

Different Worlds, Different Skins

Humanity's Encounters with Other Races



Edited by Will A. Sanborn

With Stories by:

Michael Bard, Austen Crowder, Bernard Doove,
Seth Drake, William Eakins, Lanny Fields, Phil Geusz,
Jason Gillespie, Chris Goodwin, Searska Grey Raven,
Renee Carter Hall, Stefan Kaiser, James R. Lane,
Alan Loewen, Paul Lucas, Eric Luhman, Brian Miller,
Ken Pick, J. Scott Rogers, Will A. Sanborn, Kris Schnee,
Sean Silva, Tim Susman and Wookie

Cover Artwork by:
Sara "Caribou" Palmer

Thank you to both the contributors who shared their ideas and visions with me for this project, and to the readers who have helped support this endeavor. I hope you all will enjoy this book.

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Published by Anthropomorphic Dreams Publishing.
<http://www.anthrodreams.com>

First printing October 2009.

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Editor's Notes

I first learned about anthropomorphic animals when I discovered the furry fandom while browsing the internet at college in the early 1990s. I found a treasure trove of content on an FTP archive and then later the fanzine *Yarfl*, which introduced me to a world of talking animals outside of cartoons.

Having grown out of funny-animal comics, the fandom had a heavy influence of visual artwork, but there was a fair amount of fiction around as well. I was lucky to discover several wonderful stories early on, including Watt's Martin's dramatic horror novella "A Gift of Fire, a Gift of Blood" which had a vampire bat as sympathetic character. From that point I was hooked; I searched to find more tales, and eventually gave writing a try myself.

I liked the mix of the exotic and the familiar with anthropomorphic characters and I also appreciated how much of a meta genre it was, pulling in ideas from many sources. There were stories ranging from diverse backgrounds, besides the starting points of fantasy and science fiction. Animal characters made obvious vehicles to discuss issues of race and culture, and while some stories handled that better than others, there were several good and ambitious works to be found in the fandom.

The writers in the fandom have continued to play with these ideas over the years and there is a good amount of quality fiction and compelling stories to be found, if you know where to look. It is for this reason that I wanted to produce this anthology, not only to serve the fandom, but in hopes of offering these stories to a wider audience outside the furry community. The ideas of talking, thinking animal people are not so strange that they can't be enjoyed by lovers of fantasy or sci-fi, or even of classics such as *The Wind in the Willows* or *Aesop's Fables*.

This anthology has been a fulfilling project to work on. I've been lucky to have received so many wonderful stories and have been able to assemble a good collection of dramatic fiction on the theme. I wanted a book with the kinds of stories which first introduced me to anthropomorphic animals. The idea of a world of mixed races, human and furry, both mundane and exotic, fired my imagination and offered a doorway into new lands to be explored. It's my goal with this project to offer those ideas and dreams to a new group of readers and I hope you'll enjoy reading them.

– Will A. Sanborn

In the Shadow of the Dragon by Chris Goodwin

She could not help but see the Dragon glittering in the distance as she approached, and she considered leaving the road which ran near it to avoid an encounter.

However, she had been walking for days now in strange territory. Her provisions were waning and the prospect of encountering an unknown challenge in the open desert seemed somehow less attractive. At least she knew something of dragons. But her knowledge was only what everyone knew:

Ages ago real dragons did not exist, and so a grand dreamer decided to bring them into being. This without understanding the consequences. This without seeming to grasp that the dragons of myth were monstrous and monstrously powerful. Even in the legends that cast them as benevolent, the dragons were too powerful, too arcane and too close to reptile for any mere mortal mind to fully understand. To create them was as for an ant to fashion the child that crushes it without thinking.

And this particular dreamer was not wise, merely able; so the dragons were made. They were made with such clever artifice that both the living and the dead would not know them to be machines. And the first few beasts did not know it themselves. But they knew they were powerful, more so than their creator. And they left her keep without a second thought. Those that felt themselves to be evil did evil. Those that felt themselves to be good did good. But what distinctions are these to small, wet, human minds? The snake is unknowable, and the cold clockworks, ultimately incomprehensible.

In fact, it was the most clever and benign of the goodly dragons that turned back while the others scattered over the earth. It turned back and destroyed their creator and her means of creation. In its eyes, she had done her life's work and heaven awaited. This great beast sacrificed itself to her destruction, and in its eyes this was a great honor to be humbly pursued. It cracked the earth asunder beneath her fortress; the dreamer and her dreams were lost, along with the best and brightest of her creations.

As for the rest of them in small ways, daily ways, the dragons acted out their parts and it was as if the old tales had come to life. The goodly dragons brought rain where needed, protected travelers upon the road and so on. Those that were evil, did terrible things indeed. Knights did battle, virgins were sacrificed. No dragon was ever defeated, only driven off to fly another day. The dreamer would have been pleased were she not dead, for there were dragons upon the earth for a thousand years, as if they had always been. Balanced, unchanging and eternal.

But these brilliant creatures were afflicted with a developing, cunning, clockwork logic. And over time those that did good began to see that their efforts did not matter; life was painful and suffering inevitable. Those that did evil came to realize that to spare the living was to condemn them to being alive amongst each other. So in time, the goodly dragons became

those that killed newborns to spare them life's sorrows, while those that did evil fought to save them. It was a twisted age, and there were dragons still upon the earth for a thousand years more.

This was what everybody knew, as well as that in recent memory their numbers unaccountably dwindled. Perhaps the dream was beginning to fade. Perhaps it was a sickness among them. Regardless, it was not through human effort, for no dragon had ever been defeated, only driven off to fly another day.

She held up her eyes against the glaring sun. In the distance it glittered and she was certain it was aware of her. There was nothing around for miles, just flat dried earth, the road and the sun. It would have seen her coming long ago. So she did not try to hide, she did not leave the road. She walked on sore feet and sipped from her waterskin and made her way to the Dragon that remained.

She was told it would be there. Those in the last village warned her.

"If you follow that road much further, you will meet the Dragon on your way."

"Will it harm me," she had asked. They shook their heads in fear.

"No, it is evil."

But she had no other choice. Along the road was her path. Within a stone's throw she paused to collect herself. The ancient creature studied her curiously, clicking loudly enough for her to hear on the wind. Its wings - once glorious - were now tattered stumps, but she had no doubt it could cross the distance to her quickly enough if it wanted to. It yawned and writhed its great tail, stirring up dust that slowly drifted up as a cloud.

She squatted and pulled some dried meat from her pouch, nibbling it and looking around. She waved away a fly that had been following her. There was no shade except for a patch of rocks behind the beast and she could not put it off any longer.

It watched her with eyes that irised open and closed like crisp, bladed flowers. She stood before it silently, looking up. It looked down at her. Neither said anything for a long time. She could see that its hide had been eroded or flayed off over most of its body. It had one good talon left that looked quite capable and wicked; the other was a mass of tangled mechanism.

"You are a machine," she finally said.

"So are you," it replied without a pause, in a glassy choral tone. But it did lower its head to her level, turning to focus a large round eye upon her. The broad lens was clear as a dewdrop, bright and wet. She saw herself reflected upon the surface.

"Is it far from here?"

"Not for me. For you, another day's journey."

"Now that I am close, it will be dangerous when night comes, won't it?"

"Not for me. You will most certainly be eaten or worse."

"I should camp here then."

"Because I will protect you."

“I was warned about you,” she said, unslinging her sack and walking closer. She entered into the shade of the Dragon with relief. It was cooler here, and closer still she felt the beast radiating an uncanny chill, humming.

“And with good reason.”

It did not touch her, not once. And in conversation it only responded to her, but it did so readily, quite willing to talk when prompted.

“I don’t want to leave,” she said the next day. And she meant it; there was stability and certainty here that she would not know anywhere else, under any other circumstance, with anyone else, at any other time. The Dragon was devoted, safe and could be trusted.

“But you must,” it replied, “If you stay, you will wither and starve.”

“There is nothing here for me but you. Nothing,” she said, to which the Dragon was at first silent. It watched her intently and then perhaps smiled.

“And you are always welcome, here.”

Later in life, in hard times, during moments of deepest doubt and hopeless dismay, she would remember this and regret her choice in some small way. And at her happiest, in the company of friends, family and those she valued most, she never again felt as safe and as certain of the people around her as she did under that bright creature’s gaze.

Le Roux's Love Center by Phil Geusz

Going to the drive-in with your family can be pretty uncool when you're a teenager. But for a were-rabbit, it can be pretty special. After all, it beats sitting in a cage the whole night of the Full Moon, or being hidden away in a back closet like happens to some 'weres whose parents can't deal with it. And it's kinda nice to know that my folks care enough about me to drive two hundred miles every twenty-nine and a half days so that I can undergo my Change in what they consider to be positive surroundings.

I'll never forget the first time we went to Le Roux's Child Lycanthropy Prey-Species Love Center: I was only thirteen, and still just a kid myself. It was converted from an old drive-in theater, which seemed kind of weird at first. But the arrangements made perfect sense, once you saw them. Drive-ins have always been good places for families to get together, and with a few minor changes the setting was ideal for Change night. We were-kids could socialize and be together, yet be kept safe from all the various sorts of predators. And safe is cool for us prey-types. Even as teens, we tend to be rather cautious.

The place looks kinda spooky from the highway. There's this utterly humongous movie screen, and double sixteen-foot-high cyclone fences all the way around. They used to be fourteen-footers, but that was before one of us kids – a were-kangaroo who goes non-sentient when he Changes – escaped by leaping clear over the fences. Usually in a drive-in the cars all line up for tickets, but here you had to park and get evaluated in a little hospital-thingie before they let you in. I'd been evaluated lots of times, but I guess they had to see for themselves. Probably it's an insurance thing. My parents had called ahead, so we didn't have to wait a long time like some families did. But still, it seemed to take forever.

A lot of kids with lycanthropy are hidden away by their parents, but I'm lucky. I got mine from Aunt Judy when I was still little. It happened before she even realized that she was infected herself, and since then she hasn't spread it to anyone else. I think that maybe my family is more understanding than most because of this. They know it wasn't anyone's fault. Most of the parents who were waiting with their kids looked ashamed, though. Like they'd done something wrong. And the kids themselves seemed sad and nervous.

At least the nervous part was easy to understand. It was the day of the Full Moon, after all, and I was on pins and needles myself. You see, Le Roux's Love Center specializes in working with herbivorous were-kids and their families. Prey types, in other words. Deer. Impala. Rats. Mice. And rabbits like me. Were-wolves and such love the full moon, but for us it's a time of danger and fear. If a prey were-kid is careless – or even just unlucky! – he can get eaten. Perhaps by a classmate and friend, caught up in the mindless bloodlust.

Finally, we were shown to an examination room in the back. A doctor came to check me out. He was wearing a yellow button that read 'Love Center Volunteer' in red ink. Dr. Yen was his name.

Mom had filled out a little folder about me, and the doctor studied it with great care. Then he asked me a few questions.

"Scott," he asked, "Are you a vegetarian all the time?"

"Well," I replied, "I like to drink milk. And sometimes at school I eat a piece of ham. Just to prove to the other kids I can."

"Mm-hmm. And does it make you ill?"

"Well... Yeah. Sorta."

"I see." Dr. Yen scribbled something on his chart, then continued. "Don't be surprised if you lose the taste for milk as you get older." Then he smiled. "You know, were-rabbits are very rare. I've only met one other."

My eyebrows rose. "Really? I've never met any at all. Even my aunt who gave this to me is a were-fox. She hadn't Changed yet herself when she infected me, so it was one of those cross-species things."

He nodded gravely. "Well, it just so happens that the other were-rabbit I know owns this place. He dreamed up the whole thing, then turned it into hard reality. Heck of a nice guy." He closed the little folder and scrawled his signature across the front. "I think it'd be best if we put you in with the shy species, Scott. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah," I replied reluctantly. "I stay sentient, but I can get awful..."

"Scared?" he asked, looking me in the eyes.

"Yeah," I agreed, looking down at my sneakers.

Dr. Yen reached out, grabbed the top of my head, and gently lifted my face until our eyes met again. "Don't you ever be ashamed of being afraid, Scott?" he said. "Not ever! Do you hear me? It's very, very important."

I tried to pull away, startled. But he maintained his grip.

"Have you ever been in a fight, son?" he asked, smiling a little. "A real dustup, I mean."

My brow wrinkled. What did that have to do with anything? "Well, no. Not that I can remember."

"Of course not," he replied. "How about a really violent argument?"

"No. None of those, either." I didn't understand where this was going.

Dr. Yen turned to my parents. "If you had to describe Scott in a single word, what word would you choose?"

My parents looked baffled for a second, then turned towards each other. "Nice?" my mother tentatively asked Dad. "Good?"

He nodded and turned back to Dr. Yen. "Good. That's the best single word. Though I might add pleasant, clean, conscientious..."

I blushed a bit, but no one noticed.

"Precisely my point," Dr. Yen continued. "Were-rabbits are always good people. You won't find that written in the textbooks anywhere, but we practitioners know it to be true. Were-deer and a lot of other were-grazers are pretty nice folks, too." He turned back to me. "Scott, you might be afraid sometimes, sure enough. And sometimes you have every reason to be

frightened. It's a dangerous world for good people, the ones with pure hearts who don't seek to hurt others. But what you get in return is beyond price. Never, ever be ashamed of being a were-rabbit. Or of being afraid, either."

Then he scratched me behind the ear, of all things! How did he know I like that even in human form?

The receptionist gave us a green ticket on the way out. We piled back into the station wagon, then lined up at the entrance. When it was our turn to squeeze through the gate Dad handed over our ticket, and the neatly uniformed attendant gave us directions to a small, separately fenced-off area. She had soft, dark eyes, and as she pulled back from the car I caught a burst of some sort of cervid scent from her. Moonrise must not have been too far off, if she was emitting pheromones already and I could pick them up.

The shy-species area was easy to find, as it was separately gated and marked with green placards. We still had a little time before dusk, and Mom spent it setting up our dinner while I explored a bit. All the gates were still open, and it was fun trying to figure out who was what. The gray-ticket zone had a low fence, a big sandbox, and fine steel mesh underfoot; obviously it was designed for were-moles and other prodigious burrowers. None were present that night, and the area stood empty. I'd never met a were-mole and was disappointed, though I've gotten to know a few since. They usually wear thick glasses, even in human form. There was also a corral where were-equines could run and play together, and a big area of turf fenced off for the different sorts of were-cattle. The first enclosure was marked with red, and the second with orange.

My own green-ticket neighborhood was much smaller. There were little doghouse-shaped thingies that felt friendly to me right off. They'd obviously been provided as cover for us shy ground-dwelling types. There was also a network of poles and swings and such for the enjoyment of squirrely folks, and patches of brush that must have seemed very attractive to deer-kids; there were several young ones already bedded down there when we arrived. They looked very calm and happy.

Almost before I knew it evening was upon us, and we green-taggers were laughing and playing together. Dad had found another father who was also a software engineer, and they talked shop while Mom and a group of other mothers reassured a single lady whose son, Robbie, had just become a were-chipmunk. He was only eight, and this would be only the second time he'd ever Changed. I played cards with him and tried to calm him down some.

"I was so scared last time!" he exclaimed tearfully. "I didn't know who I was or what was happening or anything!"

"It can be scary," I agreed. "But this looks to me like a pretty safe place. When you don't have to worry about stuff, it's a whole lot easier. In fact, it can even be fun!"

“Fun?” Robbie asked. “Being little-bitty and maybe getting stepped on or eaten can be fun?”

Frankly, I was sometimes pretty frightened myself. But I wasn’t going to let this little kid know it. “Of course it’s fun! You can explore all kinds of things, different foods taste good, you can smell neat stuff –”

“But you can’t see!” wailed Robbie.

I sighed. “No, you can’t see very well. On the other hand, you’ll find you don’t need to. That is, if chipmunks are at all like rabbits. Which I guess they probably are.”

“Stay with me, Scottie!” Robbie begged. “Please, stay with me! Don’t make me be alone, like last time!”

“Of course I’ll stay with you!” I agreed, hugging the poor little kid. “We can explore together. Okay”

“Okay,” the little kid replied. He seemed a bit happier to me.

As darkness approached, the world grew more and more electric for us were-kids. It became impossible to sit still, and the understanding parents in the green-ticket area didn’t even blink when we all stripped naked just before dark. Since the Full Moon was already up – we could feel it straining at our very bones – the Change came upon us as the last bit of sun vanished beneath the horizon, at precisely 8:22 PM.

Kids like Robbie usually greet the Change with screams of primal terror, and admittedly there were a few of those to be heard across the theater complex. But mostly we were well prepared for what was to come, and took it fairly easily. That was what the Love Center was for, after all.

Robbie was one of those who screamed, at first. He wrapped himself around me like a boa constrictor, hollering madly into my sensitive ears. But I held tightly onto him in turn, as we writhed and rolled across the turf. Robbie’s mother tried to separate us once, I think, but someone pulled her away. Which was just as well; one or the other of us would probably have bitten her if she hadn’t left us alone just then.

People always ask me what it’s like to Change, but I can’t explain it better than anyone else can. You might as well try to explain color to a man blind from birth, or the difference between rock and blues music to the deaf. The best way I can put it is that everything in the universe becomes fluid. You don’t seem to shift, so much as the rest of the world seems to shift around you. I think it’s because you see the world in a fundamentally different way when you’re an animal; your brain actually rewires itself to fit the new senses. I know that as a bunny I don’t depend on my eyes much, but without my nose I’d be totally helpless. You just see the world in a whole different way while Changed.

But right then, I wasn’t worried about explaining. I was worried about Robbie! He howled like a banshee until finally his throat reshaped itself. Then he whined in piercing tones that I knew his mother’s ears were not designed to hear. I was still able to talk; the bigger you are the more slowly you Change. “Smell me, Robbie!” I cried in tones that already sounded more like rabbit wails than my normal voice. “Smell me! It’s important! You

have to know my scent!” And finally he buried his nose into the soft deep fur that already covered my shoulder and breathed deep.

We Changed silently after that, because it is generally the nature of prey species to be quiet and discreet. And as we Changed, we hugged each other until when we were through we looked like a single mass of fur.

I turned into a very young rabbit, naturally, not being yet fully grown. And Robbie was an even less mature chipmunk pup. I pulled away from my friend, sat up, blinked and sniffed around. A bunch of humans were arranged around us; I knew Mom and Dad by smell so I hopped over to reassure them that all was well. They stroked me a bit, which made me feel warm and safe. I couldn’t understand their words, of course, but the expression of love crosses species lines. Then I heard an anguished chittering and saw a human, presumably Robbie’s mother, chasing her poor, terrified son across the turf.

Even juvenile bunnies are pretty quick. I was on Robbie in a flash, crouching over him and protecting him from the adult that just didn’t understand. My folks came rushing over and led the sobbing human away while I hugged my chipmunk friend for what seemed an endless time. The first movie started while we lay there, a cartoon featuring talking animals. But neither of us cared. The film was more for the humans than for us, anyway. Since there’s no such thing as scent recording, films seem shallow and unreal while you’re in animal form. Even with scents, however, it would’ve still been a frustrating waste of time to try and watch it. We could neither understand the words nor make out the images with our weak eyes.

Instead, I eventually got Robbie to play with me. We scuttled off into the little ‘safe’ places, and to our utter delight discovered tunnels inside connecting them into a secret warren! Other secret passages led to the brush-piles, and we visited the fawns who insisted on remaining immobile there all night long. Talk about your strong instincts! I chewed delicate clover and sampled some new weeds, while Robbie, finally gaining a little confidence, chomped rather noisily (to my ears) on various seeds. Eventually, he fell asleep in a little side tunnel. An attendant came and woke him just before dawn so that he could climb out and have enough room to Change back to human. Otherwise he would’ve been stuck for the month. And do you know what? He fought the attendant, he was having so much fun being a chipmunk!

I felt really good about myself as we began the long drive back home in the early dawn light. My parents were proud of me, too. They called up Dr. Yen to tell him how I’d helped, and now every month he assigns me a new were-kid who has some kind of troubles to Change with. My family gets in free, I get a neat yellow button to wear, and I feel really good about being who and what I am.

Who says being a were-bunny isn’t cool?

Moon, June, Raccoon by Renee Carter Hall

Hoping no one could see me, I placed the little package under the tree, bowed three times to the full moon, briefly pretended to be looking for something in the withered grass, just in case someone was watching, then ducked back into the house. The screen door screeched as I yanked it closed. I had three new mosquito bites on my legs.

In short, I was itchy, embarrassed, and completely desperate.

I had found the spell – complete with step-by-step color illustrations – in a book in the New Age section of the local megastore. I hated buying the book, but I was afraid I wouldn't be able to remember all the details, and who knew what would happen if you messed that sort of thing up.

So I'd followed the directions to the letter, saying the words, carving the two hearts into the apple, wrapping it up in pink paper and ribbon like a little gift. The directions said to take it to a "natural place, like a park or the woods." There weren't any woods nearby, and the closest park was a twenty-minute drive away, so I'd figured that under any tree was natural enough, and the one in my own postage-stamp backyard was going to have to do.

Try to understand, I had already been to two weddings that June, both friends from college. An engagement party was coming up, another friend just had her first baby, and another one was trying. And I was sick of being happy for everyone else, sick of blind dates and stupid matchmaking websites, sick of drinking coffee I didn't like with men I could never like, let alone love.

And anyway, they say the full moon makes people do crazy things. Of course, they say love makes people do crazy things, too, but I wouldn't know anything about that.

So I did the spell, and I tried to laugh at myself, and I geared up for another exciting evening watching stupid sitcoms and scratching my mosquito bites and eating mint chocolate chip ice cream.

And I didn't think about the spell again. At least, not until exactly twenty-four hours later.



When I heard the scratching at the screen door, I thought it was the neighbors' cat, a scruffy orange tom who sometimes forgets exactly which townhouse he belongs in.

I turned on the outside light.

It was a raccoon.

We looked at each other. I noticed it was sitting up on its haunches, holding something.

"Hi," it said.

I took a step backward. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. He, on the other hand – the voice was definitely male – kept talking.

"Nice night, huh? Not too humid. Good breeze."

I saw then what he was holding: my apple, the two carved hearts turning brown.

“Listen,” he continued, “I’m, you know, flattered and everything. But... well, I just don’t think it would work out in the long run. So I thought – it’s really a sweet gesture, and you’re not all that bad-looking for a human, but I really can’t accept this.” And he held out the apple with both paws.

“Raccoons don’t talk,” I managed, finally.

“Actually, we do. Everything does. You just don’t listen.”

Slowly, his words started to sink in. I looked at the apple. “That wasn’t for you.”

He eyed me skeptically. “You left it under my tree.”

“It was...” Why was I explaining myself to a raccoon? “Never mind. It was a mistake. You can keep it if you want.”

The raccoon shrugged and took a bite. “Y’know, there’s a produce stand about two miles from here where you can get apples that actually taste like something.”

I stared at him while he finished the apple. Was this the first sign of some kind of nervous breakdown, seeing talking animals on your back porch? Or maybe it was an early warning sign of a stroke. Did people hallucinate with those? Should I call 911?

I considered my options. I could close the door, go back to the empty laughter on TV for another night, and try to dismiss this as some bizarre stress-induced episode.

Or...

Curiosity got the better of me, and I took a deep breath. “Would you like to come in?”



“Nice place,” he said, glancing around.

“It’s kind of a mess,” I apologized. “I wasn’t expecting... guests.”

“I’ve seen worse.” He held out a paw. “Name’s Krispy Kreme, by the way.”

I blinked. “Your name’s Krispy...”

He held up his other paw to stop me. “My mother had a sweet tooth, okay? Considering that my sister is Sara Lee and my brother is Ben&Jerrys, I think I came off all right. Call me Kris.”

I shook his paw. “I’m—”

“Karen Sheffield, thirty-one, bachelor’s in English, works for Taylor & Bradshaw, and you write some pretty decent poetry even though you keep getting rejection slips.” He paused. “You might want to think about buying a shredder.” With that, he loped off to the fridge.

I followed. “Wait a minute. How do you know how to read?”

Kris sampled three different flavors of protein shake, wrinkling his nose at each one. “The Martins down the street have a kid who watches all that educational stuff. They keep their windows open a lot. I can read, count to

twenty, sing 'C is for Cookie,' and figure out which thing isn't like the others. I think my education's pretty much complete."

I couldn't argue with that.

"Speaking of education," he added, tossing the shake cans into the trash and moving on to the freezer, "we need to teach you a thing or two about eating. First off," he squinted at a frozen dinner, "disodium inosinate is not food. And neither is that third-rate Chinese takeout stuff you get twice a week."

"I'm supposed to take culinary advice from an animal who eats out of dumpsters?"

"Hey, I don't have much of a choice. And don't turn this around. We're talking about you here, not me." He left the kitchen and settled himself on the couch in the living room. "You don't have company over very much."

"How can you tell?"

He gestured to the couch. "Just your scent. Nothing male – or mingled," he added with a wink.

"Don't tell me you learned that on educational TV."

"Yeah, well, the Robinsons never close their blinds." He stretched. "So why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why aren't you out with somebody tonight instead of leaving lousy apples in your yard?"

I started to give some kind of glib answer, but then I stopped and actually tried to think of the best way to explain it. "I'm tired of being with people and still being lonely."

Kris studied me a moment. "Hm. Well, being lonely with people still seems better than being lonely by yourself. At least it has more potential."

"Maybe." I shrugged.

"So what are you looking for?"

I had used up all my energy for introspective answers. "I don't know. The same things everybody's looking for."

"Honest, caring, loyal, sensitive, good sense of humor?"

I cringed. Those were the qualities I'd written on the pink paper used to wrap the apple. "Yeah. So?"

"The perfect guy."

"I guess."

Kris shook his head. "Listen, when you spend as much time as I do going through people's garbage, you find out more about them than you really want to know. And the first thing you learn is, nobody's perfect. I can tell you, everybody's just as messed up and scared and unsure as you are, just in their own way."

"You must have watched Mister Rogers, too," I said dryly, and turned on the TV.

"I'm just saying," he replied with a shrug, then settled down to watch. "You got any popcorn?"

I sighed.



A few nights later he was at the back porch again, dragging some wrinkled bundle of paper behind him.

“This is your idea of a hostess gift?” I asked as he handed it to me.

“Just take a look.”

We went inside. It was a sketchbook, the spiral kind. About half the pages had been torn out, and the rest were wavy and stained with things I didn’t want to think about.

I opened it to the first page, and my jaw literally dropped. It was a portrait, precisely rendered in pencil, of a man roughly my age, with a thoughtful expression and bright, childlike eyes that defied the lines beginning to form around them. The subject was not entirely what most people would call handsome, but he had an interesting face that welcomed closer study. The page was half torn out, but otherwise intact.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

Kris shrugged. “Ran across it. I figured, you know, you were into the arts and all, so...”

The next page was a quick sketch of a dog, probably no more than ten lines and a bit of rough shading. But it looked so alive I expected to see it breathe.

There were other drawings, some simple, some more elaborate, even a study in ink that had turned into more of a watercolor thanks to what looked like a coffee spill. All were sensitive and real, as if the graphite lines were trembling with life, itching to release the form into the world. Even a still life – two pears, a vase, and what looked like a dog toy – had personality.

Then the drawings became sketchier, the paper scrubbed raw from erasing. One half-completed drawing had a dark scribble of charcoal over it, as if the artist had gotten frustrated with the attempt. The next page was a ragged scrap of paper clinging to the spiral wire.

The rest of the pages were blank, but I looked at every one, pausing, as if something would appear there if I willed it. I felt disappointed, even angry. The person had incredible talent; how did this end up in the trash?

I looked for any identification, hoping for at least a name, but there was nothing. Then I looked back at the portrait and saw the tiny scribbles in the corners.

“Self-portrait,” I read on the left, and on the right, “SJR.”

“Not bad, huh?” Kris said when I looked up.

“Not bad? This is incredible. Why would somebody throw this away?”

Kris rummaged in the fridge for a soda. “Jeez, what d’you need diet for? You’re what, a size five?” He cracked open a can, sipped, and winced.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m a raccoon, not a mind reader. Maybe it’s the same reason why there are so many poems of yours that wind up covered in teabags and takeout cartons.”

“Yeah, but... this is different. These are,” I fumbled for words and couldn’t find any, “good.”

“One man’s trash, I guess. So what’s on TV?”

I handed him the remote and sat down on the couch. While Kris flipped from a game show to a documentary about elephants to a rap video, I sat with the sketchbook in my lap, turning the pages slowly, over and over, consumed by wonder.



The doorbell rang on my day off, in the middle of the afternoon. And, like a complete idiot, I opened the door, never mind that the guy on the other side wasn’t anybody I was expecting and could very well have spent the rest of the day raping and torturing and killing me.

And then, like even more of an idiot, I stopped and stared at the guy for what felt like two days.

Because it was the guy from the sketchbook.

He was wearing a white polo shirt with “Scott” embroidered over a line of marching ants. “Hi,” he said awkwardly, “um... Mrs. Sheffield? I’m Scott, from Pestbusters. Your husband called about the raccoon problem.”

My husband?

Scott consulted his clipboard. “Kris?”

“Oh,” I said, thinking fast. “That’s... my brother, actually. Technically he owns the house, so he... takes care of things like that.”

Scott nodded. “No problem. Let’s take a look and see what we can do.”

He advised the usual: tight-fitting lids on the trash cans, bungee cords, closely-spaced lattice work under the porch to keep them from getting underneath. “I can try setting a trap,” he finished, “but some of these guys are just way too smart for it.”

What was I supposed to say? “Um... okay.”

“I’ve got one in the truck; I’ll go get it.”

“Wait.” He stopped. “It won’t... hurt him, will it?”

Scott smiled. “Only his pride. If we can catch him, we’ll give him a dose of rabies vaccine and take him down to the wooded areas by the park. There’s plenty of real food to forage for there. Raccoon paradise. I’ll be right back.”

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed the sketchbook from its place on the coffee table and stuffed it under the couch cushions. I was dying to ask him about it, but I couldn’t think of any way to bring it up without sounding psychic – or possibly psychotic. Anyway, it seemed so... so personal, like asking somebody about a prescription bottle you saw in their medicine cabinet.

Scott set up the trap and baited it with a handful of peanuts, then handed me his card and said to call if anything showed up. If my fingers tingled a bit when they brushed his as I took the card, and if our eyes met a bit longer than was strictly necessary... well, I told myself that was just my imagination.

The next morning, the trap was empty, the peanuts untouched. I didn't see Kris that night, either.

Scott called me at work the next day. "Nothing yet," I told him.

A pause. "Well, if it's all right, I'd like to stop by and make sure everything's still set up. Is around seven okay?"

I could feel my heart pounding. "I thought you guys closed down at five."

"Well, officially, yeah. But my apartment's just two blocks over from your place, so it's not really out of my way." He sounded almost embarrassed. I loved that.

"Oh. Well, okay. That'd be fine," I said, hurriedly. "I mean, if it's not too much trouble." I was babbling like a teenager.

I hung up and stared at the gray wall of my cubicle, then opened the manila folder on my desk. I tried to look like I was reviewing paperwork, which was difficult, seeing as the folder held the self-portrait from the sketchbook. I'd felt a little strange bringing something so personal and true into the mundane surroundings of work, but at least I'd gotten over my first insane impulse to tack the sketch up where anyone could see it. Instead, I was sneaking glances at it like a girl with a pop-star pinup hidden in her algebra book.

Stuffing the folder back in my bag, I reminded myself that love at first sight was a ridiculous myth based on physical attraction, or concocted after the fact to give the relationship some feeling of destiny. I had always said that, and I had always believed it.

And I still did.

I thought.



I offered Scott a soda, which he accepted (at Kris' urging, I had stocked up on a wider variety of beverages). I made small talk about the weather, as well as the cleverness of raccoons in general and our suspect in particular. (If he only knew.) I laughed at his genuinely funny jokes and was flattered when he laughed at my halfhearted ones.

But I still couldn't find a way to bring up the sketchbook, or anything even close to it.

On my way home from work the next night, I bought a sketchpad, an assortment of pencils, and a few sticks of charcoal. Then I cleared off my coffee table and arranged the supplies so they looked as if they'd been casually scattered there. I tried to do a drawing or two to complete the effect, but they ended up so hopeless that I crumpled the paper into balls, and, after a moment's thought, left them on the floor. Certainly anyone who had thrown away a sketchbook would be able to relate.

And it worked. "You're an artist?" Scott asked lightly when he came by a few nights later to check the trap.

I shrugged. "Not really. I thought I'd give it a try, but I think I'd better stick to writing poems."

“Poems, huh?” His voice took on that tone of slight awe, the one people who don’t write get sometimes, as if I were having my verses chiseled into polished marble instead of published on obscure websites and in photocopied literary zines that no one’s ever even heard of unless they’ve been published in them.

“Yeah,” I said finally. “I mean, it’s nothing major. What about you? Do you do anything... you know, creative?”

He glanced back at the coffee table and ran his hand through his hair. “I used to draw,” he said slowly. “Painted a little. Mostly watercolors and inks. I... haven’t for a while.”

“Why not?” My mouth was dry.

“Mostly time, I guess.”

Liar. People who say they don’t have time for art usually mean that it isn’t enough of a priority for them to make time for. These are the same people who will then spend two hours in front of the TV every night, because that isn’t as demanding – or terrifying – as facing a blank page. I know, because I’ve been one of them.

“And I guess I just got frustrated,” he added. “Nothing ever seemed to come out right.”

Good God. What had he been envisioning, that drawings so good could still fall short?

“Do you, um...” I tried to swallow. “Still have any of your stuff?”

A shadow passed over his expression. Regret? “I threw most of it away. But... maybe I’ll get back into it.” He smiled. “If you’ll show me some of your poems.”

“Uh, sure.” He might as well have asked me to take my clothes off. The thought of him reading my poems made me feel about as exposed. And yet, there was also that odd little flutter of excitement somewhere between my chest and my stomach, and already I was mentally rummaging through my files, trying to decide which ones to give him.

The trap was still empty, though there were some peanut shells inside, carefully arranged in a little pile, the raccoon equivalent of an obscene gesture.

Scott chuckled and shook his head. “I think this guy’s worth a limerick or two.” He cleaned out the shells and added another handful, then stood and turned back to me. “So... same time tomorrow?”



I spent so much time re-reading and shuffling through my poems that I had to print out fresh copies by the time I decided which ones I was least embarrassed by. I wondered if he was sketching away furiously at home, trying to draw something worth showing me.

The next night, he came in carrying a new sketchbook. He glanced at the trap, then sat down next to me on the couch, and I handed him the six poems I’d picked out, nothing too long or complicated, nothing too simplistic or silly.

I never know what to do while someone's reading my work. Part of me wants to stare at them, so I can pounce on every little nuance of facial expression. And part wants to leave the room, or possibly the country, to get away from the suspense.

He was on the last page now. And then it came – the little intake of breath, the pause, the slight sigh. When you're at a reading and the audience pauses and sighs that way, it's better than the applause. It means they're not just being polite, not even just being appreciative. It means they got it.

"These," he said softly, "are really good."

Then he handed me the sketchbook.

The first page was a softly-shaded sketch of a robin, his eyes bright and feathers glossy. He'd added a pale red-orange wash to its breast. It was, of course, perfect in every detail. I felt as if I'd never seen a robin until that moment, as if it were some fantastic creature from an ancient bestiary.

Then I turned the page, and I saw my own face looking back at me.

I must have appeared surprised, because he said hurriedly, "Some of the details might not be quite right. I usually work from photographs..."

I remembered hearing once that the point of art wasn't to portray what the artist saw, but how the artist felt about what he saw. And it was all here: the uncertain but thoughtful expression in my eyes, the faint lines here and there that I'd only recently begun to notice in the mirror, the hairstyle I'd had for the past eight years.

And through his eyes, it was beautiful. All of it. All of me.

I looked up. I had no idea what to say. He looked at me, and the silence warmed between us.

Snap!

A harsh metallic sound from outside. The trap had shut.

When we reluctantly went to look, I recognized Kris. And I could have sworn the raccoon winked at me as Scott loaded the cage into the truck.



I wrapped the last of the dishes carefully in newspaper and laid them in the box. My whole life sat around me, packed in cardboard, taped and labeled.

No, I corrected myself. Not my whole life. My old life. In just a few days— this with yet another admiring glance at my engagement ring – a new one would start.

I went out to the back porch, watching the summer's first fireflies winking in the grass. The moon was full and golden, and I laughed to myself, remembering the night almost a year before, when I'd tried to cast a spell, tried to summon love as if it were something I could give orders to. I had never told Scott anything about it. Maybe someday.

I almost tripped over the little package.

It was an apple, small and dusky red, wrapped in one of those lined pieces of newsprint that kids use in school when they're first learning how to write. The front side was some kid's story about his grandparents, with a

gold star stuck at the top. On the back, I found a note written in wobbly crayon.

Just to prove there's more to apples than those grocery store things. Nice place your fellow took me to. Nice little stream with great seafood. And I met someone, too. I think being able to count to twenty really did it for her.

Keep a light on for me at the new place. Maybe I'll bring the kids by sometime. Braeburn, Jonagold, and Nittany. Cute little furballs.

- Kris

I polished the apple on my nightshirt and took a bite. The tangy sweetness sparkled on my tongue, familiar and new at once, and I ate the rest standing in moonlight, the June night warm and sweet around me, a poem I was living instead of writing down.

Down to Cathuria by Ken Pick and Alan Loewen

Throughout the ages, most human critics assumed life outside the solar system would forever leave permanently corrupt humanity behind as it irrevocably evolved toward transcendence. Having your pocket picked on Cathuria by a Thalendri will disavow you of that conceit forever.

– *The Travel Diaries of Father Heidler*

*Kerenai Highport, Cathuria
Tulsal System, Tiara Cluster*

The observation deck was empty, except for an upright sable ferret in white satin and black leather.

Jill Noir tried not to think of the hard vacuum, waiting just on the other side of the pressure windows where the landing bays, docking cradles, pressure domes, and surface structures of Kerenai Highport stretched over the crater floor. Moving specks of power-loaders and handlers moved amid the stark shadows; bright dots of ships and shuttles came and went against black sky; approach markers flashed and pulsed halfway to the beacon tower on the horizon, the rebound peak underneath its flashing strobes hidden behind the curvature of the small moon.

And behind the upper row of viewports, a half-Cathuria hung in the sky amid its other four moons, mocking her. In the weeks she'd spent beached on this moon, Jill had come to the viewports to watch the Thalendri homeworld – its whirling clouds and storms, its blue oceans, the snowline expanding from its mountains and marching down the single S-shaped supercontinent as winter approached. From new to crescent to half to three-quarters to gibbous to full and back again, over and over amid its ever-changing array of moons, shifting slightly in the sky as Kerenai librated in its five-day orbit.

So close... Only sixty thousand clicks after all those parsecs from Califia and Alorya Prime, and she couldn't get a ticket or entry visa...

"*Wowowon, Seshai Noirai?*" a voice from behind asked, in a Thalendri species-accent.

Thalendri are elf-slim upright humanoid foxes, like a cartoon Reynard come to life. This fox had been crossed with a cadaverous coyote and stuffed into an open-necked vest-suit with the aroma of the Nameless Guild, the tolerated and sometimes-useful face of Thalendri organized crime.

The skuzzy fox-yote was around her height and gaunt enough to pass for a Zero-G Kthymri, his fur a tawny-red, his head wreathed with the smoke from a bengal cigarette at the end of a pearl-black holder, its cinnamon-clove-incense aroma covering any possible scent-clues his body could be broadcasting.

"Over there, where we won't be disturbed." Jill nodded at a sitting area by a closed concession stand, away from the viewports and mocking

Cathuria, under the ventilator plenums whose white noise should mask any casual overhearing.

“Not *The High Moon*?” The gaunt fox pointed up with his cigarette holder.

“No.” *If I had the money to meet you there, I wouldn’t be meeting you here, would I?* She stalled for time, digging through her thighboots for her own cigarette case of Silverfox Argents and the holder she’d picked up on Wintersea. The broker lit it for her as befitting a Thalendri gentlefox.

“Now how can my associates and I be of service?” he asked, slipping the lighter back into a vest pocket.

Freshly-burned benga pricked and burned inside Jill’s chest, joining with her meds in stifling the ferret within. Turning to exhale the plume, she glanced at the half-ball of Cathuria hanging in space, its brightness washing out all the stars. The Continent was mostly in evening, its shape traced by city lights on the night side. “I need a ticket down. I don’t care about the particulars. I don’t even have to go in style. Just get me on-surface.”

“Surface” as in the big light-cluster on the southernmost coast, close to the evening terminator, just above the large island – Shallivarden, Cathuria’s largest city, main surface-port, and offworld-affairs capital. Five million Thalendri in over three dozen city clusters, its “alien quarters” alone filled with almost a million offworlders and potential marks, its Underside large enough for a nimble ferret thief to ply her trade and live high. Especially with someone like the Nameless Guild as patron and protector.

“Easily done.” The skuzzy fox gestured with his cigarette holder, one of those theatrical gestures that were a Thalendri species obsession. “Five... six hundred WebCredits. You may be traveling with some cargo, but if all you want is surface, I can get you down.”

Jill sneered, discreetly baring teeth worthy of a fifty-kilo mustelid predator. “I could have myself shipped down in a box for only 500. But I have a small problem. I only have 200 with me. “

She’d left Alorya Prime with what little she could scavenge from that travesty aboard the Coventry; hustling the three stops along the route had netted her small sums of cash, but not enough for a badly-needed entry ticket with proper chitwork attached. And now even that cash was all but gone.

The broker’s ears tucked back; with a motion too smooth for a human, he got up to leave. “Wait,” Jill said quickly. “I’m sure there is something we can work out.”

“No,” the broker said. “Nothing is to work out. I have the ticket. I have the associates to clear the chitwork. All you need to supply is the money. My associates and I don’t do charity.”

“Surely, you’ve helped others in the past who couldn’t come up with the monies right away.”

The broker tongued his nose pad, thought a moment with ears twitching. “Come to think of it? No. I never have.”

“Then what would you recommend? I am ‘business’ for you and your ‘associates’ after all.”

He shrugged. “There’s always escort service. Play the game for awhile. My associates connect with the Port Casino, and the Guild there is always in need of vixens to escort offworld guests around while persuading them to spend their *shildri*. Not necessarily *besheraï*, but even then... Whatever you are, *nimseshai*, you don’t pair-bond like we do...”

Jill cut him off with a sneer, fangs bared, growl rising in her throat and hackles rising underneath her wig.

“I wouldn’t follow that line too much farther.”

“Why not? My associates and I are, after all, the only game on Kerenai. Gekkering me automatically puts you in an Underside hole where you’ll fight every night for a place to sleep. A young pretty like you will end up in the escort service eventually; or *besheraï*; or being sent back to some Shuuth’s Embrace of a planet in freeze.”

Jill was already reduced to low-end transient quarters, a small pod barely big enough for the circular Thalendri-style bed alcove in one of the semi-industrial habitats, deep and rough enough to where she’d already had to use her shock-wand twice and claws once. When – not if – she lost that, her only alternative was carving out a homeless squat amid the machinery spaces on the Underside, and that would last only until a sweep of Undersiders landed her on a one-way ticket out-system in freeze.

Or worse. If that meddlesome priest had been able to sneak his book into her luggage as she fled Alorya Prime, professional bounty hunters would have no problem tracking her. Tachyon cable or courier run, with attached promise of reward; Califian aristo-celebs always got their own way, especially with a former piece of animate property. She had to get down to surface, where she could lose herself amid Cathuria’s billion-plus population; Shallivarden’s alien quarters alone numbered close to a million.

The gaunt fox-yote took a shallow puff on his bengastick, blew the mouthful toward the ceiling in a grey coil that turned blue in the Cathuria-light. “Of course, you might find a wealthy *humaan* consort. They don’t pair-bond either, and they like Artificial.”

Jill’s lips peeled back in a snarl that made the Thalendri quantum back, ears down and quivering, white-tipped tail tucking forward between his legs. “I’ll kill one of them first,” Jill spat, in a voice more like a rabid wolverine than a ferret.

The broker quickly regained his composure, his tail untucking. “No matter.”

Pulling a cheap earbud-phone out of yet another vest pocket, he offered it to the ferret-woman. “When you have the *shildri*, call me. But one word of warning, *Nimseshai*. Be careful about killing anyone while you’re here among us.”

He put out his bengastick, returned the holder to yet another vest pocket.

“Thalendri tribunals hang for murder. I would hate to see that furry little neck crushed in a noose.”

Backing out into the elevator lobby, he left Jill and her smoke alone in the deck, with the port stretching below and the mocking globe of Cathuria above.



Ivan Curtission stared about him in ecstasy, his fingers twitching in a nervous habit he had acquired in childhood. The two-thirds-gee of Kerenai’s habitats was just different enough from his native Korranion’s that he’d taken the better part of an hour to get his local legs; now he wandered the “Citadel” of the dug-in port city, killing time before his trip down to Shallivarden.

Oh, if Mum could see me now, he thought to himself and he sniggered out loud unaware of the stares around him from the various races that made up WebFed. He had celebrated his hundredth birthday – a hundred of Korranion’s four-month years – by leaving the protection of his mother’s home, booked a passage aboard a packet liner, and made Insertion to Tulsal System.

His leap to independence had not been made on impulse. An entire Korranion year of allowance had been carefully, even if reluctantly, put away until he had enough to purchase no-frills passage to fabulous Cathuria, foxcat homeworld and jewel of the Tiara Cluster. He licked his thick lips with a thicker tongue. With the cash-stash he’d brought through the currency exchange – normal swipe-card exchanged for exotic gold and silver coinage – he should be able to spend several weeks on-world providing he didn’t do anything *really* extravagant.

Counting trip times, he had escaped his mother for over two months, most of a Korranion year; though he’d surely be berated severely when he returned home, he knew that being her only child, her fury would die down quickly enough to a sullen anger until it disappeared altogether from lack of energy.

After his fishery-manager father’s death in the Great Tsunami fifty Korranion years ago, his mother retreated into their house on Firstlanding Island and her survivor’s pension; Ivan couldn’t remember the last time she had walked under the sky of Korranion, ring-bisected Gauth hanging blue-and-white at the zenith, flanked by the tiny marbles of Evansion and Dralion. But now free from his mother’s unending censure, Ivan could sit back and enjoy the delights of travel out-system, to the exotic places he’d only been able to visit in VR simulations.

Like Kerenai Citadel, the downtown of the lunar city – a domed-over bowl of a crater a quarter-klick across, with a Cathurian forest in the bottom growing towards the sky-blue Lunacrete of the illuminated overhead dome. “The Only Forest on Kerenai”, according to the audio guidebook playing in his earbud, flanked by terrace after terrace of ornate architecture in charcoal-brown basalt.

Ivan wandered the park paths beneath the tall bronzewoods and nut-bearing tressierdrai and scented hadathdri of the Citadel Forest, his earbud describing the details of the Cathurian conifers in Freehold English with a cute Thalendri species-accent. Like the Sequoias of Earth, the bronzewoods topped a hundred meters in the low gravity, a multi-layer canopy dense enough to shade the floodlight arrays on the dome despite the lanky appearance of trees grown without wind. The vixen's voice on his earbud segued into Thalendri landscaping; reaching to his ear, he muted it and concentrated on the moving scenery – baroquely-dressed Thalendri vixens and near-nude Selkie jills.

Ivan ogled the man-sized vixens and child-sized otteroids, completely oblivious to the irritated stares – complete with flattened ears and gekkering deep in the throat – he received in return. The occasional human woman he ignored, as they had always done to him; the bejeweled saurian Larant were curiosities, dinosaurs come to life; and the octopus-like Quellan weaving through the tree-trunks on its lev-floater was just *weird*.

Oblivious to the uneasy looks and fang-tips of the Selkie jills, he waddled towards the edge of the forest, to the rings of terraced buildings. His shuttle down to Shallivarden wouldn't leave for four hours, and he had time to kill.



Jill spotted the potential mark as he came up the escalators to the terrace and made his way to one of the line of shops facing the Citadel Forest. Fat, dressed in the tacky pseudo-local fashions sold by Port Row hustlers, and wandering aimlessly.

She chewed her bottom lip in conflicting emotion, antipathy for humans battling with her need for cash and a way off this rock and down to Shallivarden.

“Continue on to Evergreen,” her cabinmate on the trip here had recommended. “They're still a growing colony, so it should be easier to immigrate. Cathuria's an old, old homeworld. You'll have a lot easier time gaining entry.” Not if it meant sharing a world with that ditz of a rabbit-girl; forty days jammed into that makeshift stateroom on the *Greatwings Pride* had been more than enough.

Jill watched the pudgy human exit the shop and continue aimlessly down the terrace. Grimacing in a final decision, she made sure her wig and bib cravat were in place, tugged at her blouse to make sure what breasts she had stood out tight against the white satin, and made her move.



Ivan had stopped before the slide-show of a theater marquee – *A theater? They don't have direct video feeds or interactive VRs?* Sensing him, an announcement in Freeholder English scrolled across the bottom, to tune his earbud for the translations while the marquee continued showing trailers for various features interspersed with ads.

The marquee windowed into a Silverfox ad; the head and shoulders of a silver-grey vixen, her furred feminine form elaborately draped in sheer fabric and jewelry, presenting a long “vixen stick” cigarette holder loaded with the product – an overly-long cigarette – into the foreground. Behind the unlit bengastick loomed the Silverfox corporate badge: a serrated bengaleaf shape in green, with a stylized silver smoke wisp forming the profile of a fox’s head.

Ivan winced a bit; *Why do the foxies have to smoke? Still, she does look good with it...*

The stems, curls, and vowel-marks of Davvashi script scrolled over the corporate badge; Ivan reached up to his earbud, killed the mute function in time to hear in a Davvashi accent “Silverfox *Platindri*; fine Wintersea-grown, naturally-cured bengaleaf; light, fragrant, and mild. When you want to Make an Impression. Taste-blends only...”

Then, as the marquee cut from the ad to some sort of period-dress music video, a real female voice overlaid the one in his earbud.

“I see you’re a connoisseur of Thalendri video-theater,” said a voice at his elbow in an odd Freeholder-like dialect. A sharp, musky odor drifted into his nostrils, felt more than smelled in his nasal passages.

Ivan yelped in shock, and spun about to see a creature that he had never seen before.

She came up to his chin, a talking animal in a tight white silken blouse and matching lace bib-cravat over tight black pants tucked into gleaming thighboots. Thalendri-slim, but definitely not Thalendri.

Cup-like ears peeked through long locks that fell about her shoulders and down her back in a cascade of ebon ringlets. A black mask covered shining dark eyes, in a muzzled face that tapered towards a prominent pink nose pad; except for the bright white fur at the front of her throat, the rest of her was sand yellow, ticked with darker brown strands, a contrast to the stark black-and-white of her costume.

She extended a hand towards him, pink palmpads amid soft black fur extending out of a lace-trimmed cuff, with prominent fingertip claws.

“Uhhhhh...,” Ivan responded; his usual response to anything breaking into his internal monologue.

“I’ve been looking for some companionship. I have a few hours before my trip down to surface. Should we enjoy each other’s ... company?”

Ivan gulped, the baggage of forty years of fear and rejection and fantasy freezing his mind.

“Uhhhhh ...”

“Oh, I like the shy ones,” the creature purred, then let out an eruption that sounded like “Dook!”. “Let’s say a little dinner? Maybe a drink together? I know just the place, with Cathuria shining in the sky...”

With a move as natural as life, she wrapped her arm through Ivan’s. Plucking the still-murmuring earbud from his ear, she placed it in his nerveless fingers and put it back on the rack and steered him toward the escalator-ramps. She knew the place; *The High Moon*, a prestige *kelesch*-lounge

above the observation deck with a surface-and-sky view from shielded pressure domes. And she knew a roundabout way to get there while she checked out the mark and potential rolling sites.

Jill blinked in shock at the ease of her performance; since she'd fled her owners, she'd never rolled such an easy mark, not even those Thalendri before she'd used up the last of her Yiffy-Lube making that escape on Wintersea.

Within fifteen minutes Jill had the gist of Ivan's story; within thirty minutes she'd heard it twice and she felt her fingers twitch in anticipation. Fate had supplied not only a ticket down to Cathuria, but an all-expense-paid dinner and source of income for at least a couple weeks while she explored all the options open to her.

"Excuse me," Ivan stuttered nervously as they ascended the last spiral stair to *The High Moon's* entrance, "but I don't recognize your species. I've never seen your like here in the WebFed. If it's not too forward can ... uh ... could you tell me what planet you come from?"

Jill fought down the knee-jerk reaction to backhand him, but she gritted her teeth. "You've never met an Artificial before?"

Ivan blinked at her. "Um ... no. Somebody made you?"

Jill gritted her jaws together so tight, she thought she'd crack her molars. "I was born in an artificial womb fulfilling certain genetic requirements," she said.

"However," she lied, "I've earned my freedom." *Though my ex-owners would definitely not agree.*

She led the tongue-tied Ivan through the entrance, passing beneath the holosign with its glowing stems and curls and vowel-marks; after her time stuck here, Jill could actually pick out the words fairly well; the fat human on her arm kept babbling about something inane.

The entry doors were pressure doors, with the emergency semiotics of depressurization-shelter instructions; Jill shuddered at what they implied. They opened onto a waiting area/vestibule paneled in real wood, with video frames showing a slideshow of Cathurian scenes and landscapes, subtle music Jill recognized as Thalendri Chambertronic losing a fight with the fat human's voice.

Ivan blinked at the dim lighting; the antechamber was lit for Thalendri eyes, the only brightness the bluish Cathuria-light coming from the main *klesch*. Jill led him towards the reception desk, which seemed deserted – until a musteloid head popped up from behind it with a loud "*CHURP!*"

Ivan jumped, yelping like a Thalendri; Jill bared fangs for a moment – "*Dook?*"

The receptionist wasn't Thalendri, but Selkie – *Ry/ii*, as they were called in the Web – a child-sized small-clawed otter colored and patterned like no otter on Earth, dressed in an adaptation of Thalendri semi-formal dress. Dropping to all fours, the small otteroid led them into the bright Cathuria-light of *The High Moon*, from dome to dome separated by more emergency

pressure doors, past tables and booths of baroquely-dressed foxes and bejeweled dinosaurs to a mostly-empty area in the back.

“Could a certain traveller buy a girl a drink?” Jill asked in a practiced voice.

Ivan’s fingers twitched and kept twitching; he stared at the Selkie-occupied booth opposite theirs. “Ah... Yes... I have the money.”

“Tell me...” She looked at his pudgy face, bright dark ferret eyes shining in a dark-furred mask. “Have you ever had a Maladar Spritz?”

“Ah... No... What’s that?”

Dook! Didn’t recognize the name. “Just a local specialty I’m especially fond of.”

Jill ordered the drinks while Ivan concentrated on the two Selkies in the booth opposite, blue and silver otters in miniature pseudo-Grecian gowns, chittering away.

Jill stared in the same direction – not at the Selkies, but at Cathuria hanging in the sky above and behind them. The terminator was starting to curve, on its way to a waning crescent, and the Continent had passed behind the planet; the night side was dark, and the dayside unbroken blue ocean and white clouds. One of the other moons was passing behind the dayside, a shrinking white-and-grey pimple.

“So what brings you to Cathuria?” Jill asked as they waited for the drinks.

Shifting his stare from the Selkies to the Thalendri serving-wixen, Ivan mumbled something semi-coherent about his mother, in excruciating detail. Jill rolled her eyes; Ivan, oblivious as ever, started on about how Cathuria looked like “Gauth without the Rings” and how Korranion was a waterworld too, with only small islands breaking the surface.

“Would you excuse me for a moment?”

Ivan nodded, looking rather relieved.

The instant Jill passed through the first set of pressure doors and out of sight, she pulled out a cheap earbud-phone and punched in the broker’s contact number. A moment later, the gaunt paravulpine’s voice came through the earbud.

“Ah!” he purred in Sentic, “*Seshai Noirai*. I have not yet ...”

“Listen,” Jill interrupted. “I’ve found a way down, but I need your help for the details. Meet me at...” Jill gave him a location where she knew the security cameras didn’t cover, one of the back-access corridors near *The High Moon*.

“I’ll insist on payment up front.” the Thalendri said.

Jill took a step back, craned her neck around the portal jamb to where she had line-of-sight on her mark. In the distance, Ivan mumbled nonstop to a puzzled Thalendri waitress.

“I’ll have it.” Jill nodded and disconnected.



Back at the table, Ivan shivered with nervousness. He found his new friend exciting, but the suaveness he affected in his fantasies disappeared in the reality of the moment. He licked his lips and in his imagination he saw himself as Jill's new owner. Maybe his mother would allow him to keep an indentured servant/neo-pet.

The genetic construct came back to the table and smiled; Ivan didn't notice the fang-tips gleaming. The waitress had already placed two large glasses – Thalendri-style snifter-goblets – of a sparkling green liquid before them; not knowing what to do, Ivan took a tentative sip.

"Whoa!" he said, and shook his head.

Jill laughed, a musical note. "Oh, my," she said, "this isn't the first time you've had a Maladar have you?"

"Oh, no," Ivan said. "Um ... I've had them before. I just thought this one was a little strong."

"Really?" He watched as Jill took a tentative sniff. "This seems regular strength to me. Maybe they serve them weaker back on Korranion."

"Maybe," Ivan agreed. He took another sip and giggled at the feeling of warmth as it went down his throat. He remained oblivious to the fact Jill had not yet so much as sipped hers.

"You know," Jill said as she stirred her Maladar with one clawed finger, making the emerald liquid scintillate in the light. "Maladars have a unique chemistry." She lifted her finger from the snifter-goblet, sucked her finger-fur dry as erotically as she could.

Ivan hiccupped as he took a larger swallow. He gasped as the liquid slug ran down his throat to slam into his stomach. "Fascinating," he said, immediately forgetting what he found fascinating.

"Yes. You see, in Humans they have psychotropic effects. It takes a while to get used to them, but the first time can be a real mind-blower."

"I'm going to buy you. I'm going to own you. My own – whatever you are," Ivan said and tried to blink away the blurriness to his vision.

She seemed to like that, *of course she would*. She was even smiling, showing two great fangs in a grin that somehow looked rather evil on the mustelid face.

"Of course," Jill said, fighting down the urge to ribbon his fat human face, just like she had her first owner. "And I promise to be a good girl. I promise to do everything you say." She gritted her teeth. "That's what every human – *Every one of your kind* – has ever wanted me to say. Shall I do a trick for you?"

Ivan giggled and nodded. With a swift movement in the low gravity, Jill took Ivan's arm in hers after throwing the last of her money on the table for the waitress.

They took the elevator down, to one of the access levels Jill had previously cased in her wanderings around the lunar city, where she knew a

dot-cam had been removed and never replaced. The gaunt fox of a broker was waiting for her; apparently he knew of the gap in security coverage, too.

Ivan stared ahead at empty air, his lips moving without sound; Jill reached into his front pocket and pulled out his trip kit.

“Hack this for me. Get me on his shuttle, with his entry visa.”

“My associates do require payment in advance...”

Jill felt in Ivan’s other pocket, pulled out a handful of Thalendri coins, including large gold Twenties and gold-and-platinum Fifties. The broker’s eyes went wide, his ears came forward, tail high as Jill counted off three hundred WebCredits.

“The going rate is eight hundred...”

Jill cut him off with a wave of her free hand. “Don’t try it. I know the market rate. Six hundred, including ‘associates’ fees’. Three hundred in advance, three hundred when I get the kit.” On her other hand, Ivan mumbled aimlessly, his fingers twitching.

“Six hundred,” the broker yipped. “Shuttleport entrance, concession area, under the Bucket-o-Bodashi sign...” He studied the ticket-chit. “Three hours. How long until ‘globster’ here –” he indicated Ivan with his muzzle-tip – “Unwipes?”

“Long enough.” *The way he chugged that Maladar, he’s good for at least five hours – longer if he really sleeps it off.*

“Ari. Three hours. Be there, *Seshai*.” Then the skuzzy fox was gone, back to his “associates” on Kerenai’s Underside.

What Jill had said was true. Humans could eventually get used to the effects of Maladars, which was why there was no problem in serving them, but that first time was always a killer. Like a Mojo Mix or Z-Bomb, but without the reputation. *Fatboy’s so clueless, I could have ordered him a Mojo Mix and he wouldn’t know the difference. No, he’s so out of it I didn’t even need the Maladar.*

“Don’t you throw up on me,” she said. Ivan did not respond but stared ahead, his lips moving in a slow mumble. Still talking to her nonstop, if only in his Maladar-addled mind.

Going through the rest of his pockets, Jill found his port locker key, his other ID, and more Thalendri coinage. *Now to dispose of the body...*

She found a niche farther down the accessway, about the size of a bathroom stall with old signs it had occasionally been used as such. *Drunks...*

She steered Ivan to the niche, sat him on what looked like an equipment housing, waited a few moments until he passed out completely. He snored.

Quickly, Jill undressed him, her fingers twitching at the touch of his pale, clammy skin. Taking his clothes and pretty much everything that was on him, she left him sitting there, carefully timing her departure to avoid any security cameras.

At the first opportunity, she pitched the clothing bundle down a disposal chute and headed for the address on the locker keys.

Fifteen minutes later she stared with joy at the contents of Ivan's locker. *Dook!* A large suitcase full of Terry clothing would accompany her down to Cathuria. Then she saw the extra coin purses, still sealed with currency-exchange markings.

DOOK! Over five thousand WebCredits! Untraceable!

DOOK DOOK DOOK DOOK DOOK!

Two and a half hours after that, she met the gaunt broker under the Bucket-o-Bodashi sign and slipped him the remaining three hundred. He introduced her to the Thalendri version of "victory celebration" before taking his leave.

A few minutes after that, a bewigged ferret in black leather and white satin entered the shuttleport, her "victory celebration" jauntily in her mustelid muzzle, its expensive smoke stifling the ferret within.

By the time Ivan awoke with his head coming apart, she was cutting atmosphere over Shallivarden.



The transition tunnel between the port and downtown was deserted at this hour, except for a synthetic voice repeating a smart-selection of WebFed languages. Davvashi joined Sentic and Freeholder/English in the cycled gravity-transition warnings as the slim paravulpine figures of Thalendri appeared in the distance. In between the recordings, the sounds of a small underground city filtererd up the tunnel.

The visibly-aged human in the Roman collar had been moving in long slow Armstrong hops, hanging in mid-air for seconds at a time between touchdowns. Now, as he approached the Citadel and its Aetheric field fringe, his weight returned with each hop until he ceased hopping.

Father Eric Heidler, Order of Saint Dismas, sighed with relief as he started walking normally. Even the induced gravity in the habitats would be at about two-thirds gee, easing the wear and tear of his aging bones and joints before Cathuria's one-gee.

Under the wall-mounted semiotic of an emergency depressurization shelter – not a free-floating holosign like the others – he stopped and concentrated fitting the adaptor chip into his flip-phone. Sensing he had stopped, the trailing lev-pallet with his luggage grounded beside him, saving its batteries.

The Thalendri couple – two slim, man-sized upright foxes in elaborate retro-styled outfits, tailed by their own overloaded lev-pallet – passed the human priest. As they passed, the vixen noticed his habit, made a quick sign with her free hand, the Thalendri female equivalent of the Sign of the Cross: "The Goddess's Bow", a smooth arc from shoulder to muzzle-tip to shoulder.

Father Heidler nodded in response as the vulpine couple passed, white-tipped tails and a cinnamon-and-clove whiff of burned bengal trailing in their wake. The PA system sensed the smell and interrupted with what had

to be Davvashi for “No Smoking in the Tunnel”, triggering a gekkering comeback to the ceiling from the silk-bloused male.

The chip that would interface his phone with Cathuria’s comnets wasn’t cooperating, refusing to mate into the standard insertion slot. Father Heidler pulled it out, looked at the code ID on it, tried again. And again. Just as he was about to go back to the passenger concourse to get a replacement, the chip seated with a faint clack and his phone diagnostics flashed green. *Got that far; now to see if it works.*

He snapped the chip-cover closed, flipped the phone open, spoke into the voice-response dialer: “Bishop-Nuncio Marasagian, audio-only, connect.”

After a ring-tone or two, a Thalendri vixen’s voice answered, in Sentic.

“Apostolic Nunciature, Shallivarden; how may I direct your call?”

The priest paused for a moment in surprise, took the phone from his ear and thumbed the video stud. A pocket hologram of a cute red fox face with brilliant green cat’s eyes shimmered into view above the phone.

The Church had a strict policy about hiring non-humans, not out of xenophobia, but out of deep respect and belief that God is His wisdom created salvation paths indigenous for each sentient race of the cosmos. With the differences in biology and psychology, converts from one species’ revealed faith to another often drifted into strange syncretic heresies – the reason Father Heidler was now on Cathuria. Or more accurately, its innermost moon.

“Father Eric Heidler, calling for Bishop Marasagian. Is he in?” He winced at the sound of his own voice. With a reconstructed throat and vocal cords, the originals torn out by a temporarily insane genetic construct he had to deal with on a previous flight, the timbre and quality of his voice had changed and it still sounded strange to his own ears.

The miniature holovixen toyed with a floofy neck-scarf at the bottom of the image.

“Allow me to connect you with his aide.” Then a dark-skinned human face in the brown robe of a Franciscan replaced the vixen’s mask.

“Father Heidler? Francis Dimowo, Nuncio’s secretary. Welcome to Cathuria. He’s in meeting right now, but I will tell him you’re at... Kerenai Highport as soon as he is available.” He glanced down out-of-frame at something. “I trust everything is ready for you to make your shuttle down in, let’s see ... nine hours?”

Father Heidler nodded in the affirmative. “Yes. Please tell the Bishop I look forward to meeting with him.”

A few pleasantries, then Brother Dimowo signed off and the holo-image vanished. Flipping his phone closed, Father Heidler continued down to what the holograms said should be “The Only Forest on this Moon”.

No sooner did the corridor open into a thick stand of scraggly conifers under a Lunacrete dome than the priest heard a human voice. A very loud, very blubbery human voice.

“Another human! Thank God!”

Father Heidler spun around in alarm, his cyborg left hand armed and ready.

The speaker was a red-headed man who looked in his late 30's, his soft pear-shaped build bursting out of a jury-rigged Thalendri-style shirt and improvised sarong. He ran up to the cleric, nervously plucking at his own fingers; two Thalendri in what looked like high-tech Napoleonic Hussar uniforms ran behind, keep up with his sudden burst of speed. "Thank God!" he said again. "I want to get home and that furry freak stole all my money and my clothes and ..."

Suddenly, he burst into tears while a ring of paravulpine onlookers formed, staring and sniffing and yipping side comments.

It took a while for Father Heidler and the two policefoxes to calm the man down.



Ivan Curtission of Korranion, as Father Heidler discovered was not the most shining example of human intelligence. Socially and emotionally retarded, he had fled his overprotective mother to explore WebFed, but he'd been played for a fool – not especially difficult – and stripped of everything he had. Even the clothes on his back, judging from his current wardrobe – one of the fox-cops who spoke Sentic said something about "starting a new fashion craze".

Finally the two fox-cops signed Korranion's "Ivan the Terrible" over to Father Heidler, ear-perked happy to make him into someone else's problem.

"Have you talked to the Embassy?" Father Heidler asked as Curtission hungrily slurped down some human-compatible fast food at a sidewalk café, oblivious to the ears-askance stares of passersby and patrons. Or the scent of *badath*-wood drifting in from the accent trees in the Citadel Forest.

"They only have offices on Shallivarden," Curtission replied. "I didn't have money to call down planetside, let alone take a shuttle."

"And," Father Heidler said, "You did report the Thalendri that stole your property."

Curtission shook his head. "It wasn't a Thalendri. It was some freak. Something manmade."

"A genetic construct?"

Curtission took another lusty slurp. "It was this long-haired animal. She wore all sorts of frilly clothes... Um, what's the matter with you?"

Father Heidler stared at the man with his mouth open. "Did she tell you her name?"

Curtission blinked owlishly. "No. Come to think of it, I never asked her."

The priest gritted his teeth in exasperation. "Did she have yellowish fur? Face like a Selkie's except sharper, coming down to a point of a large pink nosepad and a dark band of black fur across her eyes? Black fur on her

hands? Long black wig, almost down to her waist in little ringlets? Smelled like a musky incense burner?”

Curtission nodded in the affirmative and was surprised when the priest suddenly laughed out loud, the harsh sibilance of his strangely altered voice making it sound almost as a croak.

“Well, the Lord certainly moves in mysterious ways,” he said with a grin. *So she DID make it to Cathuria!* “And if she’s using your ID, even hacked, she’s going to leave a trail. *At least for a time.* This is the ultimate *deus ex machina.*”

Father Heidler pulled out his flip-phone, flipped it open with a *Queep!* “Now. You, my friend, are going to wait here while I make some arrangements. I may not have means of my own, but I still have discretionary funds courtesy of Mother Church. Let’s get you home.”

Curtission responded by immediately bursting into tears again. “Really? You’ll send me back to my mother?”

Father Heidler smiled. “Of course. Now wait here.”



When putting to sky from Cathuria’s highport, Captainess Third-Class Eyessa Ratiriai of the free-trader *Proud Tail* always spent the last few hours in *The High Moon*, relaxing with other ship-captains under the Cathuria-light before setting off in an Aetheric- and-Astral-propelled can so tight the *kesbi* life-support didn’t even allow smoking benga – or anything else – on board.

Alone at her table, the grey-and-black cross-fox vixen in black wig and gold-trimmed maroon uniform fitted an Autumn Leaf taste-blend into a long cigarette holder of an iridescent ivory. She’d picked up the elaborately-carved “vixen stick” five years ago, at Jankarra Val downport on the Skreeln homeworld, the only time she’d ranged as far as the Trigon Cluster and the Big Three home systems.

Captainess Ratiriai flicked her lighter, exhaled the thick fragrance, and let the mouth-absorption buzz tickle its way down her spine to her tail. Above her, on the other side of the *High Moon*’s dome and sixty thousand clicks of hard vacuum, the thick crescent of Cathuria hung amid his moons, the Continent just coming into view on the edge of the dayside.

Lapping her snifter, she waited for the *Humaan* Holyfather to bring her the promised prey.



The priest led Ivan into *The High Moon*, Ivan reminding him repeatedly that this is where “that furry freak” had slipped him the Maladar. The two humans – the older one in the Roman collar and younger pudgy one in his improvised wardrobe – wandered towards the back, where an older grey-and-black vixen in baroque maroon-and-gold and ponytailed black wig nursed a snifter and cigarette holder.

“Captain Ratiriai? Father Heidler.”

The piratical-looking vixen set her cigarette down, rose to give the priest a female-to-male greeting embrace. Gently embracing him with black-furred hands, she slid her benga-scented muzzle down his cheek until the human's nose almost bumped the peruke bow that ponytailed her wig, a formal greeting warbling softly in her white-furred throat.

Ivan kept staring at her thighs and legs, grey fur between the maroon-and-gold apron-skirt and high black thigh-boots, a second peruke-bow accenting the root of her formally-coiffed, white-tipped tail. His fingers started twitching in anticipation.

The vulpine Captainess released the priest and turned to Ivan; instead of the expected greeting embrace, her ears half-flattened and grey cat-eyes narrowed. "This is him? The working cargo?"

Father Heidler nodded as Ivan looked back and forth between the two – the black-clad priest and the maroon-and-gold vixen. "Working cargo?" he stuttered. "I don't understand. You said – you said you had a ship lined up to take me home."

"And I do; Captain Ratirai's *Proud Tail*, a Thalendri free-trader with an all-female crew."

"A Free-Trader!"

Captainess Ratirai's ears flattened all the way; her fang-tips showed. Resuming her seat, she puffed benga smoke, chewed her cigarette holder, and watched the two *humandri* argue. Finally she caught their attention with a loud *Yip!* that perked up ears all over the *kelesch*.

"I shall explain, slickskin." She jabbed her cigarette holder at Ivan. "I offer 'working passage'; you're signing on as part of my crew, not as a paying passenger. IF I decide to accept you."

"But there's got to be some other way! There's got to!" He turned back to the priest. "You said you had money!"

"No, I said I had discretionary funds. Not mine, but my Order's. I'm only a poor priest, not WebTAS. Unless you want to ride home frozen in a box, your only hope is working passage with a willing captain. I contacted every ship in port with Korranion listed on their itinerary, and Captain Ratirai is the only captain willing to take an apprentice with no shipboard experience."

"And so far, I am not impressed. The Holyfather," she nodded again at Father Heidler, "Requested a working passage to Korranion, a secondary *humaaan* world well outside my normal territory. We are bound there, but after several intermediate stops – outpost systems in-between. I captain a Free-Trader, not a limousine. And with Astral engines, we are limited to the First Manifold. Mate the pair, and we reach Korranion in seventy days, Cathurian."

Ivan thought a moment, converting seventy Cathurian days in his head. Both priest and vixen could see the results return.

"Eight weeks!" Ivan fought back tears.

Father Heidler put his hand on whimpering man-child's shoulder. "It's your only way home, unless you want to be frozen down. I've had to be frozen down once, and I don't recommend it."

"But that's not Fair!"

"Neither is Reality. That avenue got closed off long ago – unless you think you can argue down God about getting back into Eden or your mother about going back into her womb. Or," he glanced for a moment at the vixen-captain, "Go back to four legs like before the Thalendri Adam and Eve rose to walk on two. And win on all counts."

Ivan's lips moved like a beached fish for a moment, then his whole body sagged in defeat. "W-what do I have to do?"

"Here are the rules," the vixen began, her voice completely cold. "Aboard the *Proud Tail*, we're on a personal-name basis. My personal name is "Captainess", and once aboard, I am your goddess. You will do as I say, you will do as my vixens say – cleaning out the hold, moving containers, galley cleanup, male-maid, flushing the sewage, everything. Without hesitation, without complaint. You might even learn to cook. Understand?"

Ivan looked back at Father Heidler for support; the cleric was oblivious to his pleading eyes.

"And you'll have to be 'chemically castrated' – antiaphrodisiac implants, not pills. I am NOT letting a sight-aroused human around my vixens unless he is 'fixed'."

"WHAT?" Ivan screamed, hands instinctively grasping for his crotch. Completely speechless for the second time in his life – this time without the aid of a fist to the jaw – he tried to plead with Father Heidler, took one look, and gave up without a word, mouth moving randomly.

Around *The High Moon*, every serving vixen and patron in line-of-sight – man-sized fox, waist-high otter, man-sized dinosaur, torso-sized octopus – stopped and stared at the spectacle like feeding time at some surreal zoo. Ears canted forward, tongues ran over nose pads, mouths flehmened, heat-pits dilated, tentacles quivered, cephalopoid skin changed colors and patterns...

Captain Ratiriai's "Yip!" brought Ivan's attention back to the vixen. "If you agree to this..."

"I want to go home."

The vixen-captain reached down into her thigh-boots, brought out an enameled brooch pin, twin to the cameo at her throat – a Thalendri/fox tail curled around a world-and-constellation. Setting it on the table before Ivan, she leaned back in her seat. "Then take, or leave."

Ivan's hand hesitated, reached out, stopped a few centimeters above the brooch. "Preacher," he stuttered through growing tears, "Isn't there another way?"

"No. Not unless you want to get frozen down and shipped out C.O.D. Take 'The Queen's Shilling', boy, and get yourself home. Think of it as an adventure, except not in Virtual."

Hesitantly, he grasped the brooch and slowly pinned it on his chest. The priest and vixen exchanged looks, her ears coming up, her expression straight out of the stories of Reynard.

Father Heidler clapped the whimpering man-child on his back. “Good boy, Ivan. Long ago, when ships were made of oak and moved with sails, fathers would often send sons like you ‘to sea’ for training and shaping up.”

Captainess Ratirai crushed out her bengastick, ejected the spent filtertip from the holder and looked up at Ivan with a predator’s expression – a fox in the hencoop. “Also known as ‘Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash.’”

Ivan’s lips started quivering, his whimpering getting louder; Father Heidler stepped in.

“Except Thalendri don’t drink rum, and they have a taboo on homoerotica hard-wired into their brains.”

“We do, however, still use the lash.” She caught Father Heidler’s eye with a flick of her ebon-furred ear. *No need to tell him that with the difference in pain thresholds, Thalendri lashes are light cords, only mild stinging for a human.* “But do as I say, do as my vixens say, and you shouldn’t have a problem.”

She rose from her table, stashed the cigarette holder in a special thigh-boot pocket, brushed the hem of her apron-skirt over its tip. Extending a Thalendri-style pocket-phone to reach between her muzzle-tip and ear, she spoke in clipped Davvashi for a moment, then turned to Ivan.

“Welcome aboard, ‘cabin boy’. Now to get to the doctress and get you ‘fixed’; we put to sky in two hours.”

She took her leave of Father Heidler with the same embrace-and-cheek-rub as before; he gave her a blessing with the Sign of the Cross, she responded with The Goddess’s Bow, then she grabbed the sobbing man-child by one elbow and started walking him out of *The High Moon*, her wig and tail-root bows bouncing with each swish-tailed step.

Slim vixen and fat human reached the exit portal; Ivan stopped and stared for a moment as though Dante’s famous line over the entrance to Hell was floating on the holosign.

“Ears up, slickskin! You’re going to the *Proud Tail*, not the gallows.” Then she led him out of *The High Moon* and out of Father Heidler’s life.

“Remember the bargain,” Father Heidler whispered after the two vanished through the portal. “Make a man out of him.” *If he doesn’t blow himself out the airlock first.*

He remembered his first meeting with Captain Ratirai, two hours before, in the low-gee of the landing bay with the *Proud Tail* looming at the other end of the pressure tunnels, a small ship that had seen better days.

“He’ll know how to work hard when we’re done with him,” she had said, after a crack or two about how *humandri* were infamous for incompetent aristocrats and before he’d handed her a credit chit. “I’ll have my vixens guard him at some of the tougher ports. We’ll make him streetwise as well as teach him how to make an honest living by getting his *humaan-vanth* hands dirty.”

The priest's nagger chimed with the first warning for his shuttle down to Shallivarden. *Two hours... maybe Captain Ratiriai and I will see each other lift...*

Clicking the nagger off, he started for the exit portal with no twinge to his conscience.

Being Good did not imply he had to be Nice.

The Reluctant Reindeer by Will A. Sanborn

“How did I manage to get myself into this situation?” Jeff wondered aloud, as the deer morph regarded himself in the mirror. Yes, he had agreed to do this, and it was a nice thing to do for the kids, but there was a world of difference between thinking of doing something and actually going through with it. For one thing, his shyness was kicking in again, not to mention how ridiculous he felt, as he looked down at the little jar of stage makeup Kathy had given him. Did she really expect him to wear that?

Sighing, he realized he'd have to, if he was going to look the part. He still couldn't believe he'd let her talk him into this though. Love did make you do some pretty strange things sometimes. She'd mentioned the idea a couple of weeks ago, thinking he'd make a wonderful addition to the Christmas party she was helping to throw at the youth center. She'd been a little disappointed when he didn't want to do it, but she'd understood. It was only the day before, when the plans for the party had hit a snag, that she'd asked him again. She'd been a little more persuasive that time, and had finally gotten him to agree.

Yes, it was something nice to do for the children, and he knew that they could use a little joy in their lives, but he wasn't all that excited at the prospect of playing Rudolph for their little party. He did like kids, but still felt a little awkward around them, not knowing exactly what to do at times. Kathy on the other hand, really enjoyed the time she spent with them, and was quite at home helping out at the center. He sighed as he opened the makeup container and started his preparations. He figured he could do this to help her out and make the kids happy.

As he dabbed the bright red makeup on his nose, he thought back to his own childhood. Animal morphs were still a minority in the population, but when he'd been growing up they'd been even more scarce. Most of the kids he'd gone to school with had been good to him, but there were always the bullies who'd teased him. When he was in middle school, a couple of kids had even made mean jokes about how he'd better stay out of the woods during hunting season, and other things of that nature. Before that, the first time he got to play Rudolph in the school play he'd been quite excited about it. However, after doing that role a few years in a row, the luster wore off, especially as he grew older, and some of the kids started teasing him about it.

He sighed again, blinking his eyes to keep them from watering up from those memories, and forced his mind back to the present. That was long ago, and he hadn't had to face anything like that in years. He'd grown up to become a handsome buck. He had a successful career, and he'd found a beautiful human woman who loved him for who he was, just as he'd learned to love himself.

Looking in the mirror he examined his handiwork and felt his face warm up. He twitched his ears back slightly at the red-nosed deer peering back at him; as he stood there observing himself, his lips pursed into an

embarrassed little smile. At least nobody would be making fun of him here today. He hoped that Kathy wasn't going to be taking any pictures of him though.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. "Are you almost ready?" Kathy's voice called in.

"Yes, I'm ready" he answered back a little gruffly.

"That's good" she replied as she opened the door. When she saw him she added "oh Jeff, you look wonderful," her voice singing with delight.

"Thanks hon, but I feel kind of silly doing this... I'm nervous too."

"Oh, you'll be fine. Come on, the kids are waiting. Oh wait, you need this," she added as she wrapped a red and green scarf around his neck. "There, now you look perfect."

If she saw the quick flash of a frown cross his muzzle, she didn't acknowledge it; instead she led him down the hall to where the children were waiting expectantly for their surprise visitor.

When they first saw him, their voices hushed and their eyes grew wide. Jeff had to admit they were a cute group of kids, all sitting there looking up at him with delighted amazement shown on every face. The charming scene was lost on him though, as he looked out at the group of children, mostly humans, but with a few morph cubs mixed in there as well. Even if this was supposed to be an informal performance, his stage fright was still present. He also noticed the children's parents sitting with them, which added to his self-consciousness.

"Um, hello kids" he managed to speak out, as he sat down in the chair before them, trying to swallow the lump in his throat.

Kathy tried to cover for him by making his introduction. "Now we know you were expecting Santa to visit you this afternoon" she said, "but you know how busy he is this close to Christmas. Everyone was so extra good this year that there are more toys to get ready than usual. That's why he asked good old Rudolph here if he could come and see you instead." She paused, and then added "now this is his first time at a big party, and he's a little nervous, so why don't we all give him a big welcome, okay?"

"Hello Rudolph" the children all replied in unison, their voices coming together in a chorus of marked excitement. He cracked a smile at the sparkles dancing in their eyes as they greeted him.

"Thanks guys," he spoke, his voice sounding a little less tense, "now as this is my first party, I'm a little unsure of what goes on, so what would you all like to do?"

"Let's sing some songs" one child called back, to be followed by several other voices happily endorsing that suggestion.

"Alright, what should we sing then?"

"How about your song?" one little girl, a ferret cub, asked.

He swallowed nervously once more, but tried to maintain his composure. "Um... okay, my dear, but you'll have to start it."

She eagerly accepted his proposal, and started singing without any hesitation. “Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose...” The other children were quick to join in with her.

He twitched his ears self-consciously, but looking over at Kathy, he saw her silently urging him on. Waiting for the chorus to come around again, he took the plunge and started singing as well, though not as loud as the children were. Looking back at Kathy, and seeing her smile, he flashed her a little one of his own; by the end of the song, his singing had grown a little louder.

They continued singing Christmas carols, and as they worked through “Jingle Bells” and “Deck the Halls” and started in on “Frosty the Snowman” he was surprised to find himself feeling more at ease. As long as he didn’t think of what he was doing too much, it wasn’t that bad. It was fun singing the holiday songs again, and he remembered how he’d enjoyed them when he was a kid.

The rest of the afternoon was quite busy, with crafts, games, snacks and all sorts of activities for the kids. When they took a break for juice and cookies, Ashley, the little ferret girl, brought him his food and introduced herself properly to him. She then talked to him for several minutes while they enjoyed their snack. He’d made a few other fast friends there as well, as several of the children vied for his attentions.

He did his best to not play favorites and try and give them all equal attention, but Ashley was quite charming to him. Perhaps it was the fact that she was a morph herself, so he felt some special kinship there. She was just so adorable as well, very energetic and happy, but also very polite too. Most of the kids were well-behaved in fact. They were a good crowd, and it was nice seeing them having a fun time.

He managed to enjoy himself as well. The games were silly, but fun. Even when it was time for him to hand out presents to the kids, he didn’t really mind them sitting on his lap. Kathy had brought her camera out too, and had surprised him with a few candid shots, but he just shrugged it off. He smiled back at her, and then even started mugging for the photos a bit.

The time passed quicker than he’d thought it would and soon it was time for the kids to leave. He stood by the door and gave the children all candy canes as they were leaving, getting hugs from several of them. As they left, their parents all thanked him, telling him what a wonderful job he’d done. He couldn’t help but smile enthusiastically, wishing everyone a merry Christmas.

After everyone had gone, he retired to one of the back rooms to sit down and rest, while Kathy and the other volunteers cleaned up. He hadn’t realized it, but the excitement of the afternoon had tired him out a bit.

Kathy found him awhile later, nudging him gently awake from his light nap. “Wake-up sleepy-head” she chuckled. “They wore you out didn’t they?”

“A little,” he replied with a nod, and then smiled at her. “They can be a handful, but it did go pretty well.”

“Yes, you were great. The kids loved you.”

“I could tell. I’m glad they enjoyed it.”

“Thanks for stepping in for Santa when he got the flu. I know you didn’t really want to do it, but you saved the day for us.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought it’d be. It was kind of fun really” he said, his smile growing slightly.

“You did seem to be enjoying yourself, once you loosened up.”

He nodded, “well, the kids are pretty cute.”

“Uh-huh, that’s why I like it here. Glad to see you had fun with it... Rudolph,” she said, as she touched a finger to his nose affectionately. “Come on, let’s go home.”

“I don’t know,” he said, as he licked at her finger, and winked at her with a twinkle in his eye. “Would Santa want me going home with someone I just met at a party? Have you been a good girl this year?”

“Oh, I’ve been very good, Rudolph, and I’ll be good to you too” she chuckled.

“Okay,” he answered as he took her hand and got up. Stepping closer, he reached around to give her a hug. “Love you, hon” he whispered in her ear.

“I love you too, and thank you” she whispered back.

Slowly breaking from the hug, they grabbed their coats and, then walking hand in hand, they headed outside. As they were walking towards the car, he realized he was still wearing the makeup on his nose, but he simply smiled at that, thinking of how he must look. He was feeling too good to worry about it just then.

One Night at the Furs-Only Club by Jason Gillespie

It was a modest gathering that evening, Aaron noted, as he stepped through the double doors into the club room. Cassandra was as usual leaning over the back of the couch, her feline tail twitching in the air behind her as she reached for who knew what back there. Marcus and Tim sat opposite each other at the checkers board, their yellow eyes transfixed on the red and black pieces between them. Amber sank into the couch a few feet away, her muzzle stuck between the pages of a book, while her glasses continuously slipped down her ursine snout. Carl sat across from her and tried to chat, but she kept returning to her book. Even Sean was there, which was unusual; he sat alone by himself in one corner, munching on a small candy bar of some kind, chewing thoughtfully as he watched the others.

Aaron grimaced, and chocking back a bit of bile, crossed the threshold and met Carl's piping voice. "What ho, Aaron! Glad you could join us tonight!"

It wasn't that Aaron didn't like their club President, it was just that the ferret's cheerfulness tended to grate on his nerves. Sitting down opposite the two checker fiends, he leaned back and asked, "So, is this it for tonight?"

"Well, it's seven o'clock, but I figure we can wait a few more minutes for the rest of them."

Aaron looked over at the Siamese and called out, "Hey Cassie, find anything down there?"

She gave him a mischievous look and then waved with one paw. "Why don't you come take a look yourself?"

Aaron shook his head. "No thank you!"

Marcus grinned as he looked up from his game. "Are ya afraid of a cat?"

Aaron glowered at the wolf morph, trying not to think about the joke. Why the Hell did his parents want to become mice? Wolves and cats and deer he could understand, but mice? Sighing, he curled his tail up behind him on the couch and leaned back. "So what are we going to do tonight to forget that we're freaks?"

Sean turned his head at that, nearly smacking his growing antlers into the wall. "You're in a cheery mood tonight."

Crossing his arms in front of him, Aaron tried to ignore the others while he sat in the chair, his legs dangling before him. The others quickly forgot his snappishness and got on with their business. Tim continued taking more and more of Marcus's black pieces on the checker board, Amber read her book, and Cassandra did whatever it was she did back there. Carl got up and crossed the room to try and get Sean interested in doing something, anything other than just sitting there.

When the door to the Furs Only Club shut suddenly a few moments later, all heads turned to see who'd entered. Aaron climbed up the couch

and peered over the top at the odd looking fellow standing there. "I take it this is the Furs Only Club?"

Carl nodded and walked over, his sinuous body bursting with energy. "That's right! I'm Carl, the President. Who are you?"

The figure that stood in the doorway was of medium build with a slight paunch and a short tail. His fur was a ruddy grey, and there was a playfulness to his dark eyes. Yet his oddest characteristic was his face. It tapered down into a six inch long narrow snout that wiggled about as he talked. "My name's Roy. Good to meet all of you. I just transferred here, and was hoping to find a club like this. Is this all there is?"

Carl shook his head, inviting Roy into the room. "Nope, there are about twice this number, but not everybody can come all the time, tests and all that."

"Not all of us want to come either. What are you?" Aaron asked, thanking his parents for not being so crazy as to become something like that!

"Aardvark," Roy said with a bit of aplomb. "And who are you?"

After the introductions and they'd gotten Cassandra to actually sit in the couch it was time for the club business. Not that they ever really had any, but the other members did like to make a show of it.

"So, what do you guys normally do here?" Roy asked before Carl could start off his soliloquy for the evening.

"Well, I was just about to get to that," Carl replied, but Aaron cut him off.

"We sit here, stare at the walls and talk about how much our life sucks usually. Why, what did you have in mind?"

Roy seemed quite taken aback by the hostility in the mouse's remarks. His snout twitched a moment, as did his ears, but the playfulness was still there in his eyes. "Well, we usually went and did something together as a group that was fun. My favorite was bowling night. I was never much good at it, but we always had a good time there. Do you guys have a bowling alley anywhere near here?"

Marcus nodded. "Yeah, it's a short drive from here."

Amber shook her head. "Our club charter doesn't allow us to spend our money on nights off campus."

"What kind of stupid rule is that?" Roy asked.

Carl grimaced. "We had to include it in the charter so the School Senate would let us make a club."

Roy just shook his head. "Well, that's no fun! Hey, why don't we go anyway? It's something to do. So we have to spend our own money, so what?"

"People will stare at us," Sean murmured quietly. Aaron nodded his assent, crossing his arms in front of him.

Roy laughed at that. "So? People always stare! You know why, because they're jealous; that's what my Dad always says."

“Oh give me a break, how can they be jealous of that,” he pointed at Roy, “or this,” he pointed to himself.

“Doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. It’s all about attitude!” Roy said, rising on his hind paws. “I say we get out of here, go bowling, and have a really good time. What do you all say?”

Cassandra nearly jumped from her seat. “Sounds like fun, I’m going!”

Marcus and Tim were quick to join, the two wolves always in the sport for a game of some sort. Carl was on his paws next, trying as usual to lead them to the bowling alley, even though it hadn’t been his idea. Sean begrudgingly seemed to accept the idea, glancing at his three fingered hands and muttering about how he was going to even roll the ball. Amber silently joined the others. Only Aaron remained where he sat.

“Aren’t you coming, Aaron?” Tim asked as they all stood by the doorway.

“Come on, Aaron, it should be fun,” Marcus chided him, his yellowed eyes sparkling mischievously.

Roy looked at the others and said, “Hey, you guys go wait outside, I’ll talk to him a minute okay?”

Carl nodded. “Okay, we’ll figure out which cars we’re taking, I guess I’ll drive one. Come on you furs, lets go!” Pretty soon, the only two left in the room were Roy and Aaron. Only the lingering scent of his companions remained to remind the mouse that they’d even been there.

“Aaron, what’s your problem? Don’t you even want to go out and have some fun with the rest of us?” Roy asked, his eyes filled with concern. He sat down next to the mouse, his snout dangling comically from his face.

Aaron didn’t look at the aardvark, but scooted away, and accidentally sat on his tail in the process. “I’m perfectly happy by myself, thank you.”

“You don’t seem happy.”

“Look, just leave me alone okay! Go have your fun, go pretend you’re normal, and pretend that everybody else isn’t laughing at you. I’ll just go back to my room and read a book or do my homework.”

Roy grimaced slightly, blinking for a moment. “You think it’s hard being a mouse? Try being an aardvark sometime. The shit I’ve had to put up with is unbelievable. But when I lay down to go to bed, I want to do so happy about myself. I’m proud of what I am, despite what anybody else says. You should be too.

“I would like to have you along to go bowling. It’ll be a lot of fun. They may jeer at us, but so what if they do? No seriously, so what? We are special, you have to believe that. I believe it.”

Aaron stared blankly at the wall, trying not to let Roy’s words sink in. “What if I don’t want to be special? What if I just want to be a human being, and not a fur?”

“Well, you do have that choice, if you have the money and if you qualify for the procedure. They don’t seem very interested in reversing it from what I hear.”

Aaron turned away from Roy again. “Look, just leave me alone, okay?”

Roy stood up from the couch, and nodded. "Okay, I'm sorry. I would like to have you come bowling with us though. Can't you try at least this once?"

Aaron sighed, his teeth yearning to gnaw on something. He pulled a bit of tough fabric from his pocket and chewed on that a moment to calm himself before he stood on his hindpaws. "All right, I'll come," he muttered between bites. Roy visibly smiled, and escorted him to the door where the other furs waited outside. Marcus and Tim both gave the much shorter Aaron knowing winks while Cassandra flicked her tail in his general direction. Sean just stared off into space as usual, while Carl lead them toward the parking lot. Amber carried her book in one paw, and didn't seem to notice.

The mouse breathed deep and walked along behind the rest, trying to ignore the stares that passing humans levelled at them as they went.



"Gee, another gutter ball," Amber remarked as she watched Carl gape down the alley in disbelief.

The ferret pointed at the lane where all ten pins stood defiantly, "Did you see that? It robbed me!"

Roy laughed as he got ready to bowl in the other lane. It was a pretty quiet night at the bowling alley, one of the few nights that they didn't have a league. So the eight of them had requested two lanes. Aaron had to admit that it was kind of funny to see the receptionist's face when she asked what shoe size they all wore. Still, it was also a bit embarrassing to have to use one of the six pound balls!

"Hey Carl, are you going for a perfect game or something? You haven't hit a single pin in the first four frames!" Tim chuckled heartily, as did his brother Marcus.

"Hey, we're on the same team! You're suppose to root for me!" Carl objected, though he was having a bit of trouble hiding his mirth. Even Amber, the fourth member of their team couldn't keep her ursine face straight.

Roy only knocked down a few pins on his roll, and then it was Aaron's turn. Tim was bowling in the other lane, and managed to leave only one standing. The mouse watched him for a moment, hefting the six pound ball in his paws. To the cheers of the others on his team, the wolf slowly approached, sending the ball forward with a graceful swing of his arm. It rolled slowly, but steadily heading straight for the last surviving pin. And then the ball hooked to the left at the last second and slid past by the barest breath.

"Oh! It was so close!" Marcus wailed as his brother shook his paws in the sky in mock defeat.

Aaron looked down the lane, and knew that he would probably only manage to get a few pins like he had the past three frames. It was inevitable. Cassandra was the best on their team so far, knocking down all but one or

two pins each time. Sean did about as well as Roy and Aaron normally did, though he did seem to be more interested in how he was doing than normal.

Stepping onto the lane, Aaron scuffed his sandals on the floor. Since the quality of the lanes are paramount to the bowling alley, they had to be kept in excellent shape. Since their footpads came equipped with automatic scratch and dent devices known as claws – or in Sean’s case hooves – they had to be fitted with special shoes. Unfortunately, the only ones his size that Aaron could use were his sandals, and those tended to slip.

Taking a few jerky steps forward, Aaron tossed the ball onto the lane, shuddering at the crash as it struck the center of the lane and kept rolling. He watched it for a moment as it wove a bit off center, heading straight down in the most perfect path he’d ever seen. It struck just to the right of the head pin, and suddenly, all of them tumbled in a noisy crash! Aaron stood there staring at the spectacle, his mouth agape, and his tail curling about his legs. Whoops and cheers from the other furs caught his attention and made it clear what he’d just done. He’d bowled a strike!

“All right, Aaron! You did it!” Roy cheered, his long snout waving back and forth.

“Oh, there’s more than meets the eye to that mouse!” Cassandra snickered as her tail flicked back and forth.

Sean came onto the alley and patted him on the back, “Great job, Aaron. That was so cool!”

Marcus and Tim both gave him a wag of the tail and a competitive grin, while Amber was picking out the mouse’s ball in her large paws. “I think I’ll use the lucky ball this time,” she murmured, to everyone’s delight.

Aaron sat back down, his whole body filled with the excitement of having bowled a strike when he noticed a group of college students approaching them. He could smell the beer on their breath as they drew closer. He even recognized a few of them from his classes at the university.

“Hey, who said you freaks could come here and bowl?” one of them, a freshman named Derek, called out to the delight of his cronies.

Roy and Carl both stood up, staring the freshman down. “Who said you freaks could come in here and drink?” Roy shot back, his face completely calm. Carl looked at Roy with a bit of admiration. Aaron watched the aardvark, and then looked down at his own grayish pink paws.

“What the fuck are you man, an elephant?” one of the others asked, pointing at Roy’s nose.

Marcus let out a low growl beneath his breath, as did his brother Tim. Amber began tossing the six pounder back and forth between her paws. Cassandra idly examined the claws on one of her paws, her slit eyes glaring at the drunks. Sean took off one of his shoes and began tapping his hooves on the hard tiled floor. Even the staff began to take an interest in the confrontation, but remained at a distance. Roy shot back after a moment’s pause, “I’m an aardvark. If you spent your time in classes instead of making asses out of yourself by getting drunk, then you might know that.”

“Are you messing with us?” Derek shot back glassy eyed.

Aaron stood up and walked over to Roy’s side. “Why don’t you all just climb back under the rock you came from.”

“Ooooooh, the little mousey talks tough!” Derek jibbed. “What’s your fucking problem, Mickey? Want us to show you what a real man is?”

“I know what a real man is, and I certainly am not looking at it!” Aaron called out. He then glanced up at Roy who stood impassively at his side. A smile crossed the rodent’s muzzle. “Y’all are just jealous!”

Derek blinked at the words, his mouth opening to say something else, hanging there for a few moments, and then closing again. He glanced to one side and saw the broad-shouldered man dressed in a security uniform tapping the baton in his hand. Derek glared at him, then turned on his heels and grumbled, “Let’s get out of here.” His cronies were quick to follow suit. The security man watched them leave, but paid scant attention to the furs.

Roy turned to Aaron and grinned, his long snout sniffing at the air. “Thanks! You sure told them!”

Aaron wiggled his whiskers after a moment. “Let’s get back to our game, shall we?”

“Absolutely!”

Later that evening, the eight of them returned to the college campus and to their regular club room. They were chatting, hooting, and making quite a bit of noise as they clomped and padded their way down the hall. As they finally returned to the room, Aaron felt a bit of regret that the night was over. Amber sat back in her usual spot, but didn’t pick up her book. Cassandra sat on her haunches, chatting with Sean, who seemed quite animated for once. Marcus and Tim howled into the air as they celebrated their narrow victory. Carl was fawning over Roy the entire time, as Aaron sat down in his usual spot chewing on his piece of fabric.

“Look,” Carl said as they came through the door, “I think you should be the club President. You have way cooler ideas than I ever had.”

Roy shook his head, patting the ferret on the back with one paw. “It’s okay, Carl, really! I just want to come here and spend some good time with my new friends.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely!” Roy said as he sat down next to Aaron on the couch. “I still can’t believe the college won’t let you do that with your club money!”

“Well, I’m sure we can think of something,” Sean pointed out.

“Why not use it to buy shoes for ourselves?” Aaron pointed out. “I mean, they won’t let us use it to pay for the games, but if we have our own shoes, that takes care of most of the cost anyway.”

“Hey, now that’s an idea!” Marcus grinned. “Still, it’s kinda expensive to go bowling every week don’t you think?”

“We can make it a once a month event,” Roy suggested. “I’m sure we can think of lots of things to do together at the next meeting!”

Aaron grinned. “I can’t wait!” They all were in complete agreement about that!