

There was movement, but no way to tell which way. Even with his eyes wide open, there was nothing to see. And the air was so cold, so very cold. It was causing his sinus membranes to ache, the dull ache of the sinus headaches he had so many times before. The only thing separating this from death was the pain and the low hum and slight vibration on his back. Where was he? For that matter, where was he last night? How long had he been deprived of his vision? Was any of this really happening, or was it some kind of dream? He strained his memory to try and remember. The last sights he could recall were...

A party. It was outdoors celebrating a friend's birthday. He had brought a gift. Yes, 4 tickets to that Sunday's game. There was indeed a lot of drink being passed around. By his count, there must have been 7 or 8 different kinds of alcohol being shared. And there was a lovely young lady who was on his arm. But.....but he didn't think anything happened between them. In fact, he didn't remember bringing a girl along. There was the feel of the bonfire, a cold bottle of beer in his hand, her arm locked in his and the stars above. If there was any conversation involved it was not very much. In point of fact, she got up and walked off with someone else leaving him alone. Since his second divorce, he spent more time gazing to the heavens for an answer. Perhaps there was a message in the stars. The stars. Why was he looking up at them so much?

The party broke up sometime later, leaving him as the last one on the beach. Alone as usual. Discarded bottles and cans littered the sands around the bonfire. Sighing softly he set about the task of cleaning up the mess. Empty food containers, half eaten burgers and what looked like part of a chicken all found their way into the trash. This had been the way his life had gone for the past year. He wasn't sure why, but he walked over to the surging waves and removed all his clothes to swim naked in the surf. It felt good. Something in this moment brought about a sense of serenity. The cool waters seemed to be a comfort to what had been troubling him for so long. His swim was uneventful but tiring. Perhaps it was his age catching up with him. His 50th birthday had happened about 9 months prior and failing health was quickly eating up what income he had. Much like his father before him, there were signs of the dreaded illness that claimed the vast majority of the males in his family. The last sight he remembered seeing were the stars as he lay on his back to sleep. Looking up into the indigo sky, the stars twinkled brightly. One set in particular caught his attention. Not for their brightness, but for the odd, circular pattern they flashed. Red, white, green. Red, white, green. Red, white, green. 'Must be a helicopter', he thought to himself. He watched them for a while before they spilt off and flew in three different directions at unimaginable speed.

"Dad never said anything about those kind of aircraft before. They must be new."

The sounds of the waves lapping at the beach helped him to fall into a blissful slumber.

Everything he had ever learned was thrown into a blender and set to puree. All he knew at this point was that his name was Anthony Miller. At 6 feet tall, he wasn't too far over weight. He had seen almost 51 years in his life. For someone of his age, he was rather young looking, many thought he was in his 30s. Especially with how his drives were. He lived alone in an apartment on...on...where did he live? So confusing. There was the move after his divorce, the travel up the coast to find a new life. The only solace was his children, both of whom knew the real truth behind the splits. They both moved on with their lives when the decrees were handed down by the bench. It had taken some months of saving and eating ramen for breakfast, lunch and dinner, but the new place was small and quiet. Only his computer and online life were his companions. What life he had was spent seeing what was going on around him. And now, now the world was dark, silent and cold.

Was he still asleep? Now, just barely audible, above the hum was the sound of talking. Quite indistinguishable and what he could hear was unlike any language he had ever heard. Finally, the hum stopped and he could hear a little more. Nothing like words that he could make out. But there was a lyrical content to it. Almost like singing in many ways. It seemed to flow so well if it was a language. The air he was breathing changed. There was a subtle wafting as a sweet scent filled his nostrils. Then came the swirl of what little he could see. The headache came on with no warning causing the world to spin out of control. Thankfully, the confusing state of consciousness faded out.

A soft blue/green light greeted his eyes. Finally, something to see. And...beings clad in robes with hoods so their features were obscured. Their robes, were an odd shade of orange. Not quite a sunburst and not truly orange. Easily over 7 feet tall but with no features to see, it was hard to tell if they were humanoid or what. But something was very different, he could understand what was being said. A turn of his head brought about a sharp pain behind his left ear. The room itself looked like metal, well metal-ish. There seemed to be a blue pulsing pattern running through it. This was nothing like any ship he had ever seen in any movies or on the bases he had visited. There was a serious lack of blinking lights. Seems all those science fictions movies and stories may have had it wrong.

"We finally have our end of the bargain fulfilled," one said

"It took long enough. When do we begin the change?"

Change? What the hell were they talking about? What bargain? His mind suddenly went into an alert state straining to hear every word.

Everything was important. The voices themselves were oddly soft and gentle. There was no menace or malevolence to them. They spoke as if they were wizened and venerable. He listened trying his best to feign being unconscious.

"We have waited for so very long for this one. Over half a century of their Earth years for the subject. It is a shame the father is not alive to fulfill the rest."

Eyes suddenly flew open wide unable to keep himself from remaining quiet. The ache in his head made it a little difficult to turn too quickly.

"I think the subject is awake, Monitor"

They seemed more to float than walk over closer. What looked like a three fingered claw made a motion scant inches above his face. the temperature of the air changed. It was warmer letting the stinging in his nostrils ease off. Moving his head about, he saw that not only was he nude and he was completely hairless. Something even odder incurred to him, there was nothing holding him there. No straps, no harness. He was just there. Even though his mouth was dry, he swallowed hard, both in fear and to help him speak.

"Who are you and what is going on?," he asked breathlessly

"All in due time, Anthony. All will be explained," the one called Monitor said calmly, "You are here and you are safe. In your language, I am called the Monitor. To correctly speak my name, I would have to pull your tongue out and stretch it down to your ankles."

Anthony took a deep breath to quell the rising anger, "I'll take your word for it. So where is here, exactly?"

A wave of a hand by the second in the room opened a viewing panel. There, in all its glory, was the Eagle Nebula as they passed by close enough to make out every detail. Eyes widened in amazement. Only the Hubble telescope had gotten any image of this with any kind of clarity. But there it was, beautiful and magnificent. His head swiveled from the nebula to the Monitor.

"How far away from earth are we?," the disbelief in his voice readily apparent.

"Farther than any of your craft can travel comfortably. Now, I am sure you wish to know the details of your being here."

He nodded "That might help explain how I got from Earth to trillions of miles out into space."

There seemed to be no rush to an explanation when the Monitor spoke. Its voice again resumed the calm demeanor and low resonance. It was like talking to an elderly grandfather who had survived all the wars, and lived to tell the tale to all who would listen. When he would speak, there was no choice but to listen.

"Your father was in your planet's military, correct?"

"Yeah, so? 20 years and was he ever glad to get out of there. They offered him an officer's commission, but he turned it down to get away from the insanity."

"In all that time, how much did he tell you about his work? The people he knew or what his main duty was?"

Anthony blinked, his father rarely talked about what he did. If ever. Only once, long ago, did his father express concern for the safety of his family. It was 1962, they lived far too close to Cuba that October. Obliteration was on the horizon and scant minutes away. It was the only time he ever saw his father visibly afraid. But then the idea of missiles flying in with atomic warheads was not a prospect that was high on the 'must see' list. His eyes wound up looking at the floor, trying somehow to put all this together so it made any kind of sense.

"He said he was a supply sergeant, that he would take inventory of what came in and what went out of the bases we lived on."

"What do you remember of your birth? Only what your family told you? No photographs or odd stories?"

Another nod. Anthony's mind was reeling now. What had they hidden for so long? He knew about the drinking, his mother's outside affairs, his father being shot by a sniper. His sister....sister. Jenny? He was the third child born to his mother. What should have been his brother, was still born. Many in the family feared he would be as well. Despite the odds, he came out healthy. Or, was that a lie. He was told his mother's heart had stopped 3 times. But, she lived through it all.

"When you were born, you had a rare condition for the era, you were born with both sets of sexes. Now, with the birth rate so high, it is becoming more common place and more accepted. In your time, that was seen as an ill omen."

"A...a...a hermaphrodite?," his head snapped up from his stupor.

"If that is what you call them, yes. Our race is commonly born with them. On a particular day, some years earlier, your father came upon one of our craft. It had crashed and was beyond repair. He helped our people to acclimate to your world and its ways. On

the day of your birth, he came to us and asked for our intervention. In that age, the surgery to remove one of your sexes was barbaric. We could only save one of your sexes. We were told your female sex was incapable of child bearing. So, we were deemed to make you male. For this, we made a pact with your father that, at a time of our choosing, we would retrieve you and restore you to what you were meant to be."

What was there to say, he hung there in stunned silence. Nothing anyone could ever tell him, nor all his teachings could prepare him for the unbridled truth. It was no wonder he had felt so far out of place in life. He had friends, but never fit in anywhere. He wasn't a great athlete, wasn't a straight A student. People did comment on his frame, wondering, in secret most likely, if he had changed genders. He wasn't quite the macho tough guy, neither was he the effeminate kinds he had met before. Work was nothing special, but it paid the bills and gave him spending money. There was a certain joy in cooking. But, many great chefs were male, right?

"When you see your doctor, does he show any concern for your longer rib cage and higher hip bones? Or why you were born with pointed ears?," the Monitor shook it's head, "The barber surgeons clipped them badly. You were also lucky they didn't clip your tongue too deeply. Though it's longer than it should be. They did not wait for us to aid them in that."

"N..no. He never even brought it up. And honestly, I never gave it much thought. The girls never complained too much about my tongue. They seemed to really enjoy it."

The monitor drew in a breath "He was paid to keep your secret. That is the trouble with your world. Well, former world. People keep far too many secrets and are so unable to accept others that are different. A true shame since you are called 'the human race'. A sad truism is that only humans can be inhuman. It's no wonder the Council of 12 deems your planet inhospitable. Now that you know, how do you feel?"

"Like someone has taken a sledgehammer to my stomach. How am I suppose to take such an incredible story? No one could ever make anything like this up. I can see why they never told me about any of it. I just thought they were ashamed of me. Even my own sister never said anything. What did they do with my....unused pieces?"

"That, Anthony, is something we will not discuss. Now, my next question might be a hard one for you to answer. What is your favorite animal?"

What a gear change, his mind came to a crashing halt. Animal? What did that have to do with the price of crab cakes in Baltimore? Animal? The term, 'smoke coming out of the ears', probably applied at this point. Dogs and cats gave his allergies fits. Horses were simply too large but lovable. Bears? They were nice and cuddly, but not his favorite. Big cats? There was always the fondness for otters and seals. Cute but, again, not his favorite. No. At last he found his answer.

"I guess..... that would be a skunk"

"Can you picture it in your mind, please? It will make it easier for us since we have no reference for it," the Monitor enquired.

'What a weird idea' he thought to himself. But, to comply, the image of a skunk came to his mind. One that he had seen at a special show in Florida. It was a beautiful champagne and white colored one. So very friendly too. It walked right up, stood on it's hind legs and tried to crawl onto his shoulder. The owner gave him a nod and it used those sharp claws to make it's way onto him. He pet it, such a soft coat and no trace of the legendary smell that came with them. And, he could swear that it purred at him.

"Interesting, very interesting. A member of the *mustelidae* family, commonly called mephitis mephitis. Seems to be fond of you."

'They certainly know a lot about my world. But what does this have to do with anything?', he concluded.

"Can I ask a few questions now?"

The Monitor turned to him "Of course, what do you wish to know, Anthony?"

"Well, for starters, what happened to my clothing and hair? Why am I naked? What is holding me here? Why was it so dark when I was brought here? How is it I can understand every word you say now? And, where are we going to? "

There was an audible chuckle from under the hood. Anthony blinked several times before he got his answer.

"Curiosity, a good quality. You will need it. First, the table you are on is a decontamination chamber. It holds you in place with a field that is neither seen nor felt. But will not allow the occupant to move. Unless we deem it necessary. Your clothing and hair were vaporized to maintain sterility. As well as the first two layers of your epidermis. The darkness was needed as your eyes were badly dilated from the lights of out landing. It was the best way to save your sight. While we had you in our stasis chamber, we implanted a translator behind your left ear. It is something mandatory for travels through different galaxies. Lastly, a new world where you will find others of your own kind. Before you ask, we have transplanted others there. It was.....necessary."

"You put other's there? As what? Some kind of experiment?"

The Monitor shook his head "No Anthony, we did it to save them. They were going to pass long before their time was due. We saved them, gave them new forms and put them on a world where they could survive with others who shared the same fate. Is that so cruel?"

He made it sound like there was something dreadful about to happen. With a little effort, Anthony raised himself to full vertical to speak to them. It was only a little painful with them being that tall.

"So, this change we are talking about, what will it entail?"

No reply, just another wave of the clawed hand. The table itself wrapped a clear tube around his arms, holding them more securely. A motor of some power silently raised his arms up making it into a cross position. Much like that of an operating table. Next, his legs were spread wide to the point of being excruciating. Even what he had that hung between his legs started to hurt. Sudden pain enveloped his arms while several needles were easing their way into his flesh. The Monitor approached closer.

"I do apologize, but this will be painful. But the change is most urgent. You don't have much longer in your current state."

Anthony's head rolled from side to side in protest, "I over 50 years old, what are you doing to me!!!!"

"That is part of our project, we are going to reverse your body's time clock. We will take off almost 4 decades of your age. Again, we are sorry but this is what your father agreed to."

All his appendages went cold, ice cold. Colder than the air in the the tube. Any warmth in the room was negated by what surged through his veins. Something pushed his head all the way back stretching his throat. Some kind of darkened tube lowered down

and pushed into his mouth and down his throat, but his airway was clear enough to breathe. The same happened below, the rectal opening was wetted and stretched to accommodate the tube that was inserted. Muffled screams and cries of protest were barely acknowledged by the pair aboard the ship. Nothing he had ever done in his life could have prepared him for what was to come.

Anthony's body tingled all over. Pinpricks of sensation were scattered then gathered to become one large feeling. Both ears began the migration upward to take their place atop his head. He could feel everything, the little toes and fingers melding into the ones next to them to lessen the number of digits. At the base of his spine there was sharp, unrelenting pain as something, maybe a tail, was growing from there. His eyes beheld the growth of his face. A muzzle shaping itself from his very bone matter. There was no way to stop seeing this, the pain kept his eyes wide open. White fur grew to either side of his nose with two golden stripes down the middle. His chest became heavier, growing and shaping through all his struggles. His body was changing, and there was nothing to he could do. There were pains in parts of his body that he never knew could hurt.

Then came the greatest pain of all. Between his legs came the scent of flesh being seared. The skin there was sliced open with surgical precision and reshaped itself into the labial folds that now housed his vaginal canal. This was a pain that no man should experience. An intense pressure that swiftly filled the cavity that had been left behind. Tears ran down his cheeks from the excruciating ordeal. Birth may have been one matter, but the regrowth of the female sex, was a whole other ordeal. But this was what he had been brought here for, to become what he once was. The conscious world faded from view with the words from his captors.

"It's almost complete, Monitor. The change is nearly done."

"Good. there may be a period of adjustment. Learning to walk and deal with the new life that is ahead. Odd that he would choose that as a favorite animal, but we are only here to keep our end of the pact."

How long had that taken? An hour? A day? Longer? All he knew now was that every muscle and joint in his body ached like never before. The waking world was far from being kind to him. At least this time, he was laying in a bed, comfortable and warm. The covers were slowly removed showing there to be a rather rounded, perfectly formed pair of breasts. In a move the bedclothes were pulled away fully revealing the new body. Well toned, shapely but with the sheath for male genitalia. A curious paw slipped between the legs only to discover the new found cleft. Even the light touch sent a strong shiver all through him. Trying to stand proved to be an adventure unto its own. They weren't really feet, but under the 4 toes was a thick pad which was meant to be walked on. And the tail, thick, luxurious, and so soft. The legs weren't ready to support his new shape just yet. The door slid open as the duo walked in.

"Ah", the Monitor spoke softly, "You are awake. How are you feeling?"

"What have you-," he cut the word short. The voice was not his. It was higher pitched, almost an octave and a half higher. He managed to gather himself to speak "What is this madness? What did you do? What am I?"

The Monitor was calm and helped him up slowly "We told you, you are now what you were born to be. Albeit not of this race."

"I go back to Earth looking like this, I'll be in someone's science lab being cut open."

As shi thought about it, that was where shi was not too long ago. Rising to her paw pads, the both took an arm to help steady hir. The eyes were still looking at the new form in disbelief.

"So what about your project? Was it successful? Am I younger and covered with fur?"

"Yes, we are quite pleased with how you turned out. Would you like to see yourself, fully?"

Shi nodded as they lead hir to the sliding doors. Walking was becoming easier. The muscles were starting to understand the movements. Shi didn't concentrate on the tail, which was good. It was giving her more balance. Within a few moments, shi stood in front of a mirror, full length and reflecting hir image. A hesitant paw moved up touching the surface. It was indeed hir. Eyes scanned up and down the body. If this really was hir, they made hir beautiful. At least to hir eyes. The white fur had tinges of golden highlights.

White hair hung down hir back bearing the markings. Two golden stripes ran its length meeting up with the pattern on hir back. There was a circular swirl on the right cheek of hir rear. With each step there was a fluid grace to each movement. Hir height was also much different. There were some inches missing, but it suited this new form so well. Both paws came up to cup the swell of the breasts. As a guess, shi saw them as being supple but firm. The shapes fit hir paws well. Shi was flawless. This made all that pain and suffering worth it. Shi squatted down onto all fours and it actually felt natural and pleasant. Watery eyes gazed up, there was a sort of happiness in them. A thankful look, if you will. Shi managed to stand on hir own without any help this time.

"This.....this is what you did to me? How....old am i now?"

"By our estimate, you are the equivalent of 19 of your Earth years. We have also eradicated the plague which was ravaging your body. As we said, you had little time left. Perhaps as much as a solar year. But most likely less than a quarter of that period. So now you have a very long life ahead of you. We have a little time to help you acclimate to your new body. We only wish your father were alive so we could thank him for this."

Shi couldn't stop eyeing the new form. So much to learn and the first order was to learn to walk properly. While it may have been getting easier, it was still tiring. With aid, shi was taken back to the room and fed. For some unknown reason, they had no thought one way or the other as to whether shi was dressed or not. There were few choices for clothing, but what was there was worn to cover herself. Eating turned into a whole new experience. The sharp teeth would catch hir tongue. On many occasions causing it to bleed. And food didn't taste the same. The more raw it was, the better it sat with hir. When shi would get to sleep, there was always the temptation to explore both of the sexes. Both were highly sensitive and responded to the lightest touch. Days would pass and shi learned more and more of the new capabilities. More strength, more endurance and keener senses. Shi was always a quick learner and that helped with the gathering of new information.

During their travels, shi walked up to the monitor. Hir eyes had an obvious questioning look in them. The monitor was busily working on some kind of machine.

"Monitor, there is something I want to ask you."

The monitor's attention turned to hir, "Yes? What may I do for you?"

"You said you were sad my father wasn't here to see this. What was his part of the bargain to be?"

There came a long, uncomfortable silence. Shi didn't think they were quite ready to answer that one just yet. Finally after several minutes of long sighs, he spoke in hushed tones.

"He was to come with us, to our home world. He too, would have been changed to fit into our society. But his passing meant that we lost out on repaying him for showing us what a true being of, to use a rather odd word, humanity, could be. He was to join as a council member, to represent your world."

"My father did that much for your people?"

"No, not just our people. His example was something that few could have shown. He had a curiosity, the same you share with him, to explore and see what lay beyond the next horizon. Or, in this case, next star. He was a good being. We honor his memory by aiding you as well."

There was only a nod for an answer. The one time he ever told Anthony anything about space, was when they sat together watching tv shows about space travel. And how much he wanted to see what was out there. Perhaps that is where his own star gazing came from. Right now, his fondest memory of his father was when he got to meet his own grand daughter. Born perfect in every respect. The pride in his father's face. All the days that they had fought, the arguments and bickering were all behind them. There was peace and reconciliation. And now.....now the whole universe had changed in this short amount of time.

"And what will happen with my disappearance? Are they even looking for me?"

"No Anthony," the Monitor replied, "There was a duplicate created and left. It was found by what you call a shark and killed. Anthony Miller no longer exists. We leave nothing to chance."

Shi nodded, understanding what was lay ahead of him. For the first time in his entire existence, there was complete freedom.

Came the day the ship landed. With his head held high, shi was lead to the ramp as it lowered down onto the ground. The first scent shi caught was the air itself. Clean and clear, the aroma of the ground and the surrounding trees. His chest swelled taking in his first deep breath.

"This is your new home, Anthony. May you find peace and happiness."

A single nod was his reply. Tenuous steps took her down the ramp and to the earthen floor below. The ground was soft on the footpads. It felt so warm as shi made the very first step down. Shi looked back at the pair with a smile.

"My new name is Tina. That suits me better now."

Shi turned to them standing proudly with his head high, "Each journey begins with the first step. And this is mine. I can't thank you enough for what you have done for me. Is there a name for this world?"

The Monitor gave a simple nod "In your tongue, it would be called Arandell, at least that is as close a translation as we can provide. There is a village along each of the paths before you. We cannot tell you which to choose. But each will accept you for what you are. In your time frame, this is a medieval society. Barter system for gaining goods and needs. Use the skills you have to flourish here. May your path be smooth and free of danger."

With that, the door closed up on the vessel and rose without a sound into the air. Shi watched it vanish from sight before looking at the four pathways. It would have been easy to just start walking, but there was a 6th sense that shi felt within hir. The second path to the left gave hir a light hearted feeling inside. The soft ground felt good beneath hir paw pads. Shi turned and saw the foot prints left behind. The keen senses picked up new scents, the very plants themselves gave off a pleasant aroma. Then there were the soft petals of the red flowers. A silken like membrane with the mixture of roses and orange blossoms. On the breeze, shi caught the wafting odor of burning wood. Perhaps a camp fire or the village that had been spoken of. In either case, shi would have to be ready to meet hir first person.

The forrest thinned and opened up to a small set of buildings. this was the source of the rising smoke in the air. That, too, was pleasant, oddly so. There were children running about playing games. People busied themselves with the day to day affairs of business. But they weren't human. Far from it, everyone here was of a different species. Wolf, cat, equine, fox, bear and even a few that were like hir formed this community. A larger canine walked over to hir with a smile.

"Well," his voice growled, "Another new arrival. Welcome. I am Thorain, I am the leather worker here. And who would you be?"

"I am Tina," shi replied, "I wandered on the path to find someplace to call home."

"Then you have found one. There is a small home available, but we must know, what skills do you have to help the village?"

'A fair question' shi thought to herself.

"I can bake goods, cook enough to feed a village. I have worked with leather and carvings. I can make pottery and cooking utensils."

Torain's tail swished happily "There can never be enough cooks in a village. Come I will show you where you will stay."

Shi watched him walk just ahead of hir. He was tall, well over a head taller than shi with broad shoulders and a well muscled body. His mottled coat of grays and white accentuated his physique. He walked with confidence and purpose. What little he wore covered what was necessary and proper for village life. A loin cloth and kind of shirt that barely fit him. There was no need for shoes since they all walked on the pads. Wafting in the air was the scent of fresh baked bread, the cut of vegetables, fresh meat being braised and cooked. A garden grew where there were some rather odd plants, but it seemed they were edible. It looked like there were more female to males here. Something inside told hir this was the right place to be. It was peaceful, calm and beautiful.

The people came to meet and greet, to make hir feel a part of the village. The scents of each were distinctive. Like the cats, each had a slightly but unique scent. The same with the canines, the equines and everyone. Such a delirious mix of heady aromas. Each one took a turn at greeting hir. Nuzzles and hugs were normal here. Hugs from the women shi had known never felt anything like this. It was much more than just a greeting, it was way of welcoming home.

Home, that is what this was now, home. The first order of business was to get what was needed to help the village. That mean going out into the surrounding forest and gathering up food. Shi found something that grew on a certain tree. It had the color and crunch of an apple, the shape of a pear and the flavor of an orange. It was like nothing shi had ever tasted. Flowers were just as different. There was a kind of wheat that smelled

like it had been mixed with a barley. Gathering as much as shi could carry in hir basket, the trip back to the village was serene. Shi showed off the cooking skills shi had gathered in hir years of life. The breads made had a different flavor, lighter in texture and easier to bake. What was made brought hir needed pieces for the small domicile shi was given. A pile of sleep furs, a chair, writing implements.

Weeks passed before there was any sign of trouble for them. Several children played just outside the village when a scream came. From the tree line emerged 3 of them. They were rats, raggedly dressed and intent on harm. These bandits were wielding sticks like pole arms wading in threatening and bullying the peaceful villagers. Shi watched as two of the males were taken down within moments. Inside, came the memories of hir past life. The broomstick was broken off at the bristles and shi walked out to the middle of the pathway. A defiant look came to hir eyes when shi motioned for one of them to dare to get closer. The first one smirked, regarding hir with the little interest. That is, until shi slapped the broom handle against the side of his head knocking him across the village. Blood poured from a gaping wound that had been created. This was not unnoticed by either the villagers nor the bandits. All stood in amazement as she spun the now weapon in hir paw. It twirled and created a pattern that made some dizzy. Shi stood hir ground beckoning another to step forward. The broomstick stooped it's rotations coming to rest in a paw as the remaining two circled to flank the one who dared stand against them.

"It figures it would be a female to defend this worthless place," the first spat. His voice growled, trying to intimidate hir.

They stopped on either side of hir. Each holding his weapon out and waiting. Shi smiled and if they knew why, they may not have wanted to do what they did next. They both moved as one, swinging at her from both left and right. Shi ducked causing both weapons to clash together over hir head. With a swish of the wooden weapon, Tina cracked them both on the knees with a sound of breaking bones. Shi didn't care if they had broken legs, they had come to hurt the villagers. One was unlucky enough to get the next blow between his legs. Everyone in sight winced at the sound it made. His eyes rolled up to the back of his head, only able to lay groaning in severe pain. The remaining one found himself at the pointed end of the weapon as shi looked down at him, lips pulled back in a sneer on hir lips.

"If I ever catch you three here again, I will use your guts like tinsel to decorate the trees!"

This was the last thing anyone expected from hir. At all times, shi was calm and smiling. They nodded trying to not show how much pain they were in. The two bandits rose and dragged their companion from the scene and out of sight of their defeat. Shi stood, the sneer still on the white and gold muzzle. Everyone stood, mouth agape staring in disbelief that the new comer had beaten back an attack like that. They had gotten used to having to pay them in food to get the children back. Tina walked along the prints in the dirt and found the son of the leather worker bound to a tree. The small vulpine child shivered and cried as shi drew closer. His jade green eyes looked up happily to see hir approach. Sharp claws ripped the ropes apart. His reaction was a little surprising. He hugged hir tightly, thanking hir for what shi had done. Shi leaned down and kissed him on top of the head with a smile.

"You are welcome Disandre. Now get back to your mother and let her know you are all right."

He nodded quickly and did as he was told. Shi took a deep breath steadying the frayed nerves. After all, it had been some time since shi had wielded a weapon. An oh so familiar feel of cold rushing adrenaline coursed through hir as it had so many times at the events. The years of fighting in armor, a blade in each hand fighting in the crown wars, winning tournaments, receiving the knighthoods and accolades. And the feasts, those were where hir talents truly shone. All the food and spirits shi distilled. Maybe, just maybe that was hir purpose here. Things were seemingly becoming clearer.

When shi reached the village, there was a gathering there to greet hir. In their eyes was a mix of awe and wonder. This was the first time anyone has stood against any kind of attack. Every eye watched hir walk back to be hugged by all the children. Shi led them to the well and played tag and hide and seek. Shi was alive, the cold rush was flowing still while shi tried to help it wear off. It took some time, but eventually shi calmed enough to return to hir dwelling. Inside, hir eyes were greeted with all sorts of gifts. A full bed replaced the pile of furs, there were more cooking utensils, bowls and clothing. This was a little too much for Tina to take in. Tears rolled down hir face. Both paws came up buying hir face letting out sobs of happiness. Shi was accepted.

It was becoming so much easier to make friends. Shi had more than proven hir worth to the village and not just in the defense to it's people. Shi showed them a few new ways to make breads, marinades for meats and poultry. There were seasonings shi had found in the wanderings of the forest. Trading skills was always a good way to get something new. Or even make it himself. It filled hir with pride to know that shi had made hir own goods and could use those to help others.

In this community shi found that there was shamaness who healed all this needing it. Several days after the fight, shi went to see her. Much to hir surprise, she turned out to be a lioness. Tall and lean, her tawny clean coat shone in the sunlight. Long hair hung down to the center of her back. The angular frame was very agile and flexible. She was so much taller than shi and quite intimidating, but her voice was like the soft rolling of the waves on ocean. Gray eyes regarded the slight skunk with a serene smile. There was the sweet scent of incense in the air. A mix of honeysuckle and cinnamon. On the floor were scattered pillows around a small round table. On it were ceramic cups with a pitcher for water.

"So, tell me child, what brings you to me?"

"I found some herbs to that you had asked for, Seyatra. I'm not sure how much you may need. I have a small pouch's worth"

She smiled and retrieved the pouch. Their hands touched and the lioness' eyes went wide. She didn't let go, not for several minutes. The eyes stayed wide gazing at hir. It seemed as if the lioness was in a trance, learning some forbidden knowledge. Her head lay back letting out long shaking, groaning moans. This was quickly becoming a surreal situation. Once she left go of the white paw, she sat in the wicker chair that had been woven for her by the village. More silent minutes passed before she could gather her thoughts.

"Child, do know what has been down to you?"

Shi blinked several times, stunned by this happening "They changed me, made me what I was born to be."

"No child," she said flatly, "You are only half right."

"What do you mean? When I was born-"

"I know your story child. They gave you much more than a new form."

"What? I'm both male and female. How much more could there be?"

The lioness closed her eyes with a sigh "Have you had your first heat cycle yet, child?"

"Heat? I didn't think I could go into heat. My," came the reply as shi was turning a shade of red beneath the fur on hir face, "I can't have kits or whatever little skunks are called."

"No child, you are fully able to have little ones. Both being mated and mating with another. A male can grace your body with the seed of life and you will conceive. And you may lay with a female and give her your seed to grant her a child. The Monitor was most upset when he learned he was deceived. Yet another reason for your people and planet are not to be allowed to be on the council."

Shi stood there, hir mouth hanging open in disbelief. How could they have done this to hir?

"There is more child."

"There is," shi said with hir heart ponding, "What else do I need to know?"

"When your heat cycle hits you, you will have no choice but to mate. if you do not, you will die."

"As in, 'dead no coming back, nothing can be done to stop this from happening', dead?"

She let out a resigned sigh "No child, nothing can be done to stop when your destiny is. I am sorry child, but there is nothing I or anyone can do."

"But, when I was born like this, they said my....my....was unable to and that's why they did it. They turned me into a male human."

"They lied child, you *WERE* fully able to bear young. That is what frightened them. They lied to the Monitor and everyone. Including themselves. The so called doctors had convinced everyone that you womanhood was sterile. While quite the opposite was true. Your birth was 1 in 10 billion. This is the warning I give you; your heat will be strong. Far stronger than any desire for someone you have ever had. For your own good, find someone who will be there for you when it begins."

Ice cold chills ran all the way down hir body. Nothing more needed to be said. The walk back to hir home was slower then normal as shi tried to take of this in. The door was closed and the shutters were locked tightly before the clothing was removed. In the full length mirror, shi stood staring at the reflection. Paws caressed along the contours of the body. They both stopped on hir abdomen with a shaky breath.

How could they all have deceived hir so? The thought of a child being created with in hir body and what shi would need to do to have that child. On unsteady legs shi walked back to the oven and started to do something, anything to take hir mind off what was revealed. Loaves of bread were made, flat breads. All sorts of baked goods until there was nothing left to make. When it was done, the moon shone high over the village. The weariness of the day had taken it's toll on hir. Tina's bed looked so good as shi fell into a dreamless sleep.

The day dawned brightly with no sign of distress in the air. Goods were taken to market and traded, some simply given away to the children. The smile on hir face was visible to all. One of the young women of the village, a vixen named Kayla walked up and hugged hir. Kayla had been learning some of the secrets that Tina had garnered in hir years of cooking. She was only a little shorter than the skunk, but the eyes had a sparkle and shine that few showed. She held Tina's paw in her black gloved ones.

"I was thinking of going for a swim, would you like to join me?"

Tina smiles "Of course, Kayla. Where would you like to go?"

"There is a small lake with a waterfall not too far from here. Maybe we can even catch a few fish for a stew later."

There was a nod with a bright smile and the pair made their way out of the village, with just one stop to gather up a large pouch and hir weapon.

"Don't want to be caught unawares after all," Tina explained.

The walk through the forest was refreshing and calming. A narrow path wound its way around the trees and bushes before it opened to a meadow surrounded by the trees with a cliff at the far side where the water cascaded down into the lake. Kayla ran to the edge of the lake tossing her simple dress aside. For the first time, Tina had seen her friend in such light. Her body, perfect in every aspect. A shapely form, supple breasts that held firm on her chest. The long, thick tail swished happily behind her. Tina swallowed hard trying not to think of Kayla in such a way, but the thoughts were already there. Shi ran to some bushes next to the lake to undress while the vixen was under water. Shi stepped into the swirling waters beside the waterfall grateful in knowing she hadn't seen what the skunk really looked like. As by now, the pink tip poked out from hir golden sheath which was now hidden by the waters.

They swam and did manage to capture what was needed for the night's meal for the village. Water was splashed back and forth, both becoming soaked down to the skin. There was a small outcropping of rocks next to the falls where the vixen lay, sunning herself. It was hard for Tina to take hir eyes from Kayla. The stirrings below had only gotten worse. Kayla caught sight of Tina's gaze and launched herself to start the wrestling that came with such play. It was all Tina could do to catch her. They landed on the bank of the lake with the vixen squarely on top. The smile went from one of playfulness to one of question. She rose up seeing what effect the vixen had had on hir. Tina turned hir head away trying to hide the shame. The worst fear had come to pass and now came the reality of the situation.

"I...I don't understand. You have a-"

"Yes," shi said, the voice quivering as tears ran down the cheeks, "I have both and I tried so hard to hide it. Now that you know, if you want to stop being my friend, I'll understand."

Kayla's response took the skunk by surprise. She leaned down kissing hir. Not just one of friendship, one that would be shared by a loved one. The initial shock wore off quickly. Their kiss became a shared one, both giving in to their heartfelt fondness for the other. Kayla was taking the lead in this now. Her small paws caressed the skunk's face with a touch that was sending surges of fire all through hir. The kiss was sweet, sweeter than any shi had ever shared with anyone else. Kayla's paw found the protruding member and let a pair of fingers glide on its length. Long minutes passed before the kiss was broken.

"I never thought this would happen with me," Kayla tried to explain, "I mean, I have always liked you, even though I have never seen you without clothing. Now that I have, I'm even happier."

"You.....you like what I am?," Tina stammered, shaking more than a little and not just on the inside, "I wish-"

Kayla put a finger to her lips, "Shhhh, no more talk, I think we both know what will happen next"

The sun was setting on the meadow. Two souls, bound by friendship now found themselves entwined in the throes of passion. With no more needing to be said, the vixen rose over her friend and slipped the pointed tip into her eager nether fur. An audible gasp came from them both as it slipped deeper and deeper in, stretching the young vixen without pain. The sweet scent of the vixen flooded her nostrils with its heady aroma. They kissed once again in this sharing of a passion held back. The shared growls of the intense desire filled the air. Each kiss only sent their needs to a higher level. The tempo increased, rocking hips bucked to meet up in this now frenzied want for each other. Kayla rose up, arching her back, the muzzle lifted high in the air in her release. The nectar flowed down and onto the golden furred sheath. Its gentle warmth of it all was not lost on Tina's desires. Within minutes, she too felt the tingle, letting loose the seed to spill into Kayla's womb. Her claws dug into the ground leaving long furrows behind.

Kayla leaned down and kissed her again, her body receiving the fresh seed deep inside. Eyes met in the smile that only lover's share. Slowly the shaft receded back into the sheath and some of that deposit seeped out. Tina looked up at her with a new sense of wonder and affection. Paws caressed her sides when her nose caught wind of their escapades.

"I think we should bathe before we go back. Otherwise, everyone will know what happened and get the idea that I am more than just a baker."

"Good idea," Kayla giggled. "Besides, I am thinking maybe we could share the house?"

Tina nodded and smiled, "I like that, but we will have to be careful, not to mention quiet"

They bathed quickly, giggling the whole time washing the scent from their fur. Such a musk no one had ever caught before. Both sweet scent of their essence and the tinge of the saltiness of the seed which now mingled with the flowing waters. They found it difficult, at times, to keep their paws off each other, starting their love making again with an even greater delight than before. When the sun was just down below the mountain, they got out of the waters, dressed again and made their way back. Hand in hand they walked back to the village in time to add their bounty to the meal. Food and the milk from the goats, at least that's what they looked like, was passed around the table and shared by all. No one had any idea of what had happened that afternoon. Not that she thought anyone would care.

After the meal was done and all the clean up was finished, they walked back to her home. The bed was large enough for them both. There was a large enough fur to keep them both warm. This time the passion was slower and more involved. The exploration of each other's bodies, learning the touch and feel of the fur in the fingers. Learning what pressures were right when clawed paws were involved. They decided to keep kissing as to keep the sounds down. Though, truth be told, in the still of the night, the sounds from other dwellings wasn't hard to miss. It was easy to tell when the canine couple knotted. She would yelp and whine with her head high. The felines who would snarl and hiss when the spines were fully extended. The scents of blood and passion wafted through the night air as a perfume in the desert. And the equines who lived at the edge of the village, everyone could hear them. Hardly quiet and hard to take the eyes from as they walked through town.

Whispers spread quickly as to why Kayla and Tina were now sharing a home, much less a bed. But in the village, this was hardly unheard of. Tina took the time to

count the people. Even with the new births, there were more females than males, not by a lot. The scents in the air started to become more and more familiar. The fact that they now shared a bed only meant that they indeed would rub off on one another. This new found affection turned her attentions away from the other side of hir being. Kayla was quickly learning the way to make the foods they cooked taste even better. Kayla had taught Tina that the best places to find the herbs, roots, tubers and grains grew. Together, they would take long walks, discovering new paths that led to other villages.

"Do we try to make friends with them?," Kayla asked holding tightly to Tina's paw.

Shi mused for a moment, "Not just yet, we should tell Seyatra and see what she says. I feel a little uneasy right now being here."

Silently they made their way from the outer perimeter of the new village. The trip back had Tina thinking. Shi saw far more male than female members there. And there were some of hir kind there. Perhaps not exactly like hir, but the same species at least. These thoughts brought images and the nervousness. Tina's heart fluttered a bit on the way back. Seeing them tall and strong wearing so very little if anything at all. Hir head shook clearing those images and thoughts away. trying to focus on the matter at hand; getting Kayla safely back.

They approached Seyatra's home quickly, out of breath and sore from the long trek back. The lioness regarded them both with a quirky smile. Tina was blushing under hir fur. While the vixen's expression was somewhat confused. Seyatra beckoned them closer. The keen senses had long ago caught wind of their activities. She seemed to smile approvingly at them when they drew as close as they dared.

"What brings you to me this day?"

Kayla stepped forward with some pride "Tina and I have found another village. They don't seem to have much there in the way of food. We didn't know if we should go in and speak with them or come back. So, we came back to ask you of this place."

The lioness sat back in her chair, fingers poised under her chin. A solemn look played along her muzzle. The sapphire eyes closed slowly with a sigh.

"Yes child, I know of this village. When you came here, there were 4 paths to choose. One leads to that village. The one you both chose, brought you here. The other two will take you to a similar place. the one you have found is called Kradestor. Why they chose such a name is beyond me. On my home world that meant "City of ..."well, it is a word that means something quite vile"

Both made a face that brought to mind the aroma of stale cheeses or meats having been out on the sun for days on end. They turned to each other and giggled like school girls. Seyatra's gaze caught this and let out a soft chuckle. Two sets of keen ears picked this up and turned to see the smile on the lioness' face. She was reserved with her smile, even on the best days. A slow step forward brought the shamaness to them. Both had to look up at her. A gentle paw was laid on each of their shoulders. Without warning, she leaned down and kissed both their cheeks. Only wide eyes greeted Seyatra when she stood back up regarding them again.

"Both of you have grown much in the last weeks here. You Kayla, you have become more of a free spirit as it should be with your nature. And you Tina," she stood right before the trembling skunk, "I have watched you find yourself and much more."

Her eyes looked directly into Kayla's "What fate has brought the two of you together I cannot fathom. But here you are. I, for one, am happy for you both. Though remember my warning, Tina."

Shi nodded holding onto the vixen's paw tightly. A soft yerp came from Kayla, now she was worried that something would be dreadfully wrong with her new love. The lioness moved back to her chair reclining to size them up. Her head cocked to the side seeing the concern in the vixen's eyes. This was the sign she was looking for.

"As for the matter of that other village, you may go there and try to reason with them. Take some food as a way of showing friendship. But, take your weapon as you may need to defend yourselves."

Tina nodded and led Kayla out of the domicile and back to their own. Kayla embraced hir tightly when the covering was closed. The vixen shook from the tip of her ears to her tail. Tina looked at her in surprise and held onto her tightly.

"What is it? You're shaking."

"What was the warning? Are you going to die? What will happen to me without you?"

The skunk placed a paw on her cheek smiling "No, I'm not going to. Not yet anyway."

"Then what was the warning?"

There came a familiar long silence before she spoke, "It's when I go into heat. Seyatra said that, if I don't find someone to mate with, I will die. That is how strong it will be."

Kayla's eyes started to water "But...but you...but...I don't understand"

Tina half smiled kissing hir vixen tenderly "It's a curse of my kind. I know that I will have this problem, it will only be a matter of finding a male who can deal with me being both like you have."

Kayla held Tina tightly for several minutes before she was able to speak "I never knew it would be like this. I mean, I expected to find someone that I could love, but never someone like you. But, if I have to share you with someone else, I guess we could try."

Tina giggled pulling her even tighter "We don't know if anything will even happen. It might just be a one time thing. I can't ever see myself without you, Kayla. You make me happier than I have ever been."

The vixen blushed bowing her head slightly. No one had ever treated her so kindly, or shown her such a passion for life and love. Their's was born from a strange mix of what could have been and what was to be. A steadfast resolve came over her, she would stay by the one who held her heart. She had said it only to herself, confessing the love held inside. But there was a fear, what if Tina turned her away? What if shi laughed?

'No,' she thought privately, 'I will wait until the time is right to tell hir.'

She smiled, reassured that nothing would change. Tina took her out into the clearing just outside of the village. This time there were two weapons, on for Kayla and hir's. The first order of business was to teach her proper strike points and control. This was done by having a dead tree as a target. Tina showed her the 7 strike points of the body and what each blow would do. Each one had a number and Tina would call them out hoping the vixen would connect to the right one. Then came the 100 repeated blows to each area. Kayla's arms were sore by the end of that afternoon. Many of the children came by taking turns with the wooden weapon while she rested. Tina watched the them, laughing with them when they missed and praising them when they did it right. Even some of the adults took a turn in trying out this new exercise.

On the way home, 3 familiar figures walked up to the village. Haggard and weary. A bandage adorned the head of one while another walked with a minor limp. This time there were no weapons, only the look of defeat. Growling stomachs and frail frames suggested that they hadn't eating in weeks. Slowly they came, nothing in their folded hands and giving a wide berth to the skunk. Seyatra gave them a curious look when they drew close.

"What is it you come to this village for, bandits?"

"Please," the first said, "We have come to ask to be forgiven. All we wanted was to hold a child or two for ransom and get food. But since your guardian beat us so badly, we don't dare try it again."

The lioness smiled at Tina who stepped up to her side "She is no guardian, but a member of this village. And all here contribute in helping us thrive. What do you offer as services?"

They looked at each other unable to answer. Their heads shook as one, "We have don't have anything to offer. But we will die if we do not eat soon."

Tina touched the shamaness' arm "I have an idea, Seyatra."

"What is it child?"

Shi walked up to each of them in turn. Each one flinched, thinking shi was going to attack them again. Instead, shi circled them, sizing them up.

"I think they could serve a purpose here. They could act as protectors for those who gather food and wood in the forest. And, should other bandits attack, they can help defend the village."

Their heads snapped up in unison. A wide smile was on all their faces while they nodded to the lioness. She, too, nodded in agreement and raised her paw to them. They came forward and received her touch to their foreheads.

"If you accept this, you will learn the ways of fighting from Tina. Since she bested the three of you before."

There was an audible chuckle from many of the males in gathered around. The bandits looked to each other and whispered. A scant few seconds passed before they spoke in one voice.

"We accept!"

Tina smiled, slightly surprised that they would be so quick to take Seyatra up on hew offer. A motion of her paw and they walked over to join in the feast. Though hungry, they minded their manners in not hoarding the food that was passed around. Tina walked off into the nearby forest gathering up more limbs that had fallen from the tress. These would be fashioned into the weapons they would carry in protecting the gatherers. While not sharp, they were certainly something that would do some damage. And with a little extra work, they would be very handy with them. Each of them took a turn on the practice tree and each were as capable as Kayla when it came to using a weapon. It made hir wonder how they seemed so dangerous. But, with practice and patience, they could be trained. Now shi was doing more than just make food here, shi had become what they were needing.

When the flap was opened to the home, Kayla stood there before hir nude with arms open wide. Tina threw the flap shut and ran to her waiting embrace. The kiss they shared was the same as they had that first day. More and more they lost their ability to remain quiet while the passionate display went on. Minutes passed before Kayla let hir go

and smiled. By now, her paws had helped Tina out of what little shi wore. Eyes locked onto the other's sharing a loving smile.

"Tina, I have to say this to you."

Shi shook hir head slowly "You don't have to. I know, we both do."

"Please, Tina I love you."

Tina's eyes filled with tears as the vixen was pulled closer "I love you too. I was afraid to say it to you. I guess I was just silly for not, but I thought you would laugh at me."

"Never," she smiled, "Never would I laugh, unless you made a joke"

There was an elation in both their hearts. Even though they both knew the feelings they had, when said, there was no other feeling like hearing it for the very first time. Tina's heart skipped a few beats just standing there with tears running down hir cheeks.

Kayla, too was crying, sharing the sheer joy they both felt. Tina lifted Kayla into hir arms and carried her to the bed and lay next to the vixen. Tonight, their love would be unbridled and finally shared with anyone who would dare be close enough to listen in.

Morning brought smiles from all who passed by. The new sentries stood guard as they were ordered to. When children or members of the village went out to gather goods, they were escorted the whole time. Even the forays to the other village was accompanied by them. Everyone felt just a little safer with their new guards. Their training was rigorous and carried out daily. The children too kept up their play/training. For them, this was a fun new game. To see how many times they could hit the correct target without making a mistake. All Tina could do was smile and watch. Sayatra too watched the growth of the place they all called home.