

The Journey



Will A. Sanborn

The Journey

A Fantasy, Adventure, Sci-Fi, Furry, Romance Story

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Author's Notes

This is in remembrance of my early twenties: the wonder I felt at discovering I could turn daydreams into stories, the exuberance of writing this first novel, and for the fantasies of Marissa and the world she took me too on this journey.

I wrote *The Journey* in 1994, a year after I had discovered writing as a creative hobby. Now as I look back on this story thirteen years later, I can see its flaws. It was definitely an experimental novel. I was still learning the tricks of the trade, as evidenced by the writing in present tense and my over use of the passive voice. I have revised the prose slightly in some places, but for the most part, it stands as it was originally written, warts and all.

Now that I'm older and at least a little wiser, I can laugh and even cringe a little at some of the more adolescent story elements and themes in here. But those, along with the style of the prose, are reflections of a time and a younger version of myself. With it coming in at over 100,000 words, this novel was a big undertaking for me. Even with its flaws, I realize what the story still has to offer. I remember what I was aiming for with these ideas, and after dusting it off for another look, I can see what I managed to accomplish way back then. I am happy and proud of it for those reasons.

There are still people who remember and speak well of *The Journey* from reading it in the past, and from some new readers discovering it more recently. The printing of this book is not only for myself, but is also for those other fans of my writing who remember this tale fondly.



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Chapter 1

As sleep slowly leaves me and I begin to regain consciousness, I become increasingly aware of the light, yet persistent throbbing in my head. Opening my eyes, I'm bewildered to find that during the night my surroundings have changed. I am no longer in my smallish dormitory room, but am lying on a soft double bed, covered in smooth satin sheets, in a room which is furnished with Victorian elegance.

My confusion gives way to panic as I struggle to understand how I could have gotten here. I have never experienced a blackout before, and I can clearly remember going to bed in my own room the night before. As my eyes scan the room, I roll over to my left and my heart almost skips a beat from what I see there. Sitting quietly in a chair about six or seven feet from the bed, is an anthropomorphic leopard woman.

Her body is a mixture between human and feline, with the skeletal and muscle structure being very similar to our own. Her head is definitely that of a cat though, proportioned in size with the rest of her body. Several long and slender whiskers extend from either side of her furry muzzle, as her thin lips are drawn back slightly in an almost imperceptible little smile. Her greenish-yellow eyes, whose pupils are elliptical, yet are much wider than normal cats, somewhat approximating human eyes, observe me in a somewhat detached manner as if she is waiting to see what I'll do next.

Another feature which further is reminiscent of a humans is her slightly wavy, jet-black hair, trimmed neatly at the bangs and flowing backward, coming down a few inches below her shoulders. Her pointed feline ears stick out from beneath her hair, and flick once or twice as she continues to observe me.

Her fur is pure white, like a snow leopard's, and it is dotted liberally with black leopard spots, making an interesting contrast, but at the moment, I am not in a position to appreciate this. Also from the tips of her four-fingered hands, to about halfway to her elbows, the fur there is of a dark black color, giving her the brief illusion of wearing gloves.

She sits there calmly watching me, with her legs crossed and her long, thick tail twitching lightly around her feet. For a moment I am completely stunned by the whole situation. Here is a character, not unlike some of those from the fantasy stories I occasionally read, sitting within pouncing distance, observing me as I lie in her bed. Always while dreaming, I had never been able to attain a lucid enough state of mind to question the reality of the world my subconscious created for me. Lying here now, I'm positively sure that no matter how strange this situation seems, for some absurd reason, it truly is happening to me.

My moment of confusion is brief as it is quickly replaced by fear. It hits me so quick, that I jerk upright, trying to throw the covers off me, and jump out of bed. She reacts almost instantly, briefly focusing her gaze on me, and then

quickly standing up and walking over to the bed until she stands about a foot and a half from me.

When she had intently focused her gaze on me, a strange feeling had hit me like a wave and quickly spread through my being, causing me to fall backwards, down unto the bed. It wasn't like being paralyzed; no it was more like a tranquilizing effect, as both my mind and body were instantly calmed and the urge to flee dissipated. Now I feel almost totally relaxed; I think I could move if I tried, but I have no motivation to do so. The fear has left me, and I feel my mind beginning to clear as I look up at her still very bewildered, but not longer bothered by the situation.

She stands above me, near my head, dressed in a pair of khaki shorts and a matching short-sleeved shirt. She is also wearing leather boots that come up about a third of the way to her knees. Her legs are another area where her body structure drastically differs from that of a human's. Her feet are like that of a cat's, being digitigrade and not lying flat-footed on the ground. Instead only the front half of her feet touch the floor, while the rest of her long feet come up at a slight angle. Even with this foot structure, she is able to stand up straight, and seems quite used to walking and standing that way. Her legs are slightly thicker than a human's, with the muscles being well-developed, and it appears that her thick tail acts as a counter balance to keep her stable.

Looking down at me, her gaze softens a little as she finally speaks to me in a soft voice, with an ever so light purr to it. "I realize this is hard for you to try and understand, but you've got to stay calm so I can explain everything to you. I promise that I will not harm you. If I was going to do that I could have done that already. I have brought you here because I need your help."

Whatever that calming effect had been, its power has decreased slightly, and I feel my fear creeping back in. As I try to keep my thoughts under control I manage to stammer out "Where exactly am I, and what can I do that will help you?"

"As you have probably guessed, you are no longer on your home world, in fact you have been transported to my world, which we refer to as Fen. I have been observing you for some time now and have decided that you would be the one."

"The one for what?" I ask with a mixture of confusion, fear and also a little annoyance. I really don't like the idea of being spirited away from my bed to God knows what corner of the universe. "And how is it that you can speak English?"

"Okay, it's obvious that I need to start at the beginning," she says with a slight friendly smile on her lips. "First of all, I'm not speaking English, you are speaking my native tongue." Noticing my obvious display of confusion, she continues "while you were sleeping I was able to scan your mind and create a translation spell and insert it into your subconscious."

"What, you're a telepath?" I respond becoming even more unnerved, not one bit liking the idea of her being able to read my innermost thoughts.

Seeing my distress she tries to calm me once again. “Not exactly, as you’ve probably observed, I’m a magic user, which allows me to do several things. I am able to scan people’s minds for certain things, but I cannot read people’s thoughts. I am able to read some subconscious thoughts and can access knowledge such as your language skills, but anything personal is locked away from me. There are some cases of limited telepathy between magic users, but even then I can only read thoughts which are specifically directed at me. So I was able to learn the aspects of your language and create a spell capable of translating everything you say and hear to and from my native tongue, while internally it seems to you as if we’re speaking English.”

“Then how come when you speak, it appears as if your lips are making the correct English words?”

“The spell also links in with your visual processing, fooling your eyes into seeing the desired lip movements. Otherwise it would be quite disconcerting to see people’s mouths running out of time with their speech.”

“Definitely,” I agree, and then laughing wryly I add, “it would be just like a really bad kung-fu flick,” as she obviously misses my reference, but decides that it isn’t worth asking about. “But I’m a little nervous about you mucking around in my head and installing new programming.”

“I understand your concerns, but you don’t need to worry. It is completely safe, I’ve done it dozens of times before without any problems. The spell is still a little weak, and will only last a day or two. Therefore, I’ll need to strengthen it a couple of times before it becomes permanent, but even once that happens, I can remove it at any time, still without causing you any problems. Now, we’ve got a lot to discuss, let’s get started, shall we?”

With that she turns away to bring her chair next to the bed and sits down in it. As she’s doing that, I sit up and prop my back against the head-board so we can talk face to face. In doing this, the pain in my head jumps back into my awareness. During the whole encounter, I had forgotten about my headache, and now as it comes rushing back to me, it seems to be stronger. I grimace at the sudden onset of pain and bring one of my hands up to massage my temples.

Seeing me do this, she reaches out her right hand and says in a somewhat comforting tone, “oh I’m sorry about that, I forgot that you’d be in pain. Please let me help you.”

Her movement toward me startles me and I become defensive, turning away from her. In my fear I lash out at her with a reply that sounds harsher than I had intended. “Was this caused by your so called safe spell you used to alter my brain? If so, I don’t know if I really want to trust you to do it again.”

“No” she replies in a soft, yet also somewhat hurt voice, “I told you that spell had no ill effects. The pain you’re feeling is caused by having been brought here across the void from your world into mine. It happens anytime someone makes a journey like that, but it is easily taken care of if you’ll let me help you.

With that she gently reaches out and touches the hand I still have on my head, turning my head slowly toward her. Bringing my hand down, she gently

lays her palm on my forehead as I watch her, confused and still a little scared. Almost instantly, I feel the pain dissipate until it is totally gone. There was also something else, something very slight and almost imperceptible, but there was something that felt like a brief wave of energy traveling through me. I'm not totally sure if I felt it, or it was just imagined, but it was definitely an interesting and new sensation; it felt strange, but also somewhat pleasant.

She withdraws her hand and looks at me as I gaze back at her in wonder. The pain has totally vanished, and forgetting for the moment that she has shanghaied me, I stammer a "thank you" in my appreciation and amazement.

Smiling at me she replies "You're welcome, but now we really must get down to business, for there is much for you to hear and it is getting late in the morning. First of all, let me introduce myself, my name is Marissa, and as I have explained and demonstrated, I am a magic user here on the world of Fen."

Not knowing exactly how to respond to this I answer, "well Marissa, my name is Ben, Ben Thompson. I'd like to say that is a real pleasure meeting you, but under the circumstances, given that you've pulled me from my world without my consent while I lay there sleeping, I can't say that this has been a wonderful experience so far."

"I understand Ben, and I'm sorry that I had to bring you here this way, but I felt it was necessary, and I hope when I explain things to you, you'll agree with me. As I've told you and demonstrated now twice, I possess the ability to use magic, this ability is quite rare on our world. Perhaps one percent of the population has some talent for it, but only about twenty-five or thirty percent of those individuals actually possess any real power. The others can perform simple tasks, but nothing too useful, they show only a glimmering of the true talent."

"I was one of the lucky ones," she continues, "and when my power manifested itself during my adolescence, as with the others, when I was brought before the elder magic users for testing, it was determined that the talent was very strong in me. Therefore, after my training, I became quite proficient in the uses of magic, as you have seen for yourself. However, since only such a small percentage of the population possesses the necessary talent, there are very few others like myself and when this current situation arose, I didn't have many colleagues to consult."

"What situation?" I ask both curious and a little apprehensive.

"Well it is hard to explain, especially to someone who hasn't used the talent, but I'll do my best. As I've said, we have the abilities to read certain thoughts from people, and on some levels have obtained rudimentary telepathy. Well, in the past several months, I have felt my thoughts touched, or more accurately invaded, by some external force. It is different from when I have been mind-speaking with other magic users, for one thing it felt somewhat alien. For another, it only happened when I was asleep and my subconscious was more open to communication. At several instances in the past months, I have had recurring dreams or visions much different than I had ever experienced before."

I stare back at her, not sure if I believe what she is saying. Finally I have to interrupt her. “So you’ve had some disturbing nightmares, and you decide that’s important enough to drag me away from my world when I have nothing to do with the whole matter? Frankly I don’t see how I’m connected with this at all.”

She flashes me a brief look of annoyance, quieting me, then changing her demeanor to once again calm and composed, she continues with her explanation. “If you’d let me finish, I’ll explain where you fit in with this. First of all, these aren’t your typical nightmares, I know what those are like and I know that these experiences were something different. It’s as if my subconscious was receiving a transmission from somewhere external to me. The images in my visions were much clearer than in dreams, and I was also able to retain them much better after waking. The images weren’t really frightening by themselves, it’s just that they were so jumbled and confused, yet also had some strange meaning when taken as a whole that only the deepest recesses of my brain could decode. Upon waking I could remember the visions, but their meaning was once again lost to me.”

“The first time it happened to me, it was strange and a little disturbing, but didn’t seem to be too out of the ordinary. Then less than two weeks later, the whole thing repeated itself. The images were different, but the feeling of underlying meaning was still there. The images changed so fast, jumping through vastly different visions, that it was quite unnerving, and left me somewhat shaken and overwhelmed. There was also a feeling as if this was emanating from some alien consciousness, whose power I could only guess at. From that point on, I have been having these experiences about two or three times a month, but with a slowly increasing frequency.”

“I can tell by the expression on your face that you don’t quite know what to make of me telling you this. I’m not surprised, I had to deal with similar mindsets when I approached the magic-users guild in large city a couple of days journey from here. As I said, there aren’t too many of us with any decent power, so in order to talk with a large group, I needed to make the trip to the city and speak with the assembly there. They too had been experiencing the visions, but were not as concerned with them as I was, since they claimed they had other, more important matters to contend with.”

“They did agree that shared visions were definitely a strange phenomenon, but assumed it was coming somehow from our collective minds, and was probably from having a good number of magic users clustered together. With the advances of steam transportation, it has been easier for people to travel to the cities than ever before, and the guild membership has grown greatly in size. I tried to point out that I was sharing in these experiences and was a good deal away from the rest of them, but they figured that once enough of them had gotten together, and their subconscious minds had produced these visions, who knew how powerful they were and how far they were capable of traveling.”

“In the end, they did agree that it was an interesting phenomenon, but they were more interested in other things at the moment. A motion was made to

study it in depth at a later time, but for then, it was forgotten. So I returned back here discouraged and somewhat angry at the bureaucracy of the members of the guild and their ignorance for overlooking the matter. This is only a medium-sized town, quite near the wilderness frontier, so there is only one other talented magic user here. Based on the population, there should barely only be one of us here, but as luck would have it, he moved out here a few months back, wanting to be closer to the frontier where he says the excitement is.”

“I have approached him, and received the same treatment that I did at the guild assembly. He thinks I’m somewhat foolish for looking into the matter as much as I am. He seems to believe that these visions are nothing more than shared dreams, and doesn’t seem to find them in the least bit disturbing or foreboding. So after all of my colleagues had forsaken me, it was then that I decided to call upon you.”

By this point I am quite bemused and reply with “well I don’t know why you would think I would have feelings different from the others you have talked with. I mean, so you’ve had some disturbing dreams, or as you want to call them visions, I don’t see what I have to do with it, even if I was to be concerned. I’m sorry but I still can’t see why you’ve brought me here, and I’d really like an explanation.”

She is beginning to get slightly annoyed with me, but only lets it show briefly. After letting out a muffled sigh, she continues. “Okay Ben, I’m getting there, please try and be a little more patient. I was hoping you’d be a little more interested in the whole situation, what with magic and a whole other world and all.”

“Well, I admit that does hold some fascination with me, but at the moment I’m having some trouble appreciating it since I’ve been brought here against my will and wasn’t prepared in the least bit for this. So you’ll have to excuse my lack of enthusiasm.”

She flashes me the briefest of glares, but it’s enough to get her point across. She is getting tired of my interruptions and wishes me to be a bit more cooperative. Seeing that I’ve read her message clearly, she continues yet again. “Okay, first let me explain about the concept of other worlds and traveling between them. Magic users have been exploring them for quite some time now, but finding new worlds is very tricky. The gateways between these worlds aren’t constantly open, instead they only allow passage and observation during certain windows of time. The length of time that the gateways remain open is different for each world, some being only minutes, others lasting for hours or even days.”

“Also, the times at which these gateways open up, are different for each one, and sometimes they don’t obey a simple repetitive schedule. For these reasons it is rather difficult for us to map out these gateways to those other worlds. Most of the time, they are discovered quite by accident, much like I discovered your world a little less than a year ago. I have been observing your world, and then

you in particular for several occurrences of the gateway opening. By looking into your subconscious, I have been able to learn much about your world.”

“Travel between worlds isn’t done too often, since it is hard to discover open gateways, and it is usually not known for how long they will remain open. I was lucky with your world. Not only does the gateway open at a regular interval, but it is open for several hours at a time, which gave me plenty of time to learn about your world and then specifically you. What drew me to you was that I recognized the talent within you which you aren’t even aware of. What I discovered was that you have the strong ability to perform magic locked within you and you don’t even realize it. At first this intrigued me, and I wondered if I could subtly prompt you to discover your talent, but then after being refused help from my colleagues, I decided in a last effort to try you.”

I can’t believe any of this, and I’m surprised my jaw doesn’t completely detach from my face as she finishes her last sentence. “What do you mean, you thought you’d try me?” I retort, in a somewhat harsh tone. This is just too much for me to take and I’m feeling anger creeping in. “First of all you drag me halfway across the galaxy, or even farther than that, who knows where the hell I am, to tell me about your disturbing dreams that nobody else is interested in, and then you try and tell me that I’m some sort of a wizard or something. I’m sorry, but I think I’ve had enough. I’d like you to return me home right now.”

She looks slightly hurt at this, and I realize that I’m letting my anger and panic at this strange situation get the better of me, and I feel a little bad for speaking to her like that. Then again, she did kidnap me, and in the beginning of a weekend of much needed rest.

Speaking a little softer to me, she rests one of her hands on my shoulders, which manages to somewhat comfort and calm me, either by magic or by a simple caring touch. “I’m sorry Ben, try and understand this, I didn’t mean to harm you. In scanning your mind several times, I was able to pick up a glimmer of your personality and realize that you’re having trouble with your work and also I detected some of your longing for adventure. I had hoped that this would be an interesting and exciting change for you.”

She was right on those counts. As an overworked graduate student, the pressure of trying to hold down a part-time job and finish my degree sometimes did get to me. A lot of the time what I was doing got kind of boring too, so I did have a tendency to let my mind wander and daydream. When I got a chance I did some fantasy reading, intrigued with the idea of traveling to other, more exotic worlds. It’s just that now when my idle daydreams had actually come true, I was quite unprepared for them.

“Yes Marissa,” I reply much more calmly, “I have often thought of taking a journey such as this, but those were just fantasies. I never for once actually believed that they were possible; now that it’s actually happened I’m rather surprised and pretty scared too. Also, I need to get back to my work. I was going to take part of the weekend off to try and relax, but on Monday I have a job to get back to and I have a thesis that I’d like to get done sometime before

the turn of the century. I'm sorry for snapping at you like that, but I really can't stay too long. I'll need to leave by the tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Maybe when I'm not quite as busy, I can come back and spend a decent amount of time here."

Looking at me with a compassionate expression on her face, she pauses for a couple of moments, before she finally breaks the news to me. "Ben, I'm sorry, but it doesn't work that way. I said that the gateway to your world was open for several hours, but that time has passed while you were asleep and I was fabricating the translation spell for you. You are stuck here until the next time it opens." Then pausing for what seems much longer than the moment it is, she finally adds, "and that won't be for almost a month."

"A month?!" I exclaim, although more out of surprise and distress than with anger. "I can't stay here for a month. I've got a job, I've got work to do. If I just vanish, there's no telling what kind of hell I'll be in when I finally do get back."

She briefly squeezes my shoulder, and this time I'm sure of the magic, as I feel another wave of calm spread through me. "It's not that bad, let me explain" she says giving me a reassuring look. "Another interesting property with the gateways between worlds is that although while they are open, time flows at the same pace for both worlds, when they are closed, the time frames for both worlds progress at separate paces, sometimes being drastically different. Therefore it is possible that the next time the gateway opens to that world, while only a few days have passed here, weeks, months or even years may have passed on the other side. It is for that reason that little exploration of the other worlds has been done, since nobody wants to get stuck on some alien world for some incredibly long period of time with no way to get back."

"For your world however, the opposite is true. While a month may go by here, it seems that barely more than a day passes for you. Therefore, when the next gateway opens up, you will be able to return in plenty of time to get back to your busy life. Think of this as a vacation and an adventure." With that she gives me a warm smile which I return, feeling much more at ease.

"Now, I realize that you still might not be interested in investigating the source of the visions that I've described to you. I am disturbed by them, but also am curious to see where they originate from. I have an idea of the general location of their source, don't ask me how, I just have this almost instinctive feeling, and it is about two and a half to three weeks journey from here. I am planning on making that journey with or without you, I had just hoped that you would come with me. With your talent, you would be extremely helpful."

"Still if you chose not to accompany me, I understand. You can stay here in my house while I'm gone and I can have the other magic user come and teach you how to use your gift. When the gateway to your world opens up again, he will be able to send you back. However, if I can tempt you a little, let me just say that if you chose to join me, the journey will certainly be an adventure. It will probably have some danger in it, and will not be all fun and excitement, but

for you it is definitely a chance of a lifetime and you may not forgive yourself if you pass it up.”

Thinking things over, I have to admit the idea is somewhat seductive as well as a little scary. Having let the fact that the next month will essentially be free time with no repercussions when I return home sink in, I find myself being swayed by the promise of adventure. “I don’t know Marissa,” I reply. “The idea does somewhat intrigue me, now that I realize this is somewhat of a vacation for me, but it also frightens me a little. I’ll need to think about it. Also, you keep saying that I have a talent for magic, but I’m wondering if you’re confused. You mention that a certain percentage of your population has this talent, but as far as I know, nobody from my world can perform such feats.”

“That’s because in your world, like some others, the use of magic has been abandoned for some reason and is now long forgotten. This does not mean that it no longer exists. Magic exists in all worlds, at least all of the worlds we’ve made contact with, it’s just that in your world it lies dormant. Within you is the ability to call forth your power, it’s just that your people haven’t used it for so long that it no longer manifests itself spontaneously like on our world. I believe that I will be able to awaken your talent and then will be able to instruct you in its use.”

I stare back at her, now trusting her, but still a little dubious about what she is saying and the ramifications of what it could mean. “Give me your hand,” she gently instructs. After a moment’s hesitation, I hold my right hand out to her. She takes my hand in hers, holding it palm upwards. Giving me a confident and warm look, she then places her other hand in the middle of my chest as I look back at her in wonder, bewilderment, and anxiousness.

Observing my uneasiness, she softly reassures me, “don’t be afraid Ben. You’ve felt the magic before, and you know it doesn’t hurt. It will feel a little strange, and might be a little scary at first, but I’ll be here to help you bring it out okay. I need you to trust me, for this to work, you need to be calm and relaxed. Let go of your fear and your doubt, and open yourself up to the possibilities of what I’ve said.”

“I believe that you can do this, and when you do, it will be an extraordinary experience for you. Once you get a taste of what you’re capable of, your mind will awaken to the full possibilities and we can begin your real training.” Giving me a warm and assuring smile, she waits a moment and then instructs me to close my eyes.

Then in a softer voice she continues, “okay Ben, first in order to help you get into the correct frame of mind, I’m going to use my calming spell on you. You’ve felt it before and know it poses no threat to you, so you know what to expect. Are you ready?” I nod quietly, and then feel the familiar wave of tranquility spreading through me as my mind and body drains of tension and doubt.

“Good, I can feel you opening up and relaxing. Now you’re truly ready to begin. Magic is an energy Ben, an energy that flows through everything and

everyone, but only some of us are able to properly channel it. You have the same talent that I do, and once you learn to tap that energy, you will be able to rise to my level of proficiency, perhaps even surpassing it. I have felt the power flowing strongly in you, and I'm going to help you feel it and bring it out."

She briefly hesitates once again, as I feel a strange sensation that seems to emanate from where her hand touches my chest. It starts off with a small tingling, but then grows somewhat quickly, spreading out until my body feels like it is charged with electricity. It isn't an unpleasant sensation, there is no pain to it, but it is so strange and foreign it causes me brief alarm. Sensing as my breathing becomes slightly labored and my pulse quickens, she is quick to pacify me as I feel another wave of relaxation washing over me. "It's okay Ben. You're feeling what we all feel when we use the magic. I know it feels so strange and a little terrifying at first, but you'll get used to that. You don't need to be frightened, nothing will hurt you and I'm here to help you through this. Just try and relax and let the power flow through you."

After the calming spell has washed over me, I feel the power building again, but this time I force myself not to fight it and just let it happen. There are a couple of brief setbacks when I momentarily panic again, but eventually I hear her gentle voice informing me that the power is flowing freely through me. "Now, I'm going to give you a small example of what you're capable of."

With that, she moves her hand lying on my chest so that it navigates over to my shoulder and part way down the inside of my arm to my elbow. "What we're going to do now is to direct this energy to your hand so you can see a visual manifestation of it." Moving her hand very slowly down my arm I can feel her soft touch through the fabric of the T-shirt I'm wearing. When she gets beyond the arm of the shirt, the feel of her warm, furry fingertips on my bare skin is so wonderful, as is the effect her movements are having with the energy charged within me.

As she moves her fingers down my arm, it is as if she is pulling the energy with her and I can feel my arm becoming more charged as she nears my hand, going at a slow, yet steady pace. Coming to my wrist she instructs me to gently curl my fingers inward. "Pretend as if you're grabbing a ball. That's it, hold them there. Now pretend that this ball is actually a ball of pure energy, like that which is flowing within you. Feel the ball grow stronger as it becomes more solid. Feel your fingers pushing against it, try and squeeze it, but it's becoming too firm for you to do that. The harder you push against it, the stronger it becomes. Yes that's it. It's coming along great. You're doing wonderful Ben. Keep on concentrating on it, make it firmer, more real."

After a couple of minutes of this, it is incredible, but it actually does feel as if there is a solid physical object lying in my palm as I push my fingers against it. Finally she instructs me to open my eyes, and when I do I'm astounded to see what looks like a glowing sphere of energy resting neatly in my hand. I look at it in astonishment, as it lies there a glowing with a somewhat bright yellowish

light. All I'm able to vocalize is a somewhat weak "Did I do that?" as I gasp with wonder and surprise.

"You certainly did" she replies, smiling at me, delighted in my performance and obviously glad at how this is affecting me. "Your performance was outstanding. Congratulations, you've passed the first test that is given to anyone showing the talent and you've definitely demonstrated your power. Now that you've seen what you can do, would you like to learn more?" she asks in a slightly playfully teasing manner.

"Yes I would," I stammer, still not quite able to believe what I'm seeing with my own eyes. "Thank you for showing me this Marissa, and if you will teach me, I will definitely be an attentive pupil."

"You're welcome Ben, and of course I will teach you the arts of the talent, that's why I was so interested in you in the first place. You've demonstrated a significant aptitude for the gift, and I think you will pick it up somewhat quickly, now that I have awakened it within you."

With that she gently releases my hand from hers; after she does so I am surprised to see the energy ball begin to lose power, and within several seconds fade out of existence. This upsets me slightly and causes some doubts within me. "What just happened," I exclaim in a confused and slightly accusatory voice, "how come when you let go of my hand it went away? Did I have anything to do with that, or was it all your work, just using my body?"

"No it's not like that. The power was flowing through you with my help, but it was your doing. Remember that you're a novice at this and don't have any real control over it. Without me there to act as regulator, you didn't have the concentration to maintain the focus of the power and it dissipated. With a few more lessons, you'll gain more control of it and won't need my help to maintain your focus."

I feel a little guilty for questioning her like that, it's just that I'd seen so much in the past hour or so that I was really having trouble coming to terms with it all. This repentance must have shown on my face, for again she gives me an understanding look and answers my unspoken apology. "I know this is tough for you to understand. You've seen so much in such a short time that it's all overwhelming you. Give it time and things will come into place though."

Pausing for a few moments she then adds, "it's getting late in the morning. We need to start preparations for the journey, that is if you're coming. I don't want to push you into this, you can take all day to decide if you want to, but we do need to talk about this more, but I'll let you get bathed and dress first."

She stands up and then waits for me to pull back the covers and get out of bed, dressed in the shorts and T-shirt I sleep in. In the back of my mind, I am briefly aware of the thought that I'm glad I don't sleep in the nude.

Leading me to a dresser at the end of the room, I'm surprised to see familiar clothing neatly stacked in a small pile. "When I brought you here, I was also able to bring some of your clothes along too. I have also brought your footwear

since given the difference in our feet structure, it would be impossible to get something that would fit you.”

Looking at the clothes I see that she has brought along enough for me to go about a week between washings, if I change shorts every other day and everything else daily. I also note that most of the clothes she has chosen are summer clothes, with only a couple of cooler-weather garments. I reason that it must be summer here on their world.

I’m rather surprised that she was able to bring my clothes here too, but then given the fact that she seemingly effortlessly pulled me across the astral planes, why shouldn’t she be able to bring other objects along the same path. Still, even though I’ve witnessed her magic, and some of my own, the whole prospect of it is totally amazing.

She interrupts my thoughts by instructing, “the bathroom is in there,” pointing to a door near the corner. “You can take your morning bath and then get dressed and meet me down in the kitchen. While you’re doing that, I’ll fix us something for brunch and then we can continue our discussion.”

With that she turns and leaves through the door on the opposite side of the room. I watch her leave and then walk to the bathroom getting ready to start the first morning of what will surely be a most interesting month.

Chapter 2

Walking into the bathroom, I'm again reminded of the Victorian era, as I see the porcelain tub resting on four feet and a quaint-looking flush toilet, which would probably be referred to as a 'water closet.' I am rather surprised that they have running water here, since the lighting seems to be provided by lamps burning a fuel which is slightly lighter and of a clearer color than kerosene or oil.

I'm a bit dubious about using the toilet, even though it must work perfectly, it's just that it looks like something that belongs in a museum and I don't know how well I trust it. However, after a few test flushes, it proves to work just as well as its modern counterpart. As I'm examining it, I notice that the tank which is suspended above it gets its water supply from a pipe running down from the ceiling instead of up from the floor. This piques my scientific curiosity and I make a mental note to ask my rather strange-looking hostess about it.

When I'm ready for the bath, I quickly slip out of my shirt, shorts and underwear and start the water running, looking briefly at my reflection in the mirror above the porcelain sink. I'm 5' 10" and of average build, perhaps a little thinner than some people, giving me a little bit of the stereotypical engineering-student look, but I'm also in pretty damn good shape from the exercising which I find the time to do. I may be somewhat lean, but I also have a decent amount of muscle tone too. In a rare fit of flashing vanity, I run one of my hands through my short to medium length brown wavy hair, ruffling it slightly, and smiling briefly back at my reflection before I step into the tub.

A small thought darts across the back of my mind, 'how strange it is to find a tub in her house, since most cats naturally hate the water.' 'Then again,' I figure, 'we've certainly changed a lot from our simian ancestors, we've come down from the trees, learned to like meat, and so on. So why is it so hard to believe that cats could evolve to a point where they would enjoy the feel and hygienic benefits of a good bath?'

As surprised as I was to find running water here, I'm also rather surprised to find that it comes in two temperatures. The cold is definitely cold, several steps below room temperature, but the other faucet actually produces warm water. It's by no stretch of the imagination hot, but it is nice and warm, and by adjusting the flow, so I get mostly warm water, I'm able to get a nice and comfortable bath temperature going.

As the water fills up around me, I lean back against the inclined edge of the tub and relax, enjoying the simple pleasure of taking a nice bath. Living in the dorm I'm used to showers, which are nice in their own way, but being able to soak in a tub like this is certainly a rare and welcome luxury.

I bask in the warm waters for over half an hour, pondering my situation. It seems that this is definitely going to be somewhat of a vacation and an adventure for me. The thought of traveling with her into the wilderness is somewhat

foreboding, since there is no telling what might be out there. “Hell,” I mutter softly to myself, “I’m not totally sure if I trust her or not. I mean this talk of her strange dreams is a little bit much to try and deal with right now.”

“For all I know, she could be crazy, although she didn’t really look like it.” Then as my thoughts quickly change, I chuckle crazily to myself and almost as if responding to an inner voice reply, “Yes she did look somewhat cute, even if she was a cat woman. Well I guess that makes her a little cuter in some ways. But I really shouldn’t be thinking about that right now should I?”

“And I probably shouldn’t be talking to myself like this either,” I chuckle, still trying to come to grips with all I’ve already seen this morning. “Well I guess if any shrink was to look at the circumstances I’m in, they’d be questioning their own sanity instead of mine...”

After much more thinking, and internal dialog, some which was spoken out loud, I finally come to some sort of decision. “I guess there’s no way of getting out of it,” I voice audibly, as if trying to finally convince myself that I’ve made the right decision. “She’s right about at least one thing, if I let this adventure pass me by, it’ll drive me crazy not knowing what I missed. I’ll probably end up regretting it, who knows what we’ll get into, but I’ve got to experience this for myself.”

Pulling the plug out of the drain, briefly watching the water spiral down it, I then get out of the tub and towel off. Walking back into the bedroom, I quickly dress in a nice T-shirt and Dockers shorts coming down to about my knees. Then throwing on my socks and somewhat worn, yet extremely comfortable sneakers, I stand up and hesitate briefly before heading downstairs. Then with a wry grin on my face, I mutter “Well, I hope I’ll live to regret this...” and I’m off.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I pause momentarily before my nose picks up the scent of cooked meat coming from what I assume must be the kitchen. Navigating my way through the medium-sized house, I find her there in the room which is brightly lit from the sun coming in from the large windows. She is sitting at a table which would easily seat six with a good variety of food on it.

Spread out before me are several plates with meat looking similar to beef, cut in thin strips and fried, eggs whose size are almost twice that from those of chickens, fresh bread, and a good selection of fruit. Looking quickly around the room, I notice a sink which also looks to have running water, what looks like a refrigerator, and a black cast iron stove, which probably runs on wood or coal. It is a little warmer in here from the stove being in use not so long ago, but it is not uncomfortable.

Seeing me look appreciatively at the spread of food before me, she looks up and smiles. “Please sit down and join me in a late breakfast Ben. We have a lot to do today, and we’ll need the energy. I trust you had a good bath?”

“Yes I did Marissa,” I reply, sitting down and helping myself to the small banquet laid out in front of me. “That reminds me, I wanted to ask you about

your plumbing. I'm a bit surprised to see that you have running water when you obviously don't have electric power for light or heat."

Looking confused, she pauses for a second, and then understanding jumps into her eyes. "Right, I remember seeing how far ahead you were compared to us with your technology. At first I thought the power you were using to create the various types of lighting devices you use was some kind of magic, until I was able to search your mind and understand how advanced you are in terms of controlling the energy of your world. You certainly have lots of wonders all around you that your people take for granted."

"Now as for the running water," she continues, "that is very new, especially here. The idea has been around for awhile, but no decent means of pumping the water existed for most places. Then once steam power became practical, in the cities giant pumping stations were created, and now all of the major cities have been fitted with the necessary plumbing."

"I had heard a lot about the marvels they were doing in the cities, so when the railroad was finally completed here a few years back, I managed a trip to the nearest one and was fascinated by their technical advancement. I have always tried to keep up with technology, which has made me a bit of an eccentric out here, but I decided that I wanted what they had in the city."

"It took some planning, and also a good amount of money, but I was finally able to do it. I'm by no means rich, don't let me give you that impression Ben, but I am able to live rather comfortably based on the funds I charge for the services I provide using my talent. So, about a year ago, I was finally able to have one of the few houses in town with running water."

"Well, I'm definitely impressed. It's a really nice setup you, have given your technology. How do you pump the water up here though?"

"I'm lucky and have a small, yet quick-flowing river running through my property. I've had a water wheel installed and that provides the power to slowly pump the water up to large holding tanks on the roof. Yes they may look a little garish, but I've gotten used to them, and they're definitely worth it. Once the water is in the tanks, it feeds the rest of the house using gravity. It's not as powerful as the pressurized plumbing they have in the city, but it sure beats lugging water from the well and using an outhouse" she says with a quick grin across her furry muzzle.

"You've probably also noticed that I have a warm water supply too. That wasn't too hard of a problem to solve. It's been noted that the sun quickly warms objects of dark colors, so I had one of the tanks painted black to absorb the heat, and the other painted white and shaded by a roof to keep it cool."

"Marissa, you are truly a lady and a scholar," and taking another bite of breakfast I add, "and an outstanding cook too." With a wide grin on my face, I continue, "if you aren't taken, I'm tempted to ask you to marry me right here on the spot."

Right after finishing saying this, I realize that this was not the best thing to say to this leopard woman whom I'd just barely meant. I quickly broaden my

smile hoping that she'll see I was only kidding, not wishing to offend her in some way. She looks confused or troubled for a short moment, and then returns the smile. "Well Ben, that's certainly a flattering proposal, but I don't think I could live with the scandal of marrying outside of my race like that." She finishes up with slightly forced laughter, and we both silently agree to let the matter die.

After a few minutes of silently eating, I break the stillness with a simple question. "Marissa, do you have anything to drink?"

"Oh, of course, I can't believe I forgot to get that out. Trying to do too many things this morning I guess." Going to the fridge, which turns out to be just an insulated metal cabinet with slowly melting ice in the top compartment to keep the food cool, she asks with her back toward me, "what would you like? I have some fruit juice or water."

As she's standing there, bending down slightly, her muscles are tensed almost perfectly. Admiring her supple curves, I have to remind myself just where I am and whom I'm leering at. Pausing a couple of moments, I finally manage to come back to the present and mumble, "umm... I could go for something sweet. I'd like to try the juice."

Taking out a glass pitcher filled with a dark-reddish fluid, she places it on the table and then turns to the cabinets above the sink. Coming back to the table, she has two china bowls in her hands, each about as wide as a soup bowl, but only half as deep. Placing one in front of me, she fills it with the red juice, then doing the same for herself.

I stare at the bowl and then at her with a somewhat confused and almost dumbfounded expression on my face. For some reason, my brain just can't seem to comprehend what I'm supposed to do with the bowl seeing as I have no spoon handy. She looks quizzically at me for a moment, then as understanding flashes again in her eyes, she grins at me, and holds the bowl up for me to see clearly. Then she brings the bowl to her muzzle and with a slightly exaggerated motion, her tongue darts out and flicks across the surface of the liquid.

As I watch her with amusement, curiosity and surprise, she laps at the juice for about a minute. Then putting the bowl down, she grins at me once more, and with a chuckle in her voice asks, "it's a bit different than how you drink isn't it Ben? I keep forgetting just how many subtle differences there are between our races. I hope you'll be able to make do with the bowl, since that's all I have."

Looking at her, I notice she has some juice on the tips of the fur of her muzzle around her mouth. The sight of the red droplets of moisture, sitting there glistening on her white fur is quite adorable. A moment later, perhaps as if she saw what I was looking at, she darts her tongue out yet again and licks over the fur of her muzzle cleaning most of the remnants of the drink from it.

Giving her a shrug and an adventurous look, I take the bowl in my hand and slowly lift it to my mouth trying not to spill any of it. Then carefully tipping the

bowl back I take a few small sips. The juice tastes wonderful. It's nice and sweet with somewhat of a citrus taste to it, but also reminiscent of berries. It's also carefully blended so that it's refreshing and not too sweet.

After the success of the sips, I become more daring and try and take larger drinks of this pleasant beverage. It is there where I make the mistake, forgetting that the bowl is much wider than a drinking glass. As I'm drinking from the bowl, the liquid starts to seep around the edges, and before I realize what is happening, a good amount of it is flowing down the sides of my chin, to Marissa's obvious amusement.

Bringing the bowl quickly down to the table, I manage to spill a little more of it on myself and the table, forgetting to swallow in the process. It's then when Marissa bursts in laughter, throwing back her head slightly, laughing with a slight feline hiss, with her mouth part way open exposing her sharp predatory teeth. This is too much for me to take, and I find myself overcome with the giggles too. Trying to suppress the laughter as I attempt to swallow my mouthful of juice doesn't go to well, and I end up in a coughing fit as even more of the red fluid dribbles down my chin.

Seeing me coughing, her laughter quickly dies, and she runs around the table to kneel at my side looking very concerned. She attempts to help me, but I motion her away, as my breathing slowly returns to normal and the coughs die down. Looking at me with remorseful, she softly states, "I'm sorry for laughing at you like that Ben."

Looking back at her through my momentarily watery eyes, I force a smile and reply, "that's okay, no harm done... you can't take me anywhere can you?" She smiles back at this, and I continue "I'll be okay, now that I know what to avoid, I should be able to take small sips from the bowl without making a mess like this."

Patting my shoulder lightly, she stands and hands me a cotton napkin to clean my face with and then returns to her chair. The rest of the meal passes without event. When we're finished eating she finally asks the big question I'd been waiting for. "So Ben, have you thought about coming on the journey with me?"

"Yes, I have Marissa. I know this is probably a rash decision, one that I may soon regret, but I have decided to come with you, no matter how crazy some of it seems. You were right about the fact that I can't pass up on an adventure like this. I'd rather go through all sorts of trouble, than not knowing what I'd have passed up. So for better or for worse, I'll be with you for the duration."

"That's good Ben, I was hoping I'd be able to sway your decision. Your talent as a magic user will be very useful out there, and I think you'll be somewhat understanding of the situation. At least you'll be a hell of a lot more understanding than those pompous fools at the guild assembly."

"So when do we leave?"

“As soon as possible, I’d like to leave this afternoon. We can get packed very quickly and put the house in order and then be off. Are you ready to leave that soon?”

“I guess so, since I have nothing better to do. So where exactly are we going, and how are we getting there?”

“We’ll be traveling almost due north for about two and a half weeks. We’ll be heading out into the wilderness. We can follow a road for several days to reach a small town off that way, but beyond that we’ll have to make our own trails. We’ll be walking the whole way.”

“What! Walking... but why... why don’t we just use horses or some other animal to carry us there? I can’t believe we’re going to walk that far.”

“We don’t have any animal like the horses you mention. The only animals we have that are large enough to carry cargo or pull carriages, are really large, I mean up to my head, and are very heavy, and also very slow. When they pull a carriage, it is only somewhat faster than walking, and it’s not worth the trouble or the expense. You look like you’re in pretty good shape, so this shouldn’t be too hard on you. Again, think of it as another part of our adventure.”

I’m not too fond of the prospect of hiking all those miles toward our unknown destiny, but if she’s up for it, I’m pretty much forced to go along. We take an hour or so putting things in the house in order and loading up our backpacks. By the time we have our sleeping rolls, clothes and food all packed, our packs are quite heavy. However, I remember hiking in the mountains years ago as a boy scout, and my pack was just as heavy then and I survived, and actually had a pretty fun time.

For food we packed mostly dried meat; our rations will only last about a week, but she assures me that we can stock up when we reach the town and also that we can do some hunting along the way and eat fresh fruit if we come across any. We also take a couple of metal canteens full of water. We will be traveling along rivers and streams for most of the journey, so fresh water won’t be a problem.

Finally after all of our preparations, we are ready to go. We strap on our packs which feel quite heavy until our backs become accustomed to them and step out into the daylight. Curious to know what time it is, I check my watch, which says 3:15 PM, but the sun is just barely past its zenith. Realizing that the time is totally out of sync with the days here, I figure it’s a little after noon from the sun’s position and reset my watch.

Walking out into the warm summer sun, the day is beautiful and the temperature is almost perfect, hovering somewhere I guess in the mid 70’s. Looking around, I notice the beauty of the landscape. Her house is a good-sized residence, painted white with light blue trim and shutters, and built in a style combining elegance and functionality.

Her home lies in a big field with neatly trimmed grass, and trees scattered throughout it. Looking off to the left a ways down from where we are I can see the river she described to me, and the engineering marvel that is the

waterwheel-driven pump assembly. Her estate must be rather large, since I don't see any other houses nearby.

As we're walking on, my attention is drawn to the grass and the leaves of the trees. There is something slightly different about them, and I ponder on it for a few minutes before I realize that their hues are of a darker shade of green than on Earth. The color isn't too much different, but is subtle enough to have caused my confusion, and it is definitely different enough to be noticeable.

Then looking up at the sky, which is almost totally clear, save for a few white puffy clouds, I notice that its hue too is subtly altered in comparison to what I'm used to looking at. Instead of being the light blue I had expected to see, the sky is a couple of shades darker, and with just the slightest purple hint to it. These differences are strange and a bit jarring at first, but also serve to punctuate the fact of what a strange adventure I'm undertaking.

Then I look at Marissa, who's walking in front of me, and again take in her beauty. Looking at the attractive patterns of her spots and how they contrast with her snow-white fur, and seeing her tail protruding from the back of her shorts, further adds to the exotic beauty of this alien world.

She stands a couple of inches shorter than me, which would put her at about 5' 8". She looks to be in excellent shape, and has wonderful muscle tone, especially in her legs which must support her weight on only the tips of her feet. Her digitigrade feet are certainly out of the ordinary, at least out of the ordinary for me, but serve to enhance her unusual attractiveness. As she walks, her tail which is about ten or eleven inches around, sways lightly in time with her hips, topping off the whole picture quite nicely. I watch her for several minutes, letting my mind wander into areas which it probably shouldn't, before I pick up the pace for a few steps until I'm walking beside her.

"It's a beautiful view, isn't it Ben?"

I'm taken aback for a brief moment, until I realize that she's referring to the landscape. Then looking at her smiling in wonder, I reply "Yes it is Marissa. It's nice to just get out and walk out in the open... Things are a little different here, a bit different from what I'm used to. It's a little strange, but also a nice change. The weather is nice too, especially from the heat wave we were having this past week."

We walk for close to an hour before we come into town. When I see the first houses appearing in the distance, I become a little concerned. "Marissa, are we walking through town? What will everyone think when they see me? They've never seen a human before have they?"

"No they haven't Ben. In the large cities there is a better mix of races, but out here, it's pretty much just felenzi. There have been some strange visitors here before, but they are very rare, and most of the townspeople are still somewhat wary of them. It will be okay though, once they see that you're with me. I have their respect given my talent and the services which I provide. You'll definitely be noticed, but they'll realize that you're also fairly important, and will leave you alone."

“I don’t know if I really want to be put on display like that. Couldn’t we just walk around the outskirts of town and avoid it altogether?”

“It won’t be that bad Ben, and that detour would waste too much time; I’d like to get as much distance covered as possible. You’re going to be here for awhile, so you might as well get used to this, since we’ll be no doubt be meeting some people on our journey, especially in the beginning.”

I grudgingly concede, and we walk along the hard-packed dirt road as the town draws nearer. Coming in to town, it looks like that of a largish town of Europe in the 1800’s, housing I guess a few hundred cat-people. The streets are lined with cobblestones, the buildings are mostly made out of bricks, and I see what appears to be gas or oil lamps on every corner to serve as street lights.

Walking throughout the streets, are cat morphs of every type imaginable. There are people with coats of every color and fur markings as you’d see in house cats, and I also notice a few who look to have descended from predatory stock, such as panthers and tigers. The Felenzi are a bit bigger than humans, especially the ones resembling the larger cats. We walk by one tiger who is easily 6’ 5”, he looks at us, and especially me, with a passing interest, but seeing Marissa, he politely nods and passes by.

The rest of the people in the moderately busy streets, pay me the same attention. As my tourist-like gaze darts around between the buildings and people, I notice them looking at me, casting sideways glances as they walk by. As Marissa had said, nobody bothers us, but I still feel a bit like I’m being placed on display.

The walk through the town is definitely somewhat uneasy for me, but also not without its novelties. Watching all of the cats walking by is quite an incredible experience. Letting my eyes freely wander, I take in all of the sights of this wonderfully new species before me.

Letting go of some of my uneasiness and beginning to feel a little bolder, I notice a cute little orange tabby, with long flowing red hair coming toward us. She is wearing an elegant Victorian dress, with the bodice cut slightly low enough to be a little risqué, guessing at the time frame of their society. She has her gaze fixed intently on me, with a delightful mixture of confusion and interest. Feeling just a little bit devilish, I turn my eyes fully on her and flash her a warm and endearing smile, watching her walk quickly by, looking just the slightest bit flustered. Oh what I would have given to have been able to spend some time with her.

If Marissa had noticed my little game of cat and mouse, she had chosen to ignore it, as we walked on through the town in silence. After another fifteen minutes or so we start coming to the outskirts of the town. Before leaving however, we pass by the railway station, with a large, black steam engine and several passenger and freight cars, lying dormant for the moment, as a few people are boarding and loading it.

Remembering my childhood fascination with trains, I turn to watch the locomotive as we walk by, slowing our pace down ever so slowly. It’s then when

we hear a voice call from behind us. “Marissa, I can’t believe you’ve gone through with this. What do you think you are doing?”

Turning around we see a squat little lynx standing behind us, wearing a maroon tunic. “Tomek,” Marissa replies a little testily, “you’ve made it clear that you want nothing to do with this, so I ask you to please stay out of it now.”

“But look what you’ve gone and done, you’ve kidnapped the human, even though I advised you against it.” Then turning to me, “has she told you all about her strange visions and how much they’re disturbing her? You don’t have to go with her if you don’t want to.”

Before I can think of a reply, Marissa jumps into action. Almost instantly her body tenses and her fur ruffles up, standing on end. Gripping the collar of his robe, she pulls him toward her, extending her retractable claws slightly into the fabric. She opens her mouth in response to this challenge, pulling back her thin lips, and exposing her carnivorous teeth. The pupils in her eyes constrict several notches, as she snarls at him. “Dammit Tomek, I told you to stay out of this. If you’re not going to help me, then leave me alone. I don’t need this from you now.”

Pulling his ears back in fear and surprise, the smaller cat manages to stammer, “I’m sorry... you know how I disagree with you, and I shouldn’t have brought it up now...”

Having won the confrontation, her demeanor quickly becomes more subdued as she releases the quivering cat. “That’s better... now as you’ve guessed, Ben and I are embarking on the journey which I’ve told you about. You’re free to disagree with me, just don’t get in my way. We’re going to be gone for quite some time, close to a month and a half. Would you mind checking on my house for me from time to time?”

Taking a step backwards, he hastily replies, “of course I can, and let me apologize once again for interrupting you two. I’m sure you’ll have an interesting journey.” With that he quickly turns and is off shuffling rather quickly down the street.

Turning to me and seeing what must certainly be a comical display of surprise on my face, she flashes me an almost dangerous smirk. “Were you impressed with my little display? I gather from the look you’re giving me, that humans don’t act quite that way.”

“Well,” I manage to reply, “we usually don’t act that way, unless of course we’re stupid drunk in a bar or something... and we never growl like that. It was certainly impressive, and to be honest, rather scary. It looked like you were ready to rip that guy’s head off. Who was he anyway?”

“Oh, that was Tomek, the other magic user I told you about that lives in town. He and I normally get along okay, but since he has the same attitude as the rest of the guild over my concern of these dreams, we’ve had a few lesser confrontations.”

“I’m sorry if I scared you Ben, I was just doing what comes naturally to us. In our society it is quite often for confrontations like this to occur. Usually no

fighting will come out of it, it's just a display of force. We also allow people to have different ideas from us, but don't like them forced upon us."

As we turn and resume walking, I look at her with a newfound respect and a little bit of caution. I'm beginning to realize just how different this world is.

We leave the town and continue walking on the narrow dirt road for the rest of the afternoon. Early on we pass a few farm houses, getting more strange looks from their inhabitants. There is one instance where a little tom cat, perhaps five years old, comes running out to meet us, with his worried mother trailing after him.

"Hello, where are you guys going," he asks excitedly. Then turning to me he innocently asks, "what's wrong with you, what happened to your fur?"

Just then his mother reaches him and picking up, and with a pleading look on her face apologizes to us. "I'm sorry for his behavior, he's always been so full of energy and is always trying to talk to travelers." She shoots a couple of furtive glances toward me, but obviously knows better than to make anything of it. We accept her humbly apology, and as she turns with her son and walks quickly back to the house, he looks at us over her shoulder, waves and shouts a simple "bye."

The rest of the afternoon was pretty much uneventful. We walked for five hours or so, going at an easy pace, and stopping often to rest, before we finally stopped at a clearing off the side of the road near a small stream.

It feels so incredibly good to get the weight of the pack off my back. I drop it on the ground, and stretch out my tired muscles; I know I'm going to be sore in the morning. Walking over to the stream, we kneel down for a refreshing drink. We both use our hands to scoop up the water, but instead of gulping it down like I do, Marissa again laps it up with her tongue. Once more, I find this secretly amusing, enjoying her display of feline characteristics. Then I remember how she had looked when confronting Tomek and quietly shudder.

After getting some wood for a fire, Marissa sits me down for another magic lesson. Again she takes my hand and helps me to conjure up the power flowing through me. This time it is a little easier, and I don't get scared when I feel the energy charging within me.

Once the glowing sphere appears in my hand, she slowly lets go of my hand, keeping only two fingers gently touching me. "Okay Ben, this morning you had trouble sustaining the flow without me there to help you maintain it. Can you feel what it takes to control it?" She quickly removes her fingers from the back of my hand, and I see the ball shimmer slightly and then begin to fade. As she does this I also feel the absence of the controlling presence she was giving me.

Waiting a moment, she then touches my hand again and the ball jumps back to full brilliance, as I feel her energy come into contact with me once again. "So can you feel what the difference is Ben?" As I nod at her excitedly, she continues, "this is what you need to learn to try and control. It will be difficult at first, as is learning any new skill, but you are very gifted and I think you'll learn fast."

We spend a little under an hour with this lesson, repeating it over many times. Each time she pulls away, I gain a little more control over the energy within me; finally after getting a little bored with the exercise, I'm able to completely sustain the spell without her help.

Beaming at her with my accomplishment, she returns the smile and congratulates me. "You're coming along very well Ben, faster than most students, but that could be because you're older and have better developed mental skills and a longer attention span. Now let's try for a neat finale to this simple parlor trick. It has no real use, but can impress some people who don't know too much about magic, also it's the easiest to learn."

She instructs me to concentrate on sending more energy to the ball in my hand, and then bringing my hand up and quickly spreading my fingers, causing the energy to quickly dissipate. This takes a couple of tries to get the effect quite right, but after I do it is rather impressive. When I spread my palm out like that and the energy is no longer contained, it is released in a small flash of light and sparks spreading quickly out several inches and then dying out. Upon seeing it work correctly, the only comment I think of making is a not too eloquent "cool!"

"Pretty impressive isn't it? You will soon be able to learn how to use your magic for useful purposes, such as healing or defensive fighting spells which might come in very handy on this trip. This is enough for tonight though... well I can show you how to start the fire."

We get up and move over to where we had stacked the wood for tonight's fire, placing them in a small pile, she has me sit down in front of it. Then sitting down behind me, she reaches her arms around me and grabs my forearms slightly above my wrists. This position startles and confuses me, until I realize that she plans to channel her energy through me.

As she explains the procedure, I try and keep my mind from wandering off from the subject at hand, and ignore her presence so very near to me. "Okay Ben, I'm going to be using my energy to start the fire, since you don't have anywhere near the control or power yet to do it. However, I'll be directing the energy through you, so you can learn what it feels like and hopefully soon will be able to replicate it."

I feel the power building again, it seems that she is doing this slowly for my benefit, so I can take it all in. Then as the energy reaches full power, I feel it shoot down my arm and out my hands, shuddering slightly at the power of it. Then as I watch in amazement, the wood quickly begins to smoke and then bursts into flames. As she releases my hands and stands up, I sit there watching the fire in wonder as I let a "wow" escape from my lips.

We have a simple dinner of dried meat, which somewhat resembles beef in taste and texture, and some fruit from nearby trees. There is something about eating after a good day's workout like that, even if it isn't anything fancy, it still seems like the best meal I've had in such a long time.

Sitting there eating, I watch the sun setting, lighting up the sky with brilliant reddish hues. Then something strikes me funny about its position. “Marissa, we’ve been heading north all day right?”

“Yes, well not do north, but pretty close to it, why?”

“Well then wouldn’t that make the sun setting in the south right now?” I asked somewhat confused.

“Yes, of course, why wouldn’t it be setting in the south?”

Then as soon as she’s saying this, the explanation hits me. “Of course, how stupid of me, I keep on forgetting I’m not on Earth, although I don’t know how I could do that since I’m traveling with a cat woman.” I reply smirking at her quickly, “on Earth the sun sets in the west and I’m still a little confused and surprised by all these subtle differences.”

Smiling back at me she replies, “I realize this is pretty strange for you, but you’re doing well adjusting to everything. Give it time and in a few days this will seem somewhat normal for you.”

After dinner, we’re both pretty tired from our first day of exercise, so we roll out our bedding and prepare for bed. As I nestle into my bedroll and blanket, I gaze up at the sky and see that a couple of stars have come out and also a gibbous moon has risen in the north. It looks pretty much like ours, being white and having many craters on it, but it is also about one and half times larger than ours. Turning to look at Marissa lying in her bedding, across the dying fire from me, I remark “the moon is beautiful here. In fact everything so far has been beautiful. I realize we’re going to run into some hard times along the way, so I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate things right now before I start complaining when things get rough.”

She turns to look at me with a warm look on her face, “Thanks Ben. I’m glad you’re enjoying this so far, and we should have lots of adventures ahead of us. I agree with you, the moon is really beautiful, it’s always inspiring romantics and poets and the like. It’s also how we measure our calendar, since it has a regular cycle. Each month is one cycle of its phases, which is thirty-two days, and then a year is simply ten months. The weeks work out easily too, being four weeks to a year, and eight days in a week.”

“That’s neat, but how did you work out such a simple lunar calendar without the seasons getting messed up. We can’t go by the phases of the moon, because if we did, we’d be celebrating Christmas in July after twenty years or so.”

“What do you mean by seasons?” she asks me sounding rather confused.

“Seasons are periods of similar temperatures and weather, such as summer when it’s hot and then winter when it’s really cold. Don’t you have temperature changes here?”

“No, the weather will change, sometimes getting cooler for a few days, but is always pretty much like it is today. It must be rather strange for your weather to change like that.”

“Wow, it must be great to have this weather all year round, not too hot or too cold, it’s perfect. But it’s kind of strange that you don’t have any seasons here. I wonder if we’re on the equator, or if your world isn’t tilted like ours?”

She doesn’t seem too interested in this topic, and simply replies, “I don’t really know what you’re talking about, and it’s getting late and we need the rest. Goodnight Ben.”

With that she turns away from me; I reply “goodnight Marissa,” and turn my gaze up at the sky once again, watching it darken as more stars come out. It takes me awhile to finally wind down all my scattered thoughts and fall asleep. Just before I do, I notice that a second, smaller moon has risen in the southwest. It is about half the size of the larger moon, and has a pinkish tint to it. I find this a little unusual, but by now, it’s not really too surprising.

As I watch the sky, consciousness slowly drains away from me and I pass into a comfortable sleep.

Chapter 3

I come awake somewhat quickly in the morning, as something jars me from my slumber. Getting up in a sitting position, I look around and notice that Marissa isn't in her bedroll and is nowhere to be seen. Checking my watch it reads 9:07, however the sun looks like it has only been up for a little over an hour.

Wondering briefly where Marissa could have gone off to, I hear a jarring sound off in the distance in the woods. This must have been what pulled me so abruptly from my sleep. Sitting there holding my breath, trying to hear the noise again, it once more erupts from the woods, cutting through the stillness around me.

It is a fairly terrifying sound, like that of an animal at prey, and it strikes a chord deep within my psyche, sending shivers down my spine. It obviously is some distance away, but is loud enough to also be a little too close for comfort.

As I'm listening, it comes yet again as a series of hissing yowls, each one driving a spike of fear further into my consciousness. I'm not sure if it's just my imagination or not, but it seems as if the sounds are getting louder. All rational thought has been wiped from my mind, as I sit there quivering lightly on my bedroll.

Time passes incredibly slowly for me, as each second is punctuated by the heavy beating of my frantic heart, pounding loudly within my ears. What is probably only a few minutes, seems to last for hours, as I scarcely dare to breathe, for some irrational fear of tipping off whatever lies out there to my presence.

There are a few more eruptions of those inhuman screeches, each one threatening to force me closer to the edge of my sanity, as I teeter on the brink of what seems like a total mental collapse. Sitting there, struggling for control, I feel it slowly slipping away from me as my mind wants to give in to the terror.

Finally after an agonizing eternity of this, the sounds stop disrupting the silence of the woods, and but for the pounding in my ears, all is silent. My fear ebbs slightly, giving me a little more rationality, but I'm still terrified of the possibility of whatever it was that made those horrible outbursts finding me here cowering on my bedroll.

A few minutes pass, and my pulse has died down somewhat, allowing normal hearing to return; I'm still a little frightened of what might happen, and nervously scan the perimeter of the clearing with my darting eyes.

Then when I have almost let go of the fear, a soft padding sound coming from the woods grabs my attention. Turning to look in that direction, a little off to the left, I don't see anything in the shadows of the woods, and wonder if it was my overworked imagination.

Standing up slowly, peering into the woods, I then hear the soft padding sound again, as something is walking towards me at a steady pace. Feeling my

fear begin to build again, I slowly and cautiously begin to back away, still keeping my eyes glued toward the woods.

As my pulse once again starts to build inside my ears, I see a figure walking out of the shadows. After a moment's confusion, my overtaxed brain recognizes that it's Marissa.

My relief is short lived however, noticing the state she's in. Her fur is somewhat ruffled in several places, and she has bright red blood spattered on her hands, shirt, several other spots on her fur, and also dripping from her muzzle as if she had just drank from a bowl of it.

It's then when I notice that she is carrying the carcass of a freshly killed animal in her right hand, letting it dangle limply there. The animal looks reminiscent of a rabbit, but is a little over twice the size of any one seen on Earth. Looking at its lifeless body, I notice that the poor thing's throat has been ripped out. Looking at the jagged hole there, and then at the blood coating her muzzle, the harsh realization of just how she killed this creature flashes across my mind in a terrifying instant.

Looking at her, time seems to freeze yet again, as I make contact with her gaze. There is a look of extreme wildness to her, seeing her eyes still fired up from the thrill of the hunt. As she stands there eyeing me, looking quite bestial and feral, I struggle to comprehend the situation.

She shatters my train of thought by opening her mouth and growling at me, uttering a quick burst of hissing sounds. Startled by this, I take another couple of steps backwards. She looks at me questioningly, but also still a little wild, and again yowls at me, sounding quite like a predator getting ready to strike.

"Marissa, what's going on?" I manage to stammer, taking another cautious step backwards, and feeling panic threatening to take control.

Dropping the body of the creature she approaches me, holding out a bloody paw with her claws slightly extended, and again growling at me. Losing all control of my mental processes, my only thought is of flight, quickly turning and running frantically from her.

I manage to get about three or four steps in before feeling the wave of energy hit me, knocking me off balance. Losing my footing, my frame of reference changes as the ground comes up to meet me; my mind struggles to understand what is happening. I seem to fall in slow motion, as my neurons spastically fire, filling my head with vivid images of her ripping open my neck and feasting on my still-warm flesh.

Coming in contact with the ground is jarring, and slamming into it, my consciousness flicks out as if someone had thrown a switch inside my head.



As my senses come slowly back to me, I cautiously open my eyes to see her kneeling over me, with the blood from her kill drying on her fur and clothes. Snapping to attention, my eyes fully open, quickly trying to sit up, as her hands

dart out and press firmly against my shoulders, forcing me back onto the ground.

Struggling briefly against her for a moment, I then feel the familiar wave of tranquility passing through me. The first burst helps somewhat to soothe me, but still some of the fear remains as I continue to fight with her, just with a lesser force. Within moments, another blast of calming washes over me, totally reducing me to putty in her hands. Even if she plans to harm me, there is nothing I can do about it now, and even those thoughts cause me no concern.

Releasing my shoulders, she peers down at me with warmth and compassion. "Ben, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you like that. Are you okay?"

As rational though seeps back into my mind, I pause for a few moments, feeling out the situation before replying, "Yes, I think so, but what happened? You were so wild Marissa, I thought you were going to hurt me."

"I'm sorry. This was the first time I'd been hunting in quite awhile and had forgotten how it affected me. We still enjoy the thrill of the hunt, even though we no longer need to do it to eat. For us it's somewhat of an occasional recreation. It feels nice to let things go and for a short time and act like our ancestors did."

"But you were so savage. With that look in your eyes, I didn't know if you saw me as fair game or not."

"I know Ben. It had been so long since I'd enjoyed the thrill of the hunt and let those forces flow through me like that. I'd forgotten what it was like, and allowed it to take me over, more so than usual. Now that I'm used to it again, I will be a bit more reserved the next time I hunt. And no matter what you might have thought, I can assure you that I had no intentions of harming you."

"Then why did you growl at me like that? It seemed like you were still chasing your prey, and when you started towards me, with your claws out and growled again, I was sure that you'd forgotten who I was."

"It's not what you think Ben, but it was my fault. I should have paid closer attention last night, and checked to make sure it didn't happen. I'm so sorry this had to happen..."

The confused look that I'm giving her, prompts her to continue. "Ben, I wasn't growling at you, at least not in the way you were thinking. I wasn't growling like when I was stalking my prey. I was simply talking to you like I'm doing now."

"But... I don't understand?"

"It's the translation spell Ben, remember?" she explains. "I told you that it should last for a couple of days, but my expectations were wrong and it wore off sooner than I thought. I should have checked it last night, just to make sure. Then this whole mess wouldn't have happened."

"So you mean that your speech is just those growls and screeches I heard?"

"Yes, it sounded frightening to you because it's different and unexpected. Your speech sounded pretty weird to me, but more amusing than terrifying."

Again, I'm sorry this happened, and I hope it wasn't too bad of a scare for you. I'll strengthen the spell every night now for the next few days, just to make sure it holds this time. Now, are you okay?"

Checking myself over, this time a little more thoroughly, I reply with a simple, yet still a little nervous "yes."

"Good" she answers, as she helps me up to a standing position. Then she continues, pointing at the fallen carcass of her morning kill, "I need to clean off, which will be a little harder since I had to help you and the blood has started to dry. While I'm doing this, gather some wood for a fire and clean that pantouka for breakfast."

Before I have a chance to answer, she walks over to her pack, pulls out a clean shirt, and also a knife which she hands to me. As I'm looking at it a bit dumbfounded, she doesn't seem to notice my hesitation, and turns and walks off down toward the stream, then behind some bushes and out of sight.

I go about the simple task of gathering wood, and finish that in a matter of minutes. Then I turn to look at the fallen beast as it lies there with its glassy eyes and gaping throat wound. I have never been hunting, the idea was too repulsive to me, and even when going fishing when I was younger, I never could stomach cleaning the fish. So not knowing what to do, and not really too eager to find out, I stand there just looking at the body in front of me.

Less than ten minutes later, Marissa returns from the stream, wearing a clean shirt, with most of the blood cleaned from her fur. There are still remnants of it, dyeing her muzzle a light shade of pink, which looks both a little comical and also a bit grotesque.

Seeing that I haven't begun gutting the fallen beast, she looks at me with cold eyes, and demands in a slightly harsh tone "why haven't you cleaned it yet? Do you expect me to do all the work?"

Backing up half a step and stammering as I try and explain, "I didn't know what to do... I've never done this before... I don't know how."

Her gaze softens in understanding as she quietly asks, "okay... give me the knife and I'll show you."

Taking the knife from my loose grip, she leads me to a kneeling position and quickly slits the beast from neck to legs. Reaching in, she deftly grabs some innards and extracts them with a quiet slurping sound. Repeating the process, she then turns to me and grabs my hand, and even against my squeal of protest, brings it into the belly of the animal.

Feeling the slimy warmth surround me is almost too much to take, as my stomach ties itself in a million knots. Fighting against her grip, I pull my hand out of the innards, and struggle against the urge to vomit. Looking at her disapproving gaze, I jump to a standing position and stagger down to the stream washing my hands as a couple of dry heaves rack my body.

Recovering from my revulsion, I hear her footsteps coming up behind me. Not wanting to face her, I turn my head even further downward and to the left,

as far away from her as possible. She kneels down beside me, and after quickly washing her hands, places one of them on my shoulder, petting me reassuringly.

Fighting back tears of shame, I slowly turn my head to face her, and look into her understanding gaze. After a moment's hesitation, I finally blurt out "I'm sorry Marissa. I just couldn't do it..."

"It's okay, and I should be the one apologizing. You're not a hunter are you?" As I slowly shake my head she continues, "I handled that poorly. That is how we teach our young to learn to hunt, by forcing them into it. I should have realized that it wouldn't work for you." Pausing for a moment, she finally adds "there's nothing for you to be ashamed of Ben, and I shouldn't have expected that much out of you so soon. If you'd like to learn how to fix the kill properly, I'll teach you slowly. We can start tomorrow, if you want. But if you don't that's okay... Are you going to be okay?"

I mutter an affirmative reply, and she finishes with "okay, you just rest here while I get breakfast ready for us. When I'm all done with the messy work, I'll let you know." Then giving me a final tender pat, she withdraws her hand from my shoulder, rises and walks slowly to the campsite. Watching her go I feel a jumble of emotions run through me, then turning once again to the stream I wash my face in its cold and refreshing water.

She finishes the cleaning quite quickly, and in less than fifteen minutes calls me over to the fire to see the beast skewered by a stick and roasting on the fire. Its fur and head has been removed, but its legs are still attached to the body, still leaving it with somewhat of a gruesome look. However, smelling the aroma of cooking meat, I feel my hunger awakening and pushing out the nausea from my stomach.

When it's finally time to eat the morning's kill, she takes it off the fire, and ripping its two hind legs off with her strong hands, she hands one of the legs to me. Holding it in my hand and looking at it dubiously, I feel my nausea resurface slightly, but the smell of the meat is enough to coax me into taking a cautious bite. Trying not to look at the leg of the animal in my hand, I bring it to my mouth and bite into it. It is well cooked, but is also somewhat stringy and tough; I have to chew on it a couple of times to work the meat away from the bone.

The taste of the animal is really like nothing I have ever tasted before, although it does have a hint of poultry to it. "Tastes like chicken, go figure," I feel myself thinking in the recesses of my mind, stifling a brief chuckle.

Marissa has been watching me with interest and concern and after my first bite has been thoroughly swallowed she asks, "how is it?"

Pausing briefly to consider it, I finally answer "it's not too bad. That is as long as I don't look at what I'm eating. We've come to the point where we don't really want to let ourselves think that we're carnivores. So I tend to like my food to appear as far as possible from its natural state. I'll manage though... and it does taste okay. It's tough and a bit dry, but it's fresh and hot, so I can't complain too much."

Smiling at me, she warmly replies, “I’m glad you can eat it Ben. I realize this morning has been pretty hard on you so far, and it’s nice to know you aren’t totally repulsed by it.”

The rest of the meal isn’t too bad on me. The meat is okay once I get used to it. It takes me awhile to eat it since it is so stringy and I have to chew it a lot, not having teeth as sharp as Marissa’s, but it does satisfy me on a basic level. I am still somewhat nervous about gnawing on the leg of a dead animal, but I’m hungry enough, and also a bit numb from all that has happened this morning, that I’m able to deal with it. Between the two of us, we manage to devour the whole thing, and after the meal I find myself fairly satisfied, and my stomach seems to be handling the new food okay.

After breakfast, I am suddenly reminded that it’s been over twenty-four hours since I’ve brushed my teeth, and running my tongue over them, they feel a bit slimy. ‘This vacation is starting to lose a bit of its luster,’ I think to myself as I’m rinsing my teeth with water from the stream. Luckily since I won’t be eating a lot of food with refined sugars, I should be okay, at least for a month, if I try and keep my teeth as clean as possible.

So by a little after 11:00 on my watch, we are on our way. Putting on my pack, I realize how sore my shoulders are, and am slightly hesitant to burden myself like this. After a minute though, I’m able to adjust to the load, and deal with the soreness, slightly comforted by the thought that the soreness will eventually go away.

We spend all of the morning hiking along the road through the wilderness, again not meeting anyone along the way. It is another beautiful day, with perfect weather, although my mind is too preoccupied with other thoughts to fully appreciate it.

‘Damn, she really scared me this morning,’ I think to myself, muddling these thoughts over in my mind. ‘She was almost like a wild animal stalking prey. If she had wanted to she could have torn my throat out. But she didn’t, and part of it was that I was hearing her true language, which of course is a lot like a cat’s growls.’

‘Still, how can they live like this, being civilized enough to live in houses, learn magic and how to develop simple technology, but still enjoy hunting with such ferocity? Well, I guess there are a lot of humans that enjoy the adrenaline rush of blowing a deer full of lead even when they don’t need to, when they could just go down to the supermarket and buy ground beef... So is this really all that different?’

‘They act a hell of a lot more like their ancestors than we do though. You don’t see us swinging from the trees and eating bananas, or beating our chests when we’re challenged... One thing for sure, she’s not as human as I thought she was yesterday.’

‘But then she can sit and talk with me just like anyone else, using rational thought and displaying emotions and everything... Perhaps they just act like cats

when their adrenaline gets to certain levels, shutting off part of their higher functions.'

Spending most of the morning in quiet thought, I try and work out most of these problems, running into a few brick walls on the way. 'I guess she's right,' I finally concede, 'I can't judge them like humans, I've got to learn to take their civilization at face value... which is going to be a bit difficult at times. I wonder what other surprises she has waiting for me?'

Then stealing a look at her, and realizing I still have some of those feelings I was having yesterday, my thoughts turn to my performance this morning. 'Damn, she must think I'm some sort of a spineless coward for the way I acted. I hope I can stomach the kill the next time she does it. If I try hard enough, maybe I can learn how to clean it, and manage to make up for almost throwing up on her... at least she's trying to understand me as a human, and hopefully she'll cut me some slack until I can handle things better.'

Then my thoughts finally turn to the most difficult aspect of the situation, my still present attraction towards her. 'How can I still find her attractive, when it's obvious that she's not just a human with fur and a tail. I mean she could get pissed off and try and claw me if I don't watch it.' Then looking at her again, as she's conveniently a step ahead of me, I let my eyes peruse her definitely-feminine form. 'Damn, she's not a human, but maybe she's close enough to make me happy. For an alien she looks pretty good... In fact maybe that's why I can't stop thinking about this, maybe it's her exoticness that's got me going.'

Realizing that I shouldn't be letting myself think this way, especially not having known her too long, I really begin to feel like somewhat of a lecher for leering at her like that. Part of me really is intrigued by all those ideas, while another part reprimands me for letting my mind wander down those darkened corridors. I manage to beat myself up over this for quite awhile, trying to reconcile these conflicting thoughts and impulses.

This really bothers me, especially the way I'm thinking about her like this. I can't believe how quickly my thoughts have become clouded by hormones; in a way I feel like a raging teenager again. Having been kind of lonely lately, I finally decide that's what's causing these feelings; being suddenly thrust into close quarters with a strangely attractive woman like her is enough to get me going down that road. 'I just hope I can keep things in perspective and don't do anything stupid,' I think wryly to myself.

I spend most of the four hours hiking lost in these thoughts, and for the most part Marissa is either content in letting me do that, or is extremely polite and leaves me alone. Finally when we sit down to lunch, she speaks to me for the first time in quite awhile. "Ben, are you okay? You've been pretty quiet this morning."

"Yes... I guess so. It's just that this morning really upset me, and I realize I didn't handle it too well."

Looking at me with concern, she lightly takes one of my hands in hers, and softly replies, "Is that why you've been so quiet? Did you think that I was

disappointed in you? I'm sorry for how I acted. I wasn't thinking and couldn't think past being a felenzi."

"No it's not that... it's just that the way you acted after hunting was pretty scary. You acted more like an animal than a person..." Then realizing what a stupid statement I just made, I quickly add "damn, I didn't mean that..." Dropping my gaze slightly I finish with "it's just that I wasn't expecting you to act that way..."

Taking my chin in her other hand, she guides my head back up to meet her understanding gaze. "I'm sorry Marissa... I didn't mean that I thought you're an animal or anything like that... It was a stupid statement... I don't know what I meant."

"No Ben, I know what you mean, and it wasn't a stupid statement. From your point of view you have every right in saying that... that is if I was a human. Just like I was angry with you at first for not being able to clean that pantouka for me... But, we've both got to realize that I'm not a human and you're not a felenzi. If we can't get beyond this, we're going to run into a lot more problems."

"Now, I realize that this is all extremely strange and hard on you, and unfortunately you're at a disadvantage since you're the alien here. However, right now we're by ourselves, so we're somewhat on equal terms... I'll try and keep from judging you by my terms, do you think you can do the same for me?"

Looking back at her, sort of dumbfounded, I manage a simple nod.

"That's good... I think we'll both do okay. It's going to be a little tough on both of us, to learn how we operate differently, but if we can try and keep these things in mind, we'll get through it." Then taking her furry hand and gently stroking the back of it against my cheek and smiling warmly at me, she continues "besides, it won't be all bad... there's got to be differences between us that we'll find intriguing too. It will be fun learning more about each other over the next few weeks."

I have to agree with her on this point, and although I am still extremely confused, she has managed to calm my jumbled mind somewhat, at least for the moment. Returning her smile, I take her hand which is still holding mine and stroke it lightly, "I guess you're right about that... and I guess if you're willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, I can try and do the same for you... Just as long as you promise not to mistake me for prey in the middle of the night."

She flashes me a wounded look at the mention of this, and I quickly force a smile to patch the situation. She recovers quickly and then retorts, "fair enough, as long as you'll give an honest effort to trying to learn how to help me clean my kills."

Pausing and swallowing a small lump in my throat, I reply "okay... if you'll let me go slow... I can't just jump in there like you wanted me to this morning. I'm not a natural-born hunter like you..."

"Okay, we can work it out..."

After that, there doesn't seem to be much more to say, as we sit there, looking into each other's confused, yet well-meaning gazes. As I sit there with her hand in mind, I am reminded of my less than pure thoughts about her, but discretion, and a little bit of fear keeps me from pushing the situation any further than it's gone already.

We sit there in each other's warmth for a couple of minutes, until I finally become a bit uncomfortable and break the silence a bit awkwardly. "Well, I suppose we should eat lunch and then get back on the road..." She seems to notice my uneasiness, but doesn't comment on it, instead moving to our packs to retrieve some more of the dried meat that I am becoming rather accustomed to.

We eat lunch pretty much in silence and after a brief rest, we are back on the trail again, moving at our easy, yet steady pace. She lets me alone with my thoughts for awhile, but then interrupts me, drawing me into a conversation with her. "Ben, are you upset with me for bringing you here?"

It takes me a few moments to answer her, as I'm not totally sure myself. "I don't know Marissa. At first I was really annoyed and a bit angry. Then I was still a little uneasy, but also excited and intrigued. Now I'm not sure... I mean yesterday was fun. It was nice getting away from the daily grind and all, but things are coming too fast for me... hopefully once I can come to grips with everything it will be a lot easier on me." Then pausing again as we walk several steps, I finally add "I guess I'm really not sure how I feel about everything... I wish I could give you a better answer, but I'm a little overwhelmed right now."

Thinking this over, she finally looks at me with a deep concern on her face. "Well, if I were able to send you home today, just pretend that I could... Would you want to leave right away?"

"I don't know... since it wasn't an option, I hadn't considered it... but I guess I wouldn't... I think I'd stay here. Even with everything that has happened, I don't think I could pass up this adventure... and I hope I'm starting to understand things better." Pausing again for a few moments, I then continue with "Now that I know what to expect when I see you hunt or fight, I think I can deal with it. Just as long as I know you won't come after me, and that you'll be here to help me if anything happens makes it a lot easier to take..."

"The magic is another incentive too. I'd never even dreamed about being able to do something near as powerful as that, and now that you've given me a taste of it, I can't walk away now... and finally, I'd like to get to know you better. It probably sounds stupid, but I really mean it. I find you really interesting, and I hope we get a chance to become friends. Some of your customs really floor me, but I'd like to learn all that I can about you and your world. I'm sure there's a lot about you that I'll really like... this doesn't sound too corny does it? I do mean it, even it does sound a bit made up..."

"No Ben, I believe you, and I'd like to get to know you better too. We have a good amount of time ahead of us, so we should become good friends. You have some qualities to you which I like, and I think it will be good for both of

us to learn about each other's worlds. This is definitely a wonderful experience, for both of us since we're both scholars..."

We spend the rest of the afternoon in comfortable conversation, as I feel my uneasiness draining away. I'm still a bit uncomfortable with how alien she can be at times, but her mind is also significantly human, so it is easy to talk with her. She asks me about school and work, and I do my best to explain it to her, given how primitive their technology is compared to ours. She listens well and is amazed at all that we can do with our advanced sciences. She is a very attentive and appreciative audience, and that makes even some of the dull research I've been doing seem a little more exciting.

I gloss over most of the details, but even the simple concepts fascinate her, and it helps me to feel a little better about my work. I had been in the doldrums of grad school, beaten down by the grind of research and working part time, trying to finish things up, and if nothing else, this vacation, no matter how odd it may seem, will definitely recharge my batteries.

After she has quizzed me somewhat in depth on all the wonders of my work, I finally turn the tables and ask her all about her life. She tells me how she's been practicing magic for close to ten years, and how she loves her work and the freedom it gives her. Hiring out her services to the towns people she's made herself quite a comfortable living, and has a good amount of spare time to devote to her studies.

She is somewhat of a Renaissance woman, since she not only is skilled at magic, but manages a little bit of painting, and is also interested in some of the areas of science. Their science is still not too advanced, and she only reads about it now and again, but it is obvious that she is very scholarly and intelligent.

She tells me that she chose to stay in the town where she was born because she likes the smallness of it and the fact that it is out near the wilderness which she also really loves. She sometimes feels a little isolated, since it's hard to get a lot of books and journals without going to the big city, but since the railway has been put in, she goes there on excursions a couple of times a year. Some of the townspeople think she's a little odd for spending as much time as she does in the books, but given her talents, she has enough respect to make up for what they consider to be her quirks.

As we talk, I realize that I'm still physically attracted to her, but that is coming under control, and now that I'm getting to know her better, I'm appreciating her for the person she is, not just as a furry piece of meat. I think our academic interests will be enough in common for us to become quite close; I'm getting to know her quite well, and I hope we do become really good friends. I'd also like us to become closer than that, but I'll try not to push it too much.

Finally after walking all day, we stop for the night a few hours before sunset. I'm tired from the long day's hike, but it's also a good sort of exhaustion, almost a feeling of accomplishing something well done. My back is still a little sore, as I

stretch myself after removing my pack, but I can feel the kinks working themselves out. This is definitely going to get me in better shape.

Realizing I've been sweating all day, and without deodorant, and trying to be discrete as possible, I take a quick whiff of my shirt underarm and am appalled at the overpowering smell from it. Letting out a quick and disgusted gag, I quickly reach in my pack for a new shirt and head down to the stream. Trying to get out of sight from Marissa, who seems a little surprised by my behavior, I reach the stream and strip off my shirt, tossing it in the water.

Rinsing under my arms, I realize that I don't smell all that bad, since most of the sweat was absorbed by the fabric of the shirt. A few splashes of water, and I'm feeling a lot better. Putting on my clean shirt, I rinse out the dirty one, and return to hang that up to dry next to my pack.

Coming back to our campsite, Marissa is quite bemused by my actions. "Why were you in such a hurry to bathe like that Ben?"

I must give her a look like she's crazy, since her question absolutely floors me. "What do you mean, why did I want to wash up like that? I didn't want to stink, that's why... I know you bathe since you have a tub in your house, so why does this surprise you so much?"

"Of course I like to bathe, doesn't everyone? But since we have no decent facilities here, and we aren't getting too dirty, I can wait until we get to the town and I can have a proper bath... and why would you want to totally remove your scent like that?"

"Because it's too strong, and it smells... didn't you notice it? I hope I it didn't offend you?"

"No of course not... and it wasn't really all that strong. It doesn't smell bad anyway, at least not from a distance... it's just your natural scent, why should you dislike it so? It's different from ours, but it doesn't bother me."

Then looking at me with curiosity, she asks a rather odd question. "Do humans produce scent all over their bodies like that?"

"Ummm... I guess so. Yes, we tend to sweat everywhere like that, but do it more in certain places, like under our arms... I guess you can't sweat through your fur can you?"

"We produce scent in our hands in feet, and some in our cheeks too, with the strength and smell depending on the mood of the individual."

This whole discussion is getting a little too strange and personal for me, so I drop it, not wishing to go further in depth on the subject of pheromones, human or felenzi. She notices my embarrassment, and doesn't push the subject. It has given me something to think of though. 'I wonder how they keep from overheating then with all that fur. It must just be like cats where they pant and I guess sweat through their feet. I'd never thought about it, but it works for the big cats with just as much mass as them, and they're just as active, if not more.'

As we're setting up camp, getting some firewood, and unpacking our bedding, Marissa stops suddenly. She sits down on the ground, grabs her leg and hisses with pain. Alarmed, I rush to her, kneeling down and ask what's

wrong. Clenching her teeth slightly, she replies “muscles spasm” hissing again, as her muscles continue their game of tug-of-war.

Having had some of these from running, I know how painful they can be, and offer “try and relax your leg, don’t clench it up so,” which of course isn’t much help to one who’s in the midst of these contortions. Unfortunately, all I can do is sit there and watch as the spasms run their course for several more seconds.

As the pain dies down some, she tries to stretch her leg out, emitting a few more slight hisses of discomfort. Gazing up at me, looking just the slightest bit vulnerable, she quietly asks me to help her remove her boot.

Taking her somewhat large boot in my hands, I slowly undo the laces, trying not to pull on her sore muscles, also a bit nervous by the situation. Her boots come up somewhere between halfway and a third of the way up to her knees. Since her feet are digitigrade, they are fairly different from what I’m used to seeing everyday. In order to remove the boot, I have to undo the laces to about halfway down it, so it can come off from her large foot and not get caught on the ankle. It drops off her foot, having most of the top opening up, rather than pulling the boot down, like I’m used to. Removing her boot, I see that the fur of her foot, and that up to just below where her boot had fit, is dark black, just like her hands, giving her “boots” markings on, I assume, both her feet.

Her “foot” is longer than a humans by about five or six inches, from the large felenzi equivalent of an ankle to her toes. However this “foot” is shaped a little differently than ours, since it is almost more like an extension to her leg, being somewhat long and a little skinny. What I consider as her foot doesn’t actually start until down near her toes. The part that actually comes in contact with the earth is only about five inches long and is squat compared to humans. Her “toes” are much thicker than ours, and all four of them are the same size; her foot looks pretty much what you’d expect to see on a cat of her size. Each one of her toes, has a retractable claw, much like the ones on her fingers, which are just barely visible beneath her dark fur.

Once her boot is off, I take her foot in my hands, feeling a little awkward, and try and straighten out her leg while causing her as little pain as possible. Her foot is a little moist, as I’m reminded that they sweat down there, which causes a momentary revulsion. However, her foot isn’t nearly as wet as under my arms had been, and although I can smell her scent, it’s very slight and smells different, with a hint of animal to it, but not repulsive. It definitely smells better than human feet, and at this distance from my nose, it isn’t too noticeable. Her fur is drying, exposed to the air, and I try to ignore this and focus at the task at hand.

Straightening her leg out slowly, she lets out one or two really small hisses of pain, but I’m doing my best to minimize her discomfort. Putting her foot across my legs, I move my hands up the fur of her legs, coming to the middle of her calf. “Is this where it hurts?” I ask, gently squeezing her firm muscles.

“Yes,” she answers, with a little hiss.

“I can try and work out the knot, it will hurt a little...” She nods, and I begin to slowly palpate her muscles, finding their tightness, and gently manipulating them, trying to work it out. She lets me work for several minutes, as I feel them softening. I think I hurt her a couple of times in the beginning, but after that she seems to enjoy the attentions, as she leans back on the grass and even lets out a little purr.

Finally sitting up, she leans forward, and takes places one of her hands on top of mine. “Thank you Ben, you did that well, and it really helped... but I think you’ve done as much as you can to get rid of the tightness, and there’s still some pain lingering. It’s a good opportunity for you to learn about healing anyway.”

Again, it’s like with my other lessons, she focuses her energy through my arms, and directs it to my hands placed on her legs. As before, I feel the energy building inside me, but can also discern the subtle difference in how it feels this time. As the energy flows through me, I feel it concentrate in her sore muscles, then dissipating along her leg. I don’t quite understand it, but I’m able to feel the tightness and pain drain out from her, as if the flow of energy extends my senses outward. As with the other magic, this is phenomenal, especially the first time.

Releasing my hands, she smiles warmly again, and thanks me once more for my attentions. I squeeze her muscles once more, surprised at how the knot has completely vanished. Then in a moment of bravado, I glide my hands down to her foot, and gently run my fingers along its furry contours. Glancing at her, she looks surprised, but not upset. Tracing my fingers along the bottom of her foot, I again elicit a couple of satisfied purrs from her.

I continue my exploration for a couple of minutes, quite enjoying the feel of her fur beneath my fingers, and the wonderfully new shape of her foot and toes. Then looking up at her again, she looks a little troubled and confused. ‘Perhaps I’ve gone to far,’ I think, ‘but how to stop this without looking too stupid?’

Finally I just run my fingers along the underside of her foot one final time and then detach myself. Trying to act nonchalant, I look at her and simply ask “does it feel better now?”

“Yes Ben... thank you again,” then pausing she finally continues, “we should continue with your lessons and then get dinner and get to bed.”

My lessons are pretty much like the night before, first making sure that I can still remember how to do the spells I’d mastered yesterday, then continuing with her showing me a few different types of energy, so I can learn their differences. Then finally we start the fire, I try to do it a couple of times by myself, but can’t even get it to smolder. It’s somewhat frustrating, but she intervenes before I let it totally stress me out, and once again helps me to use the spell, as the wood before me jumps into flames.

We have another simple, yet satisfying dinner of meat and fresh fruit, then settle of to bed, watching the stars and twin moons coming out in the darkening sky above us. She falls asleep much quicker than I do, for there are a lot of things I have to muddle over, trying to comprehend everything I'd experienced today. Finally tiredness overtakes me and I fall once again into a peaceful sleep.