minor at first, but growing in intensity with the continuing nightly progression, forced their way upon his flesh. Each night the changes had been more pronounced, the moon marching relentlessly through its cycle, and tonight, in just a few hours, the full moon would rise; surely tonight would be the worst of it, as the changes within him took their toll.

As his eyes stared with a heavy gaze into the encroaching darkness of twilight, a quiet knock on the door intruded into his racing thoughts, pulling him, if only briefly, away from his worries.

Turning away from the window, he sat up on the bed, watching the door; there was another quiet knock, before it slowly opened and his mother peeked her head inside. Seeing him sitting there, she regarded him with a concerned look on her face, he returned her gaze, but his was dull and preoccupied.

“Scott, are you okay? You’ve been up here all afternoon...”

Pausing, taken aback by her intrusion, he finally forced out “yeah, I’m alright Mom.”

“But you’ve been so quiet lately, and spending so much time in your room this past week. Is there anything wrong?”

His pulse quickening, his mind racing at her inquisition, afraid of being discovered, he answered her. “No, everything’s fine... I just felt like being alone. Okay?” his voice straining at the end of his reply.

Watching her son, looking at him as if trying to search for some insight to his behavior, her face reflected her concern. “Okay Scott, I just wanted to make sure you were feeling alright.” Then, trying to help but just grasping at straws, she finished, “if there was anything bothering you, you know you could tell me... Do you want to talk about it?”

“No... it’s nothing,” his thoughts defensive and his voice becoming more insistent, all his efforts were focused on avoiding discovery.

“Are you sure?” her voice trailing off, unsure of what to say.

“Yes. Now just leave me alone” he almost snapped at her. Then in desperation he turned, rolling over on the bed, withdrawing from the conversation to stare at the wall in front of him. His heart beating loudly against the heavy silence, the moments dragged on before he finally heard her shut the door, leaving him alone with his thoughts. The relief of ending the encounter mixing with his other jumbled concerns, his weary mind found temporary solace as he fell off into sleep.



Awaking slowly to the darkness, gathering his bearings, his memories returned to him as his eyes adjusted to the soft light pouring in through the window. His thoughts became more agitated when he realized the source of this silvery glow. Jumping out of bed to stand before the window, he saw the pale orb of the full moon rising up before him in the darkness, casting its spell across the world, washing the landscape with its ghostly presence.

Throwing open the window, unable to resist the call, he felt the cool chill of the night air engulf him, as the power of the moon’s glow poured over his body. Feeling the energy building, his mind reacted, his thoughts becoming frenzied, consumed with the flickering understanding of what was about to overcome him.

As the power grew within him, his body became charged, his nerve-endings running hot and cold, his senses expanding against their bounds. As before, he tried to fight it in futility, but his body pushed on, changing against his wishes.



Tonight, as he'd thought, the changes took him farther than they'd gone before, much farther.

With his whole body tingling, engulfed with the power flooding upon him, he scratched wildly at his itching skin, quickly shedding his clothing for some margin of relief. His nerves all firing at once with the energy surging through them, new hairs began to emerge from his skin, growing wildly, knitting together to form a coarse covering, then blending into a finer coat of fur.

At the same time he felt his flesh becoming malleable, stretching and molding to the forces exerted upon it. With the power surging through him, the pain was replaced by wondrous new sensations, as he gave in to the pressures of the change, and endorphins swept through his system. His vision blurring, the physical effects of the reworking of his body overwhelmed his senses, leaving his mind reeling from their intensity.

Moments later the change was complete, leaving him dizzy from the rush of those new feelings, gasping at the vague pleasure of it all, the pinnacles of sensation now just fading into memory. Blinking his eyes, which now saw the landscape of the night with a sharper vision, he glanced down at his changed form, having fully realized the hidden potential locked within his body.

Relaxing the grip his paws held on the window sill, he crouched there, regaining his equilibrium as his senses adjusted, re-tuning themselves to his altered body. Panting through his partially-open muzzle, he caught his breath, perusing the moonlit landscape before him with newly-opened eyes, his tail twitching in excitement behind him.

Then crouching down on his haunches he leapt with powerful grace, jumping through the window, coming to land on the ground a few feet below. Breaking into a quick-paced gait, running easily on all fours, he sped across the yard into the silvery-lit fields beyond. Off to run with the moon, his thoughts were free and untroubled, the awkwardness of the time of change forgotten for the moment.

Looking out the window of her room, his mother watched him leave to explore the new world just now opened up to him. Sitting there, watching with mixed emotions, a bittersweet smile crept across her muzzle. Her lupine ears twitched ever so slightly, as if recounting old memories of her youth; "adolescence is always a little difficult," she thought to herself.



# The Loner

*Story illustrated by Heather Bruton.*

*The idea for this story and the shy character it's based around are fairly simple, but I liked the premise to it. Many of my stories tend to be romantic, especially the earlier ones. I have written about other subjects as I went along, but my plotlines always tend to be driven by the characters, and my thoughts about them.*

"I'm glad that I finally convinced you to spend some time with me outside of class Paul. I'd like to get to know you better, that is if you're interested."

He peered back at her, the lower part of his face conveniently hidden behind the coffee cup, as he took a slow drink, then lowering the cup to the table. His eyes remained locked on her, gazing at her with a mixture of emotions that were hard to decipher. He still looked shy and scared, but there was something else underneath, perhaps just a hint of wildness, which she found intriguing.

Finally he broke the silence with his soft voice. "Of course you know I'm interested Ann, otherwise I wouldn't be here. It's just that I'm still a little nervous..."

As his voice trailed off, he momentarily dropped his gaze from hers. In the span of those few moments, she reflected back on their relationship, and what had happened between them so far. She'd noticed him a few weeks into the semester, in her film-studies course, as he sat alone, towards the back of the auditorium. It was a night course, so it wasn't that well attended, most of the students in the course were there because their schedules were so hectic that 7:00 in the evening was one of the few times when they could fit academics into their life. She'd taken the course as an elective because it looked interesting, and she had nothing better to do with her Monday nights, and also because a night class was vastly superior to an early morning one.

She hadn't seen him around campus before, and at first didn't pay any notice to him sitting there by himself. But after glimpsing him the first few times from across the room, she felt something almost intangible grip her. She'd been interested in several people before and had a few steady boyfriends in the recent past, but she'd never experienced an attraction quite like this. It wasn't a strict physical attraction, although he was fairly attractive, with his medium height and build, straight dark hair, and an honest face. He was just average-looking, except for his eyes, which looked so deep and insightful, but she hadn't noticed that until she'd gotten a closer look at him. No this hadn't been a simple attraction, it had been as if she'd sensed something about him, and that had intrigued her. There was something subtle about him, and just the way he sat there somehow hinted at the interesting personality hiding beneath his quiet exterior.

After taking several quick peeks at him throughout the lecture, she'd decided that she wanted to meet him. She was outgoing most of the time, but still had a bit of shyness to her when it came to approaching strangers, finally, she decided it was worth the risk to try and meet him. The following week she'd waited quietly outside of the lecture hall until he'd entered and sat down. Waiting a few minutes more, she'd entered the room and approached the row where he sat.

He'd looked up at her with surprise, and was a bit uncomfortable when she'd asked if a seat close to his was taken, and if he minded if she sat there. He'd shyly mumbled that it was okay, and had spent the next several minutes in an awkward silence, staring down at his shoes. Finally she'd introduced herself and found out his name, she was even able to prod him with some small talk before the lecture started.

At the end of the three-hour session, they'd chatted some more before he'd said he needed to leave. In that short time, he'd become more comfortable with her, but was still very reserved in his conversation. He'd said he lived in an apartment downtown, so they only walked a short distance together, before their paths diverged.

The next few weeks had been more of the same, she'd found herself becoming more interested in him as she slowly brought him out of his shell, each time sharing a little bit more of himself with her. He was still shy and a little reserved, but seemed to be growing more comfortable with her. They'd found they had more than a few things in common, such as a love for foreign films, which had led them both to the class which had brought them together. After each lecture they'd stay and talk for upwards of an hour or so before he'd say that he needed to leave. They'd walk together to the student union, where she'd turn east toward her campus apartment, and he would head south, down into town.

But then tonight she'd asked him if he'd like to grab a snack at a nearby, yet slightly secluded coffee shop, and to her delighted surprise, he'd actually agreed. They'd talked with their newfound easiness all the way there, but upon entering, he'd become strangely quiet, perhaps because that was a new step in their relationship.

Brought back to the present, she glanced around the shop, which wasn't too busy tonight, there were only four other customers in the whole place, and they were at the back, several tables away from anyone else. Looking back at him, she decided to make the move, reaching over to him, and gently touching the top of his right hand. He jerked his head up at her touch, gasping slightly, with a look of surprise.

"It's okay Paul," she said in a soothing and reassuring voice. With a slightly-forced laugh, she continued "I'm not going to bite. You seem so alone, I just want to help you."

Looking at her with his deep, brown eyes, he dragged her into their depths, seeming to pull her mind into his for the briefest of moments. Falling into his gaze, she felt closer to him than ever before, uncovering some of the layers

of his psyche, as he revealed more of his personality to her. At that moment she felt a stronger attraction towards him, realizing how deep her feelings for him had become, almost a longing.

She also sensed there was something he was hiding from her, something besides his simple, but deep need for simple companionship which she could now feel. He broke their contact by speaking again. "You don't really know me Ann... I do feel so alone, but it's because of the way I am, and I don't know if I can escape that. I'm just so different, so different from everyone else and I don't know if you can deal with that."

Looking into the sadness in his eyes, she felt the weight upon his soul, but still didn't understand its cause. "I feel like I know you very well already Paul, whatever it is, I think I can understand. I want to help you." After a brief pause, she continued, "I can't explain it, but in our meetings during these past weeks I've felt a connection between us. I don't quite understand it, but I feel like I've known you for a long time and I'm always thinking of you. I want to be a bigger part of your life... please let me in."

"I've felt this way for so long, it seems like I've been alone for ever. I can't tell you what this means to me Ann." As he was speaking, he blinked his eyes several times, and she saw they were glistening slightly with tears, his voice becoming just slightly choked. "I've felt the same way about you, but didn't know how you felt about me. Still I've been alone for so long, I don't want to be hurt, or to do something that might hurt you... It scares me just to think of it. I'm so afraid that it won't work..." his voice trailing off.

"But if we don't try, we'll never know" she interrupted, giving him a cute smile, looking deeper into his eyes. "I'm willing to risk it if you are. I've known you long enough to know that I don't want to lose you."

She could still tell he was nervous, but he flashed her a quick smile in return. Gathering up his courage, he took her hand in his, keeping his eyes locked on her gaze, his grip was loose at first, then tightening slightly. At his touch she was drawn deeper into his mind, touching his loneliness and gaining more insight into his soul, still there was part of him that he kept shrouded from her.

Sitting there hand in hand, lost in each other's eyes, there didn't seem to be any more need for words. They stayed like that for only a few minutes, but it seemed to span a much longer period. The contact gave her a feeling of intimacy, and it was as if they'd spent several hours pouring over each other's souls.

He finally broke the magic of the moment, letting go of her hand, speaking against the comfortable silence of a short eternity. "Well now, I think it's about time we left."

"What do you mean Paul? You aren't going to leave me now are you?"

"I said 'we' not 'I.' I'd like to be in a more private setting... that is if you're interested" flashing her a bold, and almost dangerous grin. It seemed that perhaps the prey had suddenly turned on the hunter.

Struck with surprise at his boldness and the turn of events, she was silent for a couple of moments. Quickly recovering, she returned his grin as she replied “why Paul, whatever has gotten into you? Are you sure that you’re up for this?”

“I wasn’t until just now. When we were sitting there I got a feeling of just exactly who you are. I think that we’re right for each other, and I think that this will work out. That is if you’re serious about wanting to be with me.”

“You know that I am, now let’s get out of here.” Quickly paying their bill, they headed out into the cool night air, as they walked, he slipped his arm around her and she leaned into him.

It was a short walk to her apartment, and they walked there at a faster pace than usual. Entering her single, she could feel her pulse quickening with excitement, she’d never felt like this with anyone else, and it was as if he was the one she’d been waiting for all this time.

Closing the door, he quickly turned her towards him, kissing her hard, almost forcibly. His kiss caught her off guard, especially from the deftness of it. From his shyness, she’d assumed that he wouldn’t have had much practice at that sort of activity, so she was pleasantly surprised by his skillfulness. Letting out a tiny gasp, she kissed him back, bringing her arms tighter around him.

They stood in their warm embrace for several minutes, and then he pulled away slightly, nudging her through the small apartment, into her bedroom. The room was lit by the moonlight flooding in through the windows, and standing in front of the bed, its glow illuminated them in a pale aura.

“Ann, are you ready for this? After this there can be no turning away, I want to make sure this is what you want.”

“Please Paul, I want to be with you as much as possible. I’ve never felt this way before and I need you with me.”

Hearing that, he embraced her once again, kissing her lightly, slowly unbuttoning her shirt, he slipped it gently off of her. Lightly stroking her neck and shoulders with one hand, he moved the other to slowly caress one of her breasts beneath her bra.

The hand caressing her neck then moved behind her head to stroke her cheek, while his other hand slipped behind her back to touch the side of her waist. He slowly disengaged his lips from hers, moving down her cheek, lightly kissing, until he reached her neck. Running his tongue deliberately over her tender skin there, he heard her gasp slightly in response, holding her body against him.

His actions changed abruptly, like a snake lying at wait in the grass he sprang, striking quickly. Pulling her closer to him, he thrust his hand over her mouth, stifling her cry, at the same moment he bared his teeth, forcing his giant canines into her soft flesh. Piercing her jugular, he drank deeply of her life-force, her warm blood spilling across his tongue, as she struggled against him.

Her struggles didn’t last long though, as the venom of his essence seeped into her blood stream, calming her. The application of the drugging agents hidden within his saliva, given to her while lapping at her delicate skin, had

helped to dull her pain and made it much easier for her. His attentions had been slower and kinder towards her, for she was not like one of his nameless victims. No, she'd agreed to be his partner, and was now taking part in what had become their dance, for now and forever.

It was over quickly, and she passed into what appeared much like a deep sleep, as the change started to work its way upon her. Laying her gently on her bed, he bent down to slowly lick the two round wounds on her neck, more natural agents in his saliva clotting her blood.

How long had he been like this? It had been so long he could hardly remember. What he'd become was part of a race which was on the decline, it had been so long since he'd seen someone like himself. He'd gone through his lonely existence for such a long time, never thinking he would find anyone, someone like her. He had found her though, and she'd agreed to stay with him, even if she hadn't thoroughly understood the ramifications of her decision. When she awoke the next evening to join him in the night, he was sure that she would understand the situation; after all it would give them the opportunity to be together like she had wanted. He was sure that she would understand.

He smiled to himself for the first time in what seemed like centuries. How good it would be to be with someone who would completely understand him, and was so much like himself. Closing the window shades, leaving them in the protection of darkness, he lay down on the bed next to her; he embraced her sleeping form lightly and soon fell into sleep himself. Tomorrow was after all a whole new night, and what wonders it promised to hold.





# The Scent of a Mephit

*Story illustrated by Sara "Caribou" Palmer.*

*This is just a cute little bit of fluff I wrote for the ConFurence 9 book, using the theme of "Furries in Love."*

The sad skunk femme sat alone at her table and watched the couples out on the dance floor with a quiet jealousy. Why had she even bothered to come to the singles' dance she asked herself, not for the first time that night. Of course nobody was going to be interested in her, she being a skunk after all.

Even though she'd learned long ago how to control her scent, there was still a slight musky smell that followed her. No amount of bathing or deodorants could help that. She didn't even think it really made her smell bad, just distinctive, but of course nobody else thought that way. They were all too willing to believe the stereotypes that continued to endure, and people tended to keep their distance from her.

She'd had some small grain of hope that there'd be another skunk at the dance tonight, and perhaps she'd even have a chance at romance and a little happiness. Skunks tended not to get out much though, and she'd found herself the only representative of her species there tonight.

So she just sat there instead, watching everyone else dancing happily together while she sat at her table, lost in a lonely corner in the back of the room. She sighed to herself as she felt her eyes watering up, and she turned her attention to the drink in front of her. It was only a couple of minutes later when she felt a gentle tap on her shoulder.

Startled, she turned to look up at a handsome male lynx standing next to her.

"Excuse me," he said as she blinked at him questioningly, "but I couldn't help but notice you sitting back here. It's not right that such a pretty lady like yourself should be all alone like this."

As her mouth opened slightly and she stared back at him, he flashed a smile at her before continuing. "You wouldn't mind some company would you?"

"Oh no... of course not" she stammered, "it's just that it's surprising, that's all."

His smile broadened a little at that and he sat down, taking one of the empty chairs next to her. "Well now, I guess introductions are in order" he said, "my name's Jerry."

"I'm Sheryl" she replied, still a little unsure of the situation. She did take his hand as he offered it to her though, and let out a little gasp of surprise when he lightly kissed the back of her hand instead of shaking it.

"Well, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance Sheryl, thanks for letting me join you."

They started talking and much to Sheryl's surprise, Jerry's flirting became subdued and more natural. He simply talked with her like they were old friends, and soon enough she began to feel that way about him. Before she knew it they'd been talking for close to an hour, having got caught up in the conversation.

Jerry noticed the time as well, and smiling at her once again he said "it's getting late and they'll be closing things down here in awhile. Can I get a few dances in with you before it's over?"

She felt a little nervous once again, but soon agreed, taking his hand and walking with him out onto the dance floor. She caught a few odd glances from some of the other dancers as they walked by. She saw the looks here and there of people who wondered just how anybody could wind up with a skunk, but she did her best to ignore them.

As Jerry moved closer, gently putting his arms around her, she hesitated, pausing a moment before she reciprocated his embrace. Finally she just closed her eyes and leaned against him, feeling his comforting presence as they moved together in the slow steps of the dance.

They enjoyed three dances together as her mind sorted things out and her thoughts drifted from comfort to those old familiar doubts. Pulling back slightly to look at him, she gazed into his eyes as he looked back at her intently. He seemed so warm and caring, but she just had to know. Taking a slow breath, she asked him "Jerry, why are you here with me now?"

He blinked back at her, his own turn for puzzlement and surprise having come. "Because I saw you sitting there all alone, and you looked so beautiful and sad" he replied after a moment's pause. "And talking with you, I really like you Sheryl."

"No Jerry, why are you with a skunk like me?"

Realization dawned on him, showing evidently on his face. "Oh is that it? People are always saying how bad skunks smell, but I've never seen that. You see I did something stupid at work several years back and got a whiff of some strong chemicals." He paused, and with his ears dropping slightly he flashed her a small embarrassed smirk. "Ever since then, I've lost my sense of smell..."

She stared back at him, almost in disbelief. "You mean...?"

"Yup, I can't smell a thing," he replied, his smile becoming warmer. "It doesn't matter anyway. I don't care what people say... I just like being with you like this tonight."

With that he pulled her closer once again and she offered no resistance. They spent the rest of the evening dancing together, both of them ignoring the occasional glances from some of the other dancers.



Before they knew it, the dance was finished and everyone was clearing out. Neither of them had wanted the night to end just then, so she'd taken him up on his offer to spend some time together at a local coffee shop.

"Thank you for a wonderful time at the dance" she said as they were sitting at the table, waiting for their drinks to arrive. "I'm glad I went, even though I thought I wouldn't enjoy it."

"You're very welcome" he replied. "I had a nice time myself and I was lucky to find such a lovely partner to dance with. You look really beautiful Sheryl. That blue dress looks pretty against the black and white of your fur."

"You're not so bad yourself" she answered with a smile playing across her muzzle. She was enjoying the comfortable presence of his warmth once again.

They only had to wait a couple of minutes before their waitress returned with their mugs of steaming Java. Bowing his head down, Jerry brought his nose to his cup and took a heavy sniff of the aroma. "Mmmm, I just love the smell of gourmet coffee." A moment later he realized his mistake as he looked up to see her watching him, her expression darkened.

"Jerry, you can smell the coffee?" she asked, her voice revealing a mixture of surprise and hurt. "But you said you couldn't smell anything..."

"Oh no," he sighed, "I didn't want to get caught like this." His tufted ears drooped once again as he looked at her sheepishly.

"I did really find you attractive when you were sitting there all alone" he continued, "and I wanted to try and spend some time with you. I'd heard how people could lose their sense of smell like that. I figured you might be self-conscious about your scent, so I made that up to try and get you to feel more at ease... I'm sorry for lying to you. I didn't want to hurt you."

She looked back at him, studying him with misty eyes for several moments, unsure of what to say. Finally, as he reached out to take her hand in his she replied "I guess I can forgive you, at least you did do it trying to be nice to me..."

"Thanks Sheryl," he said squeezing her hand gently. "I am glad that we got to spend some time together tonight, I was truthful about that... Plus, your scent isn't all that strong anyway" he said as he brought her hand to his muzzle and kissed it once again. With a warm smile playing across his lips, he looked back up at her. His gaze meeting hers, he paused for several moments before finally adding "I think I could get quite used to it..."