

“There’s nothing to it. You put the bell on the cat, take a selfie and then you’re in.”

“You forgot to add ‘don’t get eaten’.” Aiden fumbled over the large ball of tin in his hands, blue eyes squinting against the unfamiliar glare of the sunlight flashing off its chrome skin, a bright contrast to his rust-colored fur.

“Don’t worry, that almost never happens.” The white and tan frat brother to his right clapped him on the shoulder as his black and gray counterpart nudged Aiden forward with a well-placed foot behind his ropey tail.

“And if it does, you’ll be forever toasted in Kappa Epsilon Kappa,” sniggered the mouse responsible for motivating the reluctant pledge. “More importantly—you get to live there rent-free.”

“That’s the *only* reason I agreed to this, Ryan” Aiden muttered, regretting his decision more by the second. “If there was a *storage locker* I could live out, I wouldn’t do this.”

“Yeah, housing’s a bitch, isn’t it? Even worse in the Lower Tunnels. Fortunately, Kyle and I are legacies.” Ryan jerked his thumb at himself just in case Aiden missed his bragging. “But you gotta do what you gotta do. Right?”

“Right,” Aiden muttered, recalling the fruitless hours spent searching in every adjacent atrium to the university in the Lower Tunnels and coming up fruitless. “Guess it’s this or try to live on the surface with those nutjob Pilgrims.”

This earned him a guffaw from Kyle. “Wouldn’t go calling someone a nut considering what you agreed to do. I mean, at least the Pilgrims aren’t *looking* for cats.”

“Ah, don’t listen to him.” Ryan punched Aiden good naturedly in the shoulder as if they were about to play a sport. “Don’t worry, man, you got this.”

“Look, he’s even asleep.” Kyle supplied.

“She,” Aiden corrected, licking his lips at the unexpected attractiveness of the monster he’d been tasked with collaring. Ahead of them in the grass lay their target: a golden-blond furred Bahst with a shoulder-length amber mane.

Bronze stripes raced down her arms, legs, and sides. In the warm heat of the waning summer, she’d dressed sparsely, her slender, feminine body covered by a white top and red-black checker patterned miniskirt.

Eyes closed, the prominent chest rose and fell in steady, rhythmic breaths. Peaceful, serene even, the girl’s beauty almost offset the innate lethality of her feline traits and sharpened angles. “I don’t know what’s crazier,” Aiden muttered, “me doing this, or me thinking that’s hot.”

“Eh?” Kyle looked at him, “what’d you say?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Aiden recovered—last thing he needed was to be overheard admiring a different species. “Just don’t forget your end of the deal—I do this crazy thing, survive, you let me live free of rent, got it?”

“Sure, sure,” Kyle reassured. “Come on, man, we’re right behind you.”

They gave the pledge a shove—then immediately backed up. “Way, way behind you,” Ryan supplied as Aiden glared at them before straightening himself out and starting for his initiation rite.

Ryan and Kyle watched their brave but foolhardy pledge ford his way through the grass towards the sleeping Bahst, stopping every few yards as if fighting a mutiny by commonsense before resuming his doomed course. “Think he’ll actually do it?” Ryan asked.

“Do *any* of them do it?” Kyle snorted. “I give it two minutes before he pisses himself and runs back here blubbering like a little pup.” Ryan sniggered in agreement and the pair leaned forward, anticipating that moment when the pledge’s nerve would break.

Five minutes later, Aiden shot them a wave from less than a tail length of the Bahst’s left foot.

“Um, he still hasn’t turned back,” Ryan observed.

“He will,” Kyle said with less bravado than before. “He’s gotta.” He licked his dry lips, stomach aflutter. “I mean, nobody ever goes through with it.”

“Nobody ever gets that close, either.”

“He’s not going to do it,” insisted Kyle. “Just not.”

Ryan squinted, and then slammed his jaw to the ground. “Man, I hate to disagree with you—but, he’s *totally fucking doing it*.”

“You’re pretty for a monster,” Aiden whispered as he drew close enough to the prone form to feel the heat from her body. He’d seen a Bahst once before, at a distance, when he was less than ten, a daredevil cousin bringing him to the surface near a remote sidewalk where they’d watched the towering shapes move to and fro from various shops and stores.

He’d been amazed then, amazed that such nightmarish titans would do something mundane and common as wave at one another on the street. Before he knew it, Aiden had crawled out from under the hatch in a bid to get closer—only for his older companion to grab him about the waist and say, “Whoa, there. Mom and Dad’ll kill me if I let you end up as kitty chow.”

Their parents had been furious anyway and boxed the two young pups' round ears until numb. For two hours afterwards, Aiden and his cousin had been forced to listen to the grisly demise of every R'tosk that had occurred at the hands—or feet—of a Bahst.

Nevertheless, even as he'd gone to bed without supper, his stomach growling and ears sore, Aiden had wondered if he'd ever get another chance to see the near-mythical beings who ruled the world of the sun. Talk about being careful what you wish for, he thought in the present, approaching the slumbering form leaning against a towering oak tree amidst the well-cut grass.

The faster I go, the sooner I get this over with. On that thought, he began to climb. Straight up her top. One hand over the other, Aiden clamored up the twin hills of the Bahst's chest, rising and falling like ocean tides with her steady breaths, bell in tow, the world's most voyeuristic mountaineer. Feeling his hands and feet pushing against the pert flesh and fur below the white cover, only his fear at what would happen should the female discover him here kept him going.

Yet she didn't awake, and after carefully picking his way over top her top, Aiden stood upon the white colored ruff of the slender tree trunk that was her neck. "Let's get this over with," he muttered, untying the bell from his waist and planting it down like a flag.

But how to tie the string? Maybe he didn't have to: he pushed the ends over the side of the Bahst's neck to give the appearance they looped behind it. Then he pulled out his phone and angled it so the bell took up the center of the frame. He drew the phone back in front of his face, took a breath, and then gave a quick snap.

Click went the phone in digital imitation of an old shutter-style camera. *Did it!* Eager to see his handiwork, Aiden turned the phone around in his hand--*damn*. In his haste, he'd snapped the shot too fast and left a blurred pallet of color in place of an image.

No problem, he thought, just, take the picture again, slowly this time. He just needed to concentrate. Below him, Bahst's throat flexed with a hard swallow, a wet squelch of a gulp that chilled Aiden to the bone.

Above him, the immense muzzle parted in a soft yawn, revealing a red cavern lined with sharp teeth the length of his legs. Below, her arms and hands stretched out, wicked hooks peering out of her fingertips before vanishing from sight. Unsurprisingly, the next shot also came out blurry. "Seriously?" Aiden hissed. "Piece of junk! I knew I should have upgraded last week!"

Another swallow rippled below him. "Calm down," he breathed, "or that's going to be you. Just, take it easy, Aiden, you're gonna get this shot, you're gonna get into Kappa Epsilon, and you're not going to have to pay a peanut."

Click!

The third shot rendered with immaculate perfection—unfortunately, so did the blinding glare of the sunlight reflected off the large chrome globe of the bell. “Oh for the love of—,” frustrated, angry, *careless*, he turned the bell to the side—a tad harder than he should have. *Ting-aling* rang the bell.

“Shit,” went Aiden.

And the Bahst woke up.

Aiden froze as the ground quaked, hoping that if he didn’t move, the Bahst would settle down and remain asleep. That hope died as a pair of eyes larger than his head snapped open above to reveal deep pools of green. Ears tall enough for an R’tosk to stand in perked forward towards the direction the bell had sounded from.

Down craned her head towards the tickling sensation on her throat. The eyes did the impossible and widened further as her mouth popped open in a soft—to her—gasp as she spied the intrusive presence resting upon her neck.

Aiden acted on pure instinct, launching himself backwards away from the end of the cat with the most teeth. Flailing as he fell, he could do nothing but pray for a soft landing. And soft it was--right back onto her chest, the twin hills of her bosom catching him like an inflated trampoline.

But rather than the cloth of her top, the hapless R’tosk found himself touching the soft white underbelly fur covering the Bahst’s left breast—he’d found his way right into the plunging neckline of her top.

Double-shit!

With speed born of terror he scrambled off the soft fur and pushed once more out into space. Doing so, Aiden narrowly missed being flattened by a hand wider than the tunnel car he’d ridden in with Ryan and Kyle, gale-force turbulence buffeting and spinning him.

Striking the ground on his side, Aiden rolled to his feet, pushed off with his hands and sprinted for the long grass—the swipe told him all he needed to know—the Bahst wanted to catch him. As a cat would any small prey, he thought.

But there was still a chance; Aiden could see the taller fronds of the nearest deep patch of grass, a sanctuary of green. That chance ended as a shadow fell over him. The Bahst landed with the force of a hurricane.

Looking up, Aiden saw the flattened palms of a pair of monolithic hands coming down, her fingers encircling him in a tight cage. He felt crushing pressure on all sides of his body before everything went black.

“Shit, man, shit, shit, shit!” Ryan alternated between cursing and breathing as the pair ran back to the tunnel-car. “We just got a pledge eaten by a cat, fuck, what are we gonna do?” He stopped, “What are we gonna say?”

Kyle stopped, grabbed his friend by his blue letter jacket and yanked his face to within an inch of his face. “Nothing. We are going to say nothing!”

“But—we took him out here. We told him to do the Belling.”

“No we didn’t,” Kyle hissed. “We *joked* about the Belling, and he came out here to try it on his own. Alone.”

“But—”

“Do you want to be the reason the House gets banished off campus?”

“No—thing we could do...” Ryan’s confusion turned to understanding. “We told him it was a joke.”

“But he wouldn’t listen.”

“He didn’t listen—poor guy.”

“Real damn shame,” Kyle agreed.

Everything had gone black, but Aiden remained very much conscious, despite wishing for the welcoming escape fainting would have provided. Hands over his head, eyes squeezed shut he anticipated the deathblow that seemed an eternity in coming. Knees drawn to his chest, he curled into a tight ball with a quiet whimper.

Hot air weighed down upon Aiden, each breath he took heavy and labored. He pictured the moment when the Bahst would crush him like a grape in her hands, her long curled claws skewering his soft flesh as his bones snapped like twigs.

Instead, he felt himself scooped lightly from the grass onto an uneven, warm felt mattress and begin to rise upward. The air around him turned cool and breezy as it had been out in the open. It was almost enough for to tempt him to open his eyes again. Almost.

“You okay?” Asked a voice above him, a feminine alto: though concerned and soft, it filled Aiden’s ears with pronounced, inescapable volume like a proclamation from a higher power.

Momentarily confused, his stomach twisted in panic at a terrible thought—perhaps he hadn’t survived, perhaps he *was* dead,

Perhaps, this was an angel come to lead him to heaven.

“Hey.” Something large and very solid nudged him from the right. “Come on, say something.”

One at a time, he opened his eyes, craning his head slowly up to the sound of the voice, and as he did so, his heart both stopped and skipped a beat. Very quickly Aiden became aware of two inalienable truths.—he wasn’t dead but it was still a very strong possibility.

Effortlessly as he might a seed, the Bahst cradled Aiden in the palm of her right hand in front of her chest, the left curled around and keeping him upright as well as preventing him from acting on the knee-jerk urge to dive for the edge. Instead, he continued to stare into the deep emerald wells above until she spoke again: “I’m so sorry. I thought you were a—different kind of mouse and I just pounced.”

The inside of her tent-sized ears turned pink, and if he didn’t know better, Aiden could have sworn the monster holding him sounded remorseful. Gripped in nervousness, adrenaline pooling in his body until he had to act, speak or burst, he blurted without thought. “And I thought you were an angel come to take me away.”

Soon as he spoke the words, he cringed in horror at the thought of how ridiculous and impertinent he must have sounded to her, and how she might decide to punish his insolence.

Instead, she giggled, the blush deepening from pink to red. “If I had come down full force, you might very well be in heaven right now.” She sighed in relief, sounding unsettled at her own pronouncement. “Good thing I saw you were wearing clothes.”

“Good...thing.” The tripped breakers in Aiden’s head reset one by one, letting him process a single fact with each one. He was still alive; a Bahst held him in her titanic grasp; this godlike being who could snuff his life in a breath was talking to him—like an equal.

“I really can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

She’d even apologized to him. Apologized! A laugh—devoid of mirth or humor, a strangled cry of stress—escaped Aiden’s mouth. Her tan ears perked at the sound and she lifted him closer to her face—closer to the black slit green eyes with their unblinking stare. Closer to the flashing fangs and crushing jaws moving as she said: “you okay? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Lips clamped shut Aiden squashed the next laugh before it could rise free, answered her with a waivered shake of his head. “Glad to hear,” the giantess breathed, a warm gale flowing over Aiden, cleansing the icy fear from him.

The rest was scraped away by the long, fuzzy index that slid up and down his back and sides. A chirr of pleasure slid involuntary from him and before he could catch himself, Aiden leaned into the petting. Near to the point of dozing off, he snapped to full attention as she said, “can you talk enough to tell me your name?”

He nodded in short, quick bobs.

“Can you tell me, then?”

“Aiden,” he squeaked, then coughed and cleared his throat in a paltry attempt to resonate deeper. “My name is Aiden.”

“Aiden,” she tasted the name, rolling it on her tongue. “Nice to meet you, I’m Jaina.” Half a minute of mutual staring later, she raised an eyebrow. “Can you say anything besides your name?”

Up came a finger—the lethal claw sheathed and out of sight thank the Earth—to poke him playfully in the chest. Jarred from his stupor, the R’tosk gave a gasp and blurted, “Jaina! That’s a pretty name.”

She laughed as he began to tremble in her hand. “Oh, now you’re just trying to get on my good side.”

“Better the good side than the *inside*.” Another blurt. Yet once again she laughed mirthful pearls, setting Aiden more at ease. At least until she said, “so now that we’re good and acquainted...what were you doing on my chest?”

He paled under his fur. “I—I didn’t mean to end up there. Honest!”

“Oh?” She cocked an eye, “do explain. And this too.” She held up the bell in her free hand, tingling as it swung free by the string wrapped about her finger. “Why did I wake up with *this* and a mouse on me?”

Aiden gulped a piece of quartz. “They called it the Belling.”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow, “do go on.”

Praying to every deity he’d read about in Mythology and Religion class, Aiden explained further. “I know, it’s really stupid,” he said quickly, “but I need a place to live and there’s no other way to, really, really stupid—.”

She snorted, “well, it can’t be any stupider than what I had to do to get into *my* House.” Aiden stopped mid apology/rant. “Really?” Curiosity overrode his fear. “What did you have to do?”

“Had to swallow a goldfish.”

“Eat a fish?” Aiden snorted, “doesn’t sound too hard for a ca—a Bahst.”

“*Live*,” Jaina sized him up between her thumb and index claws. “A little bigger than you—but he went down smooth with a shot of scotch to mask the taste.” She licked her lips with savored

nostalgia. “But it was mostly a symbolic thing—hazing’s been banned at our school for over two years after two girls died being Sacked.”

“Sacked?”

“How you had to get into a Sorority. A Sacking means a burlap sack gets put over your head, and the other girls toss you into a river. Easy enough to get out of, unless you panic like one did, or lied about being able to swim like the other, and drown.” A shake of the head, as if to lament the waste of life. “So that was that.”

“Lucky you,” Aiden shivered, trying to banish the image of a mouse-sized fish—or a fish sized mouse, wriggling their way down the slender throat he’d tried in vain to slip the bell around, recalling the sensation of the powerful swallow beneath him.

In deepened dread, he wondered what other live creatures had disappeared between the feline girl’s soft, luscious lips. “You said something about—other kinds of mice earlier? Pouncing and stuff?”

The green pools deepened, lips turning up in fond remembrance as she let slip an ecstatic sigh. “Oh yes! Meal plans and groceries are so expensive; you wouldn’t BELIEVE the money I save going out and catching my own meat.”

She tilted her head back and flicked her tongue over her sharp, needled teeth, “and there’s something—intimate about hunting. You just don’t get the same experience buying a pound of ground beef at the grocery store.”

The pit in Aiden’s stomach deepened, “I—wouldn’t know.”

She laughed—a glowing peal that warmed Aiden even as a chill rolled through him from seeing her cavernous maw with its ivory points widen and shut less than an arm’s length from his face.

“Well, of course not,” Jaina said, “I mean, you’re a herbivore, that makes you....” she paused, brows raising as if a new thought intruded, “prey.”

A second blush filled her ears and Aiden felt her thumb caress gently over his back. “But you’re not that kind of mouse to me,” she reassured him with a gentle coo, sliding her thumb up to his cheek.

Though he had no reason to trust, let alone relax, Aiden felt his fear slowly melting. He knew to be afraid, knew not to believe anything the Bahst said, yet these truths, ingrained in him since birth by grade after grade of teachers, family, and friends waned.

After a minute or so had passed, she looked across the open lawn in the direction Aiden recognized he’d come from. “I saw two other mice that way—but they took off into a hole in the ground. I assume that hole goes down to a Tunnel and those were your friends?”

“Yes, and they were not really my friends,” Aiden grunted, “friends don’t leave friends to stay up in the woods after dark.”

“Why not just go down the tunnel yourself?”

“The hatches are pressure sealed and keyed to tunnel cars,” he explained. “They can’t be opened from outside unless the car sends a signal to. Otherwise, a weasel or a snake could get in.”

She made a small hmmf sound. “Then you’ll just have to come home with me.”

“Huh?”

“A little mouse out in the woods all by himself,” Jaina twirled a finger through his tail, tracing up his side with the tip of a claw. “I know there’s not a lot of carnivorous wildlife here, but we do have some possums, skunks, at least one fox—and an owl.”

“O-owl?” The one thing R’tosk feared more than cats. “You sure?”

“Quite,” she whispered, low and dangerous. “Wouldn’t you feel—safer with a predator that thinks you’re too interesting to have for a snack?”

“Y-yes.”

“I thought you’d say that. Now,” she mused, “where to keep you till we get there...” Jaina looked herself over, ticking off prospective locations. “On my shoulder? Nah, you might slip off. Purse? Lots of crap rattling around; might hurt you. Pockets? Too tight.”

Her face brightened into a sly, coquettish half-smirk. “Well, I guess you already found the perfect spot already, didn’t you?”

Before Aiden could work out what she’d said, the hand holding him plunged down to her top, tucking him into her cleavage. She continued to push, sliding him down further until his gaze was all white cloth and fur. Now it was *his* turn to blush, face and ears burning up as he settled between the twin furred hills like a small phone.

A rumbling thrum rolled upward from her chest, vibrating his body. Purring, he realized. She was purring. Enjoying the sensation of his small form nestled against her own within the snug confines of her bra, the cushioning bosom and silken soft fur threatened to cause him to nod off.

A sharp, sudden jolt ended that concern as Jaina rose and began to walk, her torso swaying like the bow of a ship cresting through choppy waters as she walked back to her dorm, Aiden borne deeper into unfamiliar seas.

Some indeterminable time later Aiden became aware of a pair of descending fingers sliding around his shoulders and torso. As before, he found himself resting in her cupped hand, except

now the rays of the sun, now waning into the orange pastel of dusk, were diluted by glass and blue curtains.

Taking in the surroundings, he saw that the room was small, sparsely decorated with pennants and posters of what must have been Jaina's school—and quite cluttered. Discarded clothing lay strewn about like debris from a storm—a circus-tent of a bra similar to the one he'd ridden in hanging from the foot rest of the bed that Jaina sat on with her legs crossed.

She noticed his inspection and turned sheepish. "Sorry; didn't know I'd have company tonight. Or else I would have cleaned this place up."

At least you have one, he thought. But he didn't say anything; what interest would she have in such miniscule problems, the concerns of a lesser creature from the dirt? No, better to do his utmost to keep the cat entertained—in all likelihood his life depended on it.

"—and the scholarship covered tuition, but not board." Aiden leaned back against the intertwining net of fingers keeping him propped upright as he on the smooth plane of Jaina's stomach upon the cushion of silken fur and trim abdomen. "So if I can't get go here, it's back to the old community campus I go. Which, in my home tunnel is just a—"

A rumble interrupted him. Not purring, but a growling; coming from below him... "I'm hungry." Aiden's blood ran cold, feeling her stomach continue to growl. "Up for dinner?" She asked innocently.

"Sure," gulping, Aiden felt her fingers curled about his body, lift him towards her face--then set him gently down on the bed as she rose and slid off. "Wait here." With a wink, Jaina disappeared into the kitchen before returning with a saucer and a platter.

Aiden's eyes widened at what sat upon the smooth plate beside a thin cutting knife: a mountain of cheddar, an orange boulder large enough to feed all of Kappa Epsilon. Taking the knife expertly in hand, Jaina sliced a thin sheet in offering.

"You're the kind of mouse that likes cheese, right?"

"Not a mouse on two legs or four that doesn't like cheese." He sank his teeth in happily. "And cats too, it seems."

"I—don't really like it that much."

"Really?" Aiden cocked his head. "But if you don't like cheese, why have so much in your fridge?"

"You said yourself; mice like it."

“Oh.” Then his eyes widened. “Oh.”

Smiling sweetly, Jaina turned to her saucer, filled with thick, viscous cream. “I planned to have a bit of meat tonight, but I wouldn’t want to make you nervous.” She lifted the saucer up in her dainty hands and lapped in short, quick precision. “I’d love to hear more about your home town.”

“Be...happy to,” slow but steady he resumed course after a brief swerve. “So anyway, I was born in the upper tunnels...”

Half an hour of small talk later, Aiden nibbled a small remainder in his hands while a larger portion sat nestled in his cheeks as the pair finished up. “This is the best,” he moaned. “After nearly squashing you, it’s the least I could do.” Jaina tilted the saucer up in her hands to finish the cream before setting it and the platter with the largely undiminished cheese aside.

“Oh, no, you’ve done way more than that. I mean, a fancy all-cheese dinner? If I didn’t know better, I’d say we were on a date.” He grinned lopsided. “How crazy would that be?” “Very,” she answered softly. “But what if this was a real a date? How’d you rate it?”

Fixated on his meal, eyes on the cheese and not the cat, Aiden missed the longing in Jaina’s eyes, the innuendo in her voice. “Full ten,” he joked, stuffed the last into his mouth. “This cheese is the best—can’t think of anything that would make this ‘date’ better.”

“I can.”

This time, Aiden didn’t miss her tone and expression, swallowing hard. “Ah, are you saying what I think you are?”

Jaina bit her lip, her tail switching slowly, working a length of hair in front of her with her hands. “The thing is...I think you’re kind of cute.” She flicked at a strand of hair while staring down at the bed sheet. “Silly, right? We’re not even the same species. I probably look like an ogre to you, all big and grotesque.”

Aiden heard the nervousness in her voice, the deflective masking of intent, saw the shy manner she drew her arms close and rubbed her elbows with her. Like a young girl trying to work up the courage to drop a hint on her crush: eager for reciprocation but fearful of rejection.

He stepped forward, putting his hands gently against her arm, sliding his fingers through her lush golden fur with deliberate “Angel, remember? Wouldn’t make that mistake if I didn’t think you weren’t beautiful to the point of divinity.”

“Mmmmm,” she stretched out on her stomach on the bed, arms snaking around behind him and drawing him near to her lowered muzzle, hands cupped about his body. “You’re real sweet.” A pair of encouraging fingers nudged him up against the end of her muzzle, his face to the soft

cushion of her lips as she kissed him—he gasped at the overpowering sensual interaction—drawing back and licking her lips. “Very sweet indeed.”

Aiden’s body tingled from head to toe, as if he’d grabbed a bare wire, trembling in exhilaration, vaguely aware of the dampness covering his face and chest—and shirt and jacket. “My clothes are going to be soaked,” he panted.

Down came her pursed lips again for another kiss. “You could always take them off.” Jaina flicked her tail slow and sultry as the tone of her proposal. Her eyes fixated on him: a longing hunger beyond words.

Mouth dry, heart-racing, Aiden gave an obedient nod before fumbling with the buttons on his jacket, tossing it aside before yanking his damp shirt off. Above him her head turned to the side, inspecting and appraising him with a “not bad,” as she slid her index along his bare chest and torso, caressing him like a beloved pet. Her claw tip pricked at the waistband of his jeans popping the button and fly. “Not bad at all. But don’t keep a girl waiting; do continue.”

He gulped, frozen by a final protest of primal fear and cultural mistrust. “You—you really want this to happen?”

“Only if you do,” Jaina’s lips massaged Aiden’s chest. Sans shirt the electric sensation magnified ten fold as a fireworks show erupted in his head. “I would never use you against your will.”

“Use me,” he groaned, “guess it’ll still go better if I say yes?”

“Perhaps,” she teased, “or maybe I’ll let you take the lead—you’ve already proven good at getting around—ah, unfamiliar territory.” Jaina shifted in front of him, her top drooping and exposing a yawning chasm between her breasts that could have swallowed three of him. “Don’t tell me your courage has failed you now?” She winked. “Not after you came right up to me thinking I’d gobble you up if I caught you.”

“Actually, that might have been more desperation than bravery,” Aiden admitted. “With a mix of stupidity and a tad bit of curiosity.”

“What’s wrong with curiosity?” A nuzzle pushed him back into her palm. “I know *I’m* curious.” Staring into the alluring emerald wells of her eyes and the inviting smile, Aiden couldn’t think of an argument. “Nothing, I guess,” he mumbled in surrender, “although curiosity is usually more dangerous for the cat...”

Gently, she plucked him up in her hand and lifted him to her face to nuzzle and kiss. “I promise I’ll be gentle.” Jaina set Aiden down onto the pillow, towering above him. She crossed her arms down and pulled her top off, unclasping her bra as her voice shrank to a lustful whisper. “If we’re both curious, then why not experiment?”

Aiden awoke first and sore in a dozen places but didn't care. Stretching his knotted limbs he stood atop the pillow where Jaina had set him down with care before falling asleep beside him, her brown mane tousled and disheveled, her head turned at an angle.

She lay downward in the bed, arms wrapped about the pillowcase, and by extension, him. Falling asleep in an embrace, though in truth had taken extra care to allow for some safe distance in the event of a roll over. "I think I hooked up with a cat," he mused aloud. "How the hell did that happen?"

The answer sat beside him on the nightstand next to his piled up clothing: the bell, his mission, his initiation, his objective still unfulfilled. The sunlight spilling in through Jaina's window glimmered off its shiny surface, an irritating glare he couldn't look away from. The burning ray of light cut into his memory, resurrected the plan, and before he knew it, Aiden had scampered across the pillow, across the intervening arm and clamored onto the nightstand.

His phone had miraculously survived all that had occurred, as well as remained in his back pocket. Slipping his boxers and pants on, Aiden picked up the bell and made his way back to where Jaina lay.

This time, he kept a hand firmly on the ringer as he set his prop and posed as the phone clicked as before. Turning the screen around, Aiden breathed in relief that this picture was crystal clear in resolution, his face fully outlined in front of the bell and the sleeping Bahst.

It was done.

Hopping off Jaina's neck onto the pillow, Aiden sat down with his legs crossed and booted up the webpage Ryan and Kyle had told him to post the image on. In the adjacent window, he brought up the album function. Below the photo were two commands: UPLOAD and DELETE respectively.

A stroke of the thumb and his housing problem was solved; he'd probably be a hero to boot—the first pledge to actually through with the Belling. Aiden made his choice in the time it took to exhale and press his thumb to the screen. PHOTO DELETED. Shoulders slumping, he set the phone aside with a tired sigh.

"You're not going to brag to the boys about this?" To his not-surprise, Jaina sat straight up in the bed in full attention, the sheet wrapped about her torso for warmth. She studied him with her sharp, green gaze, "you just got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"They weren't going to let me in," he said quietly. "I wasn't supposed to actually succeed. I understand that now. The Belling wasn't an initiation—it was a way to get rid of pledges when the House was full."

Ears flattening, she gave a small hiss. "I see. I take it their House is well underground?"

“Yes, and smack dab in bedrock, too.” He smiled. “When the R’tosk build something they want to be permanent it’s *always* as far down as we can go.”

“And this works?”

“Sometimes,” he replied. “But if someone upstairs decides a subway needs to go through one of our major cities—well, guess we just have to move on. Like I’m going to have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, without the House, where can I live?”

“With me,” Jaina answered without hesitation, scooping him up in her hands and cuddling him close as she let the sheet fall away from her chest. “You’re going to stay with me.” Her hands pressed him into her pliant bosom and warm fur. “I won’t take no for an answer—I’ll chase you down and catch you *again* if I have to.”

Aiden’s head spun from either euphoria or crushing press of the furred hills he was squeezed between in the hug. “Is that even allowed?” He asked groggily.

She shrugged, loosening her grip. “We’re not supposed to have any Toms over after six. But we *are* allowed to have pets so long as they’re small and easy to clean up after.” A grin. “You didn’t make too much of a mess in my bed last night, but you’re house-trained, right?”

“Oh yes,” he flushed, “but don’t expect me to live in a cage.”

Hand on her chest, she feigned shock. “I’d never suggest such a horrid thing. But I *do* have this *adorable* plastic ball you could run around in.” Jaina snickered. Relaxing her arms, she settled back onto the pillow. “Man, listen to me, I must sound so—”

Aiden interrupted Jaina as he pattered up and kissed her, hands holding steady on her muzzle as he leaned fully into their shared passion. “Crazy. But that’s okay,” he finished after breaking their shared kiss, tingling from head to toe with electricity. “I’m starting to like crazy.”