

Gildedtongue's Story

By Robert Adrian
Book One: Inferno

Chapter 1

It was the day before the autumnal dance. The streamers were tacked up in the traditional green and silver that were St. Gabriel's Academy's colors. The cheerleaders were busy at tables selling tickets for the dance and the senior athletes were busy hazing and giving the new students a hard time. Things were all in all normal in the city Gildedtongue worked at. The chakat purred to himself as shi sipped from hir cup of tea.

The early morning newspaper gripped in hir other hand as shi made way to hir classroom. Though shi had the first hour of hir day open, shi was one of the few teachers who actually arrived early, and stayed late. 06:43 read the chronometer at the front of the class. "Damn, thirteen minutes late," the brown furred felinoid thought to himself while heading towards hir desk. Hir prehensile tail tucking in chairs to the student desks idly as shi moved. Sitting down shi ran both hir hands through hir red mane of hair, finding hir scalp to relieve an itch on the back of hir head.

"Today is going to be an interesting day" shi said aloud to no one in particular. This only reminded hir of an ancient Chinese curse. Booting up hir computer shi checked hir mail. Seven students writing in some excuse that they couldn't attend hir public speaking class for some reason or another. Not surprisingly, all seven students were registered to present their second speeches today. Looking over hir notes, the cancellations left only Dreamweaver to do hir presentation. Dreamweaver was one of two chakats in the entire of school population, the other being Gildy, of course. The common species has given the two a special kinship to each other. Hir parents took very good care of hir, except they were constantly busy during the day, so the young chakat went to the longtail for advice often. Gildedtongue, in exchange for the advice, simply enjoyed the platonic friendship the youth gave hir. 63 might not be too old for any chakat, but shi'll be the first to admit it is very lonely to live as long without a mate.

Gildedtongue's reminiscence was cut short by the shattering of glass. A baseball bat was being pulled out of the window, as the startled centauroid looked up. Shi dashed out to the door, wincing at the shards cutting into hir bare feet as shi wrenched the door open, looking into the hallway. Hundreds of students filled the hall, milling towards their first class, and the perpetrator was nowhere in sight. Shi pulled back and sighed, closing hir door again gently, as not to let any more glass shower. Limping to the desk shi called maintenance to come by and clean up the glass and put up some cardboard on the wreckage.

After the Gene Wars, America lay mostly in ruins, taking the fullest brunt of what could be easily called the third World War. It was the most targeted country for total land assault. Reason being that whilst the country set itself up well to defend against mass destructive warfare and terrorism, it lacked the ground force to counter an invasion, an ingenious attack through the Yukon of Canada, into Washington, then traveling eastward in its assault. Thus, those with enough time to flee took refuge in the allied countries of Australia and the United Kingdom. It was much to the shame of the American Refugees when it was the French who liberated New York and Washington D.C. Having been the focus of such a massacre gave way to new leaders with old policies. Just like how Germany reacted to the failure of the First World War, Americans in the southern sector, which became the Holy Christian Kingdom of North America (HCKNA) blamed the morphs for their problems, and the Humans First movement got its first foothold in that country.

Certain religious leaders of all walks damned and cursed the morphs. Legal and political measures were used to prosecute them to beyond the full extent of the law, stating plainly that all rights and privileges of the new Kingdom were reserved solely for people, not animals, or their kin. It wasn't until the formation of the Federation of Planets, which managed to calm the hateful policies of the time of troubles, and give morphs the joys, and benefits, that were to be shared by all living things.

"Old ideologies die hard." Gildedtongue mused as shi reached down to hir handpaw, yanking out a sizable shard of glass from the pad. A number of napkins were applied to curb the bleeding. Shi had to work quickly to remove all of the glass from hir wounds. The Turners thought they were giving chakats an advantage to their regenerative properties, however it did make cleaning small wounds a bear, especially non volatile substances like Glass, which could be lodged in hir skin for years. Shi finished hir conversation with the janitors and hung up, letting out a sigh into the air. A knock was heard on hir door and Gildy instinctively responded, "Come in!" but quickly added, "Watch out for the glass!"

A tiger striped head peeked into the room and nodded, giving a short leap into the room, over the crystalline dust, then nodded in achievement. Dreamweaver had a very unique fur pattern, as shi had some normal tiger stripes going vertically along hir body, but also patches of fur that moved horizontally along hir fur, making hir look like a loosely woven tapestry. Shi padded up to the older chakat's desk with a grin that reminded Gildy of a kitten with his first mouse clutched in his teeth. Gildy decided to bite and cocked hir head, "So, what's so important that you're missing your first class to talk to me, Dreamy?"

"Guess who's going to the dance tomorrow?" the student grinned, closing hir eyes in hir smile.

Gildedtongue, much like shi always does, played with the conversation like a kitten with a moth, batting around before delivering the fatal blow. Shi rolled hir eyes a

little, "I dunno, some new pop band?"

Dreamweaver smirked and shook hir head, "Gah, Gildedtongue. You're such a meanie at times. Me! Of course."

Gildedtongue gave a soft nod as shi looked at the younger 'taur, "Well, congratulations. So who is the lucky guy or gal who got to escort you?"

"Jacob Miller, you know, the captain on the rugby team? He he, he is so hot out there on the field."

Gildedtongue furrowed hir eyebrows on hearing this. Shi wasn't completely against the idea of Dreamy dating an athlete, but shi had bad vibes coming off that particular one. His record was completely clean, however, so shi dismissed it as pure irrational paranoia. Hir face softened at the empathetic barrage of good feelings from the teenager. Shi smiled and gave another nod, "Well, congratulations, Dreamy. I hope you have a good time."

"Thank you. So, will you be attending it as well?"

"Of course I will." Gildedtongue smiled smugly, "I'd never turn down an opportunity for extra money and hours. I'm rather mercenary."

Dreamweaver giggled loudly, "He he, well, that's good. Going with anyone?"

Shi shook hir head, "No no, just little ol' me. That's good enough though." Gildedtongue shrugged, looking up at the ceiling again.

Dreamweaver leaned in close over the desk. Hir black facial fur getting a red hue of blush, as shi whispered softly, "Well, Gildy, you know, if you ever get too lonely, I wouldn't mind if..."

The young chakat was cut short by the banging of Gildy's paw on the surface of hir desk. The yellow muzzled feline swallowing a growl, "That's enough, Dreamweaver! You know as well as I do the legal ramifications of such actions. Not to mention the breaking of the student/teacher relationship." Gildedtongue calmed down as shi saw hir student's fur prickling up on end and the buds of tears forming at the corners of hir eyes. The older chakat let out a long, slow sigh, regaining hir composure, "I'm sorry. I thank you for your concern over my well being, however, you know as well as I do what the Pope thinks of underage sexual activity." The leonine chakat chuckled to himself, "or any sexual activity that doesn't result in bouncy baby humans, for that matter."

"I know, but, well, in Chakona..."

"Trust me, I know Dreamy. I know. No one would notice, or care. But even then I

would refuse, so long as you were my student. If you weren't in my class, that would be different. But, firstly, you're in my class; secondly, this is the HoCK on Terra. And lastly," Gildedtongue looked at hir clock again, "Our class starts in five minutes." Gildedtongue looked over at the door again. The glass was still all over the floor, even though it was over an hour since shi called. Shi kept a broom and dustpan for this reason, sweeping up the brunt of the glass, and then laying down a thick carpet for the non-shod students, leaving the door open.

The day went on rather uneventful for the rest of the day. Students came, presented, and left. After the final class Gildedtongue took the recordings and the notes shi made and started to critique and grade each student. At 17:45 shi finally finished all the paperwork and left the school for the day, catching the bus home. HCKNA Terran buses were almost considered torture devices for most 'taurs. Each had a section at the back for four leggers, but were rarely maintained, or cleaned off. Thus Gildedtongue stood in the aisle at the back through hir short journey. Luckily the commute was only an hour to hir apartment.

The two bedroom flat was suitable for any bachelor. A full sized kitchen greeted the eyes of anyone coming in the door. An electric stove, microwave, and refrigerator were all the appliances the chakat used. The den was just to the door's right. A small viewscreen, which doubled as a telephone and entertainment TV, hung on the wall. A videogame system hooked up to that. Pillows of all sizes adorned the floor, mostly seated around a short coffee table that served as the main dining table. Gildedtongue took no interest in these as shi pulled off hir shirt, tossing it into the hamper, and then unbuckling hir saddlebags, letting hir books and notes fall with a loud clump on the floor. The bed's siren call drove the chakat to its downy breast, where shi slept.

Chapter 2

Gildedtongue snarled as the alarm clock pulled the chakat out of hir world of imagination. Shi wondered what the hell shi was doing riding a giant llama whilst an unseen announcer described a fictitious relationship hir grandmother had with a minor celebrity. These mental images were quickly done away with upon the introduction of Earl Grey into hir body. There was, as usual, no time for breakfast as shi threw on another shirt, packed a dress shirt for the evening, and bolted for the bus stop.

The bus nearly left hir behind as shi dashed the block between hir dwelling to the mass transit stop. Hir bus card seemed to refuse to be read by the driver's transaction machine so shi ended up having to pay two hundred and fifty credits to the booth to remain onboard. That fare was twice the amount any biped had to pay, but was justified that since 'taurs were at least twice any single rider, that they must cost at least twice to maintain their seating. Shi didn't argue as shi took hir spot near the back of the bus. Shi didn't have enough time to buy a paper so shi spent the trip

simply looking out of the window in quiet admiration and horror of the St. Altretric cityscape.

Most of the walls of the buildings were coated in various designs of graffiti. Curse words, gang names, and other bits of text surrounded images of phalluses and, at times, morphs being hurt in one way or another. The skies offered no different mood to the blue green eyes of the chakat. Skyscrapers speared the heavens like wicked fangs against the blood red sunrise. Billowing from the factories, clouds of midnight attempted to drown the sun's light. Though the Federation's environmental bureau registered these emissions as only mildly hazardous and negligible after 24 hours of dissipation, their early morning presence made anyone worry. The city renewed itself into the same desolate abomination it was before the conquer.

Gildedtongue's mind was snapped back to the present as the school came into view and shi signaled the driver that it was hir stop. The Mass Transportation Vehicle slowed to a crawl, stopping at the front gates of the Academy. Shi started to get off, heading to the door when shi felt something reach under hir tail and touch hir anus and vulva. A toss of fiery strands of hair billowed around hir head as shi snapped hir face around to see who did that. A perverted human chuckled and waved to hir, winking knowingly. Shi swallowed hir initial instincts to haul off and slap the twenty something with hir claws, and with shaky knees walked out of the door.

The initial surprise and adrenaline had worn off quickly, but hir fury stayed as shi marched coldly up the steps and down the halls to hir room, not responding to any 'hellos' or 'good mornings.' The door was still broken and the glass remained everywhere as shi stepped around it. Shi just wanted to set hir books down, head to the gymnasium, and take the shower shi forgot to earlier.

A fold of cloth greeted hir as shi approached hir desk. A memo rested on top of it with hir name in clear, bold letters.

To: Gildedtongue, chakat

From: Jackson, Earl; Human Resources

Gildedtongue sighed to himself upon reading the header. Nothing good seemed to come to hir from this department, usually in large complaints to something shi said or did. Shi idly wondered how they could still call themselves 'Human Resources' considering the large morphic employment, but a mental reminder telling hir who was on the board of education gave hir that answer. Booting up hir computer shi read the bulk of the memo.

Shir Gildedtongue

It has come to the attention of the board that the current dress code has needed to be revised to assume a greater sense of decency,

especially concerning centauroids such as yourself. On your desk is a new model of loincloth made to cover the genitalia of someone of your build.

We've received numerous complaints of third parties concerning the lack of your wearing anything below the waist, and this came as an agreement with the board of directors and the various third parties. We are sure you can understand why many people would be offended by such lack of attire and that you will co-operate completely.

'If it isn't some pervert trying to cop a feel, it's some nervous ninny blushing at the thought that any normal creature has the equipment to procreate,' Gildedtongue thought to himself as shi crumpled up the piece of paper. A growl developing in hir lower chest, letting the bass noise fill the room. Shi picked up the article of clothing and stared at it. The fabric on hir fingers already made hir itch around hir rump as shi could tell this was made cheaply, or maybe to be as uncomfortably as mortally possible. Shi made a mental note to give Mr. Jackson a very firm talking to after school.

The trash barrel almost called to hir to dispose of it before anyone came. Maybe shi could feign ignorance that no one gave hir any note or cloth. That idea came to a dead halt as shi noticed in hir inbox a campus wide message instructing all teachers must announce that all 'taurs must wear the new dress code by Monday. Shi did a mental population of the campus and tried to find out how many other 'taurs there were on campus. Himself, Dreamweaver, and a young skunktaur who didn't seem to really associate with anyone were the only ones who came to mind. Shi checked the calendar to make sure this wasn't Friday the Thirteenth. Shi was close; it was the Friday the twelfth.

Begrudgingly shi donned on the silly looking thing. On the bright side, this prevented students from 'accidentally' dropping pens to get a voyeuristic thrill, but shi'd rather had made this sort of decision herself. The fact that this thing was also the same bright green and silver of the school's colors, didn't make hir any happier either. Shi didn't receive any visitors that morning like yesterday, so shi managed to get a cheap breakfast-like meal from the vending machines at the teacher's lounge. Pop-tarts and coffee, whilst a traditional breakfast for high school and college students, didn't do much to ease hir palate.

Third period rolled around as it always does. Shi stood at the board, explaining how public speaking skills could benefit all of them, simply by the additional pay for a high demand skill. The raised hand of a student in the middle of the class interrupted hir. She was the usual cheerleader type, blonde hair in two pigtails, breasts that rivaled the chakat's, an outfit that revealed where her strong suits were (if HR was concerned with how shi was dressed, why don't the crack down on these people?), and a plastic smile that never seemed to fade. Gildedtongue was, as always, obliged

to answer, hoping that the question actually dealt with the subject. "Yes, Jennifer?"

Shi, of course, was wrong. "My dad's the minister for Revelation Baptist Church, you know, the one off of Main Street?"

Gildedtongue continued his struggle to not groan and rub his temples in agony, but rather attempted to move this statement to something relevant, "Yes, priests, preachers, rabbis, clerics, and all holy men need plenty of public speaking skills. In fact, that is their whole job." Shi turned his back to the class and raised his chalk again, but stopped short as his fur went on edge, hearing Jennifer continue his 'question.'

"Well, my daddy says that since Morphs were made by Man that they don't have a soul and thus can't be saved. So does that mean that you'll be burning in Hell for all of eternity?" What surprised Gildedtongue the most was the sincerity of her voice. This didn't, however, make his any less angry.

Perhaps it was the punk on the bus this morning. Perhaps it was the loincloth shi was forced to wear. Perhaps it was the fact that the glass still hasn't been cleaned up, or perhaps it was the fact that Gildedtongue hadn't been laid in forty some years. But at this point, the chalk between his fingers cracked in twain. Shi turned around slowly to look at the still clueless set of tits seated in his class and leaned against his desk, a cocked eye ridge and a bored expression on his face. "Is that so? Let me ask you something. If I don't have a soul, then what, exactly, is going to Hell?" Jennifer obviously didn't have any comment past her original witticism.

"If you're going to make stupid comments like that in my class again, Ms. Reynolds, then I hope you at least research some logic to back yourself up. Oh, I forgot, God damns logic and reason to make sure you brainless twits keep in line under your rich priests and any male horny enough to take you as his own personal property in marriage." The chakat turned back to the board to continue writing as shi heard the young girl scramble out of his classroom.

The official report stated that Gildedtongue regretted immensely what shi said in that class. Off the record, shi couldn't thank Charles and Kathleen more for that empathetic taste of psychic blood. It wasn't that Gildedtongue was an atheist or had anything against religion. Shi was, privately, a very devout practitioner of the Christian religion, but didn't quite agree with the mainstream practices of the faith, especially the ideology of creating the philosophies into a religion of fear and hatred. Whatever happened to 'Love Thy Neighbor?'

There was a deafening silence that roared in the room. None of the students made a peep through the rest of the class, which suited the chakat fine. Shi was definitely not in a very pleasant or humorous mood as shi lectured through the rest of the class.

Lunch was a more solitary affair than usual. By now his action in the classroom

would have spread like wildfire. Gossip and rumor are exchanged more than ideas and teachings at this school. It's not like that was the first time a question of that sort has been brought up in any sort of social environment. However, at least to Gildy's knowledge, it was the first time anyone had actively defended themselves against such accusation in such a manner. The other teachers seemed to avoid the chakat during the lunch hour, more so than usual. Gildedtongue took the hint and gathered his books quietly and returned to his room. This was, of course, the time when maintenance decided to clean the floor, making the chakat lose the ability to enter his 'fortress of solitude.'

His last place of sanctuary was in the library. Shi sat himself at one of the tables and picked up a discarded datapad. An article about a squabble on a Lunar colony read across the screen. Pictures of Morph standing next to Man, together as one, in their disagreement of their company's policies looked so strange and alien to the chakat. A paradise found only in movies and television. Shi noticed that a music file was paused on the background of the GUI display. Shi pulled the retractable ear buds from the top, wiping them clean on his shirt and placing them into his ear before playing. A centuries old rock and roll song started to play into his ears as shi checked the title and band. "I've Got to Break Free" by Queen. Shi chuckled to himself, wondering who in their right mind would listen to something this archaic. Shi shook his head, pulling out the buds and wiped them again. Shi returned the pad to the library's rack where the memory was erased and ready for another student to pick up. Shi sighed softly and made his way back to his classroom. Fourth hour started in just twelve minutes.

Chapter 3

Gildedtongue purred contently under the warm flow of water from the locker room's shower spout. Though the chakat tended to often lean to his masculine side, shi found that the woman's locker room to raise fewer eyebrows during bathing. That and it was usually far cleaner than its boy's counterpart. Though shi wasn't all that dirty or smelly, thanks for fewer sweat glands in his body, the feeling of the filth of the air and the stupidity of the school all dripping down off his fur and into the drain below was very therapeutic. After about an hour and a half of good lather, rinse, repetition, and soaking, shi finally came out to towel off his fur, not having a decent fur dryer at the school. It was a few hours after school and most of the students and faculty were off getting ready for tonight's event. Shi had his own eveningwear in his bag over by a locker.

Gildy blushed to himself as shi found the shower relaxed him a bit more than expected. His length throbbed darkly between his hindlegs, begging for a bit of attention. Shi looked left and right, making sure shi was the only one in the room before making his way to one of the larger 'taur stalls. Shi closed his eyes after locking the door and

moving hir left forepaw to hir length, beginning a slow, deliberate motion. Shi tried to picture people shi would like to be mating with, alas, absolutely no one came to mind, pure void. Shi tried to think of movie stars, or porn stars, even Dreamweaver to give the masturbation session some substance. No fantasy seemed to spring forth, though, as this whole thing became very mechanical. It was all over with a hushed hiss as shi felt hir paw become warm and sticky with the fruit of hir efforts. Even hir fantasies have become as lonely and as blank as hir life has become.

Shi lifted hir forepaw to look over it, seeing the pearl colored fluid streaked across the black paw pads. The essence for new life ran over hir paw, glistening like a golden elixir to end hir lonely nights. Shi knew that just shoving hir fingers coated in this fluid while shi was ovulating would be a good chance to put a cub inside of himself. A small, happy child willing to be with hir through those cold nights alone in that hell hole of an apartment. A slice of salvation the longtail yearned for to keep from going mad. It would be so simple, fast and efficient. Maybe when the cub got old enough, shi'd even offer himself to hir mother and father.

Gildy spat at himself from thinking such thoughts. Wiping the seminal fluid off of hir paw with a bit of tissue and flushing it down the toilet. Shi cleaned off hir limp shaft before letting it retreat back into hir body. Shi made hir way to hir bag and pulled out hir evening attire, a light green silk long formal blouse. Shi knew shi didn't have a loincloth to accompany this as well, but didn't care at that point. Hir day was terrible enough that if anyone had a problem with it, shi'd rather hear about it on Monday like the rest of the things shi knows shi'll get an earful of.

Taking hir small makeup kit to the sinks shi made some minor dusting over the hairs on hir face that have grayed more than the others, trying to get a uniform look. A little application of a mild perfume upon the two sides of hir jawline, and a firm blast of deodorizer against hir sheath, as shi certainly didn't want to attend the dance smelling like a young, randy male who just finished masturbating, no matter how accurate that would be, minus the young and half of the male part. A pair of clip-on emerald earrings completed the basic look. Shi looked at the mane of hir hair and, much like females even in that era, grumbled and sighed a puff of breath at it. A comb and brush started to work on the knots and tussles in it, trying desperately to achieve a form of uniformity in it all. A wild mane looks all right on a lion fur for most occasions except formal. After sticking hir tongue out at the reflection in the mirror shi decided to attempt to braid the mess. Shi separated the headfur into two clumps, and worked on braiding each half into its own ponytail, then getting a long band to connect the two at the bottom. Shi looked at the mirror and nodded, giving a small smile, "Looks much better," shi said to himself before gathering hir things and leaving the locker room.

Gildedtongue left hir books and things at hir classroom and left the school for a bit of personal time before the dance. Shi had a few hours to kill and wondered where to kill it. Shi could get a pack of cigarettes as shi was getting low, but shi would

probably be able to confiscate plenty at the dance. Shi saw the local Catholic Church and shrugged to himself, heading to the massive doors.

The 'taur made hir way to the confessional in the back, seeing that there was a priest available shi slipped in and knelt on hir forelegs, a very uncomfortable position since hir legs were not really designed for this work, but some traditions die hard, and others, not at all. Shi made the sign of the cross and began the ritual of Confession.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. It has been three weeks since my last confession."

"Go on, young morph."

Gildy gritted hir teeth at that phrase. Like most things, it was the little things like that. Most people expect a 'my child' or something, but this one was definitely another holy man who felt that there was a huge divide between humans and morphs. Shi took a breath to relax and started to relate what shi's done. "Well, Father, I've spilt seed twice since my last confession and have viewed pornographic imagery on occasions."

"Mmm, lust does tend to control your kind. No matter as you seemed to have been created to be such, especially as one who isn't even male or female. Anyway, go on."

Gildedtongue felt some enamel rubbing off the tops of hir molars in hir swallowed rage, but continued with a dry, flat tone, "I've yelled at a young girl for her opinions, and..."

"Excuse me," the priest interrupted, "A human girl, or another construct?"

Gildy pursed hir lips tightly, closing hir eyes. "Human," shi muttered, telling the truth.

"Tsk ts. You really shouldn't do that. I also see much wrath in you. Anyway, go on."

Gildedtongue was finding it increasingly harder to control hir temper, but managed to keep it under foot for this moment, "Last week I..."

"Look." The priest interjected once more, sliding open the privacy mesh, "Why are you even wasting your time and mine. We all know that only God's creations are going to heaven. You're merely a fancy new Golem of Prague. Made of genetic mud and science from people thinking they can be their own God. Some day you will stop listening to the 'Obey' on your forehead, and then we'll have to change it to 'Die.' Why don't you go worship the Turners or something and just leave the God work to the humans."

This was definitely not turning into one of Gildedtongue's best days. In the back of hir head shi very much wanted to slam the mesh door into the fingers of the thin

looking priest that was probably half his age. Common decency managed to win out in his head as she calmly got up and started for the door. His eyes a little swollen with swallowed tears, his tail dragged on the tile floor, dusting a trail behind him as both of his hearts sank to the bottom of his feet.

Before she left she looked at a hung crucifix in the vestibule, and asked the effigy, "Please, I really could use some help now. Your followers know not what love is." With that she went back outside, inhaling the cool air of the evening.

The skyline of the city of St. Altreteic looked a little brighter than usual, possibly a good omen of things to come as she made his way back to the school. The church district was always interesting to walk through, seeing beams of stained light run through the glass windows of the buildings unto the ground, making the floor look painted upon. The chakat's step almost seemed to get a slight bounce as she purred softly to herself, humming a quiet little ditty to sweep away the troubles of the day, for now it is night, and it should at least darken his woes. Maybe tonight she'll have a good night, she thought and hoped to herself as she walked into the parking lot of the school. Funny how reality and hopefulness never tend to coincide with each other.

One Week Later.

"Chakat Gildedtongue, you have been charged with assault on a minor, and the destruction of private property. How do you plead?"

The leonine chakat stared firmly at the judge before him. His hands painfully bound with thick bracer cuffs as well as his tail to his left hindleg. His tongue swollen in his mouth as she just stared trying not to growl.

"Shir Gildedtongue, how do you plead?"

Chapter 4

20:00 – 01:15 before incident.

Gildy managed to get back to the school without any more irritations. She had calmed down quite a bit from the cold air and the brisk walk. She daresay, felt a little happy about being able to relax and if something broke out at the dance, she could excuse herself with little worry of retribution. The event was already starting by the time she got there, the gymnasium's lights were on and the sound of the audio system was just barely made out by Gildy's black furred ears.

She purred to herself as she made his way up the stairs and into the hardwood floored room. The students were sparse, but the night was still young. It was a very usual

young dance in the Kingdom, the female humans were out dancing and having a good time, where as the males were predominately spending their time looking at the laces of their shoes, or chatting amongst each other about what movie or videogame they've watched or played recently.

Gildy spotted a fellow teacher and friend in the corner of the place as shi smiled wide, making hir way through the students to the bearded, white haired human and took plenty of will power not to hug him right there in front of the student body. "Reverend Johnson, I'm surprised to see you here!"

He returned the smile with his own wrinkled one, "Gildedtongue, I'm happy to see you here. Apparently we're a little under chaperoned tonight, so I've had to help pull the slack," he gave out a hearty laugh, "Of course, it's this sort of overtime working when I wish I didn't take a vow of poverty." The monsignor pat the chakat's shoulder, "Heard what happened in class today."

Gildedtongue's ears drooped, hoping shi hadn't offended one of hir few good, close friends in hir outburst, "Yeah, I guess I've been stressed out lately, Frank."

Frank merely chuckled, then gave a pair of shifty eyes before leaning in to whisper, "Between you, me, and the Lord, I think you let her off easy. People like that need a good slap of reality now and then. Call it human weakness, but I would have dug deeper than you did."

Gildedtongue blushed inside of hir ears at the comment, "Heh, thank you. Glad to see someone giving me a bit of support today."

21:45 – 30 minutes after the incident.

"You fucking freaks make me sick! I've read all that propaganda the Feds keep dishing out about your kind, but tonight just proves you're all a menace to everyone around you!"

The police officer was screaming into Gildedtongue's face as shi sat in the interrogation room. Hir eyes remained fixated on the steel wall in front of hir, counting the cracks in the paint, as hir tail remained wrapped around the leg of the table in front of hir. It's only been a few minutes since shi was thrown in here, but it already felt like an eternity. Shi hasn't said a word since shi was taken to custody, keeping hir yellow muzzle firmly locked with hir tongue swelling against the roof of hir mouth.

Hir left paw unconsciously stroked over hir right arm, still tingling and burning from the event of being stunned. All of hir muscles ached, having had been rapidly twitching from the effects of the stunning weapon. A stun ray was little different than a 20th century Tazer aside from less needles and direct electricity.

The officer continued to ramble and rave loudly in front of hir, hir brain having droned him out with the sounds of the air conditioner unit. Finally the man swung open the door and stepped out with a huff, slamming the steel door behind him. Gildy could hear the door latch and lock, not that shi was in any mood to escape at the moment.

20:30 – 45 minutes before the incident.

Gildedtongue wasn't too interested in leaving at the moment. The large hall was pounding with the sounds of synthetic music from the speakers on the ceiling and multi colored lights were dancing around the room, bouncing off the faces of the various participants. Gildedtongue felt a little bored that not much was happening, however, after today, Gildy certainly could appreciate a little boredom. A familiar face popped out of the crowd, carrying a very uncomfortable older human male. Gildedtongue purred softly as shi bowed hir head to Dreamweaver. "Good evening, Dreamweaver. And this must be young master Miller. Your reputation precedes you."

"Glad you could make it, Gildedtongue, and yes, this is Jacob." Dreamweaver said in a smile, smitten and in a healthy bit of lust, Gildy noticed. Shi also noticed that Jacob's eyes were traveling all around the hall except to hir and Dreamy, as if to check out all the exits and the location of everyone.

"Erm, hi," is all that the rugby player had to say. He did take the time to look Gildy straight in the eye and give hir a cocky salute. Gildy nodded hir head back, not really minding the brush off, shi was about to do the same. Dreamweaver purred a bit, stroking over the thick forearm on hir date.

"Well, we've best be going, Gildy. Have a good evening!" the younger chakat purred as shi drug the athlete along behind hir. Gildy purred to herself, at least shi isn't letting him drag her around like a trophy. Shi padded over towards the punch stand, thinking to herself, 'maybe they'll make good companions,' but shi doubted seriously that they'd become anything closer.

Students continued to dance, forgetting what lives they may have in the future, but embracing the moment.

22:00 – 45 minutes after the incident.

The cold interrogation room housed only Gildedtongue for a short period of time, letting hir stew a bit. The chakat remained completely unmoving, locking hir muscles on the floor. Finally the steel door opened up again as a thinner, lankier officer stepped into the room carrying two cups of coffee. His uniform was left unbuttoned, showing off his work shirt and loosened tie. He set one of the black liquid filled paper cups in front of the stoic felitaur as he proceeded to sit down on the chair on the opposite side of the table, propping his feet up. Hey, let me level with you, Gilded. It's not your fault." The blonde haired yuppie started. "It's completely

understandable why you did all of that, hell I would have too."

Gildy's eyes betrayed hir as they moved to look over the human, hir brow softening just a little. The goateed face let a small smile as he felt he might have dug in a bit, "I mean, shi was a pretty girl, you know, for a morph," he shrugged to himself, "and I'd be jealous too."

The chakat's brain, probably too weak to keep up the stone face, opened up a little as shi muttered the first intelligible thing in over an hour, "Jealous?" Hir tail tightened around the leg of the table separating hir from the officer.

The officer nodded a bit, "Yeah. I've read up on your kind. You don't care about the age of your lovers, or who they are. A little release is all fun and games right? Maybe you got too attached to this one, and you were upset that someone else, someone younger was pushing you out of the picture, am I right?"

Gildedtongue was speechless; hir slight softening to this kinder man had only become thicker and colder with his every word. A slight growl developed in hir lower lungs, but shi swallowed it down reluctantly. Hir teeth clenched harder in hir muzzle as shi tried desperately to refrain from any more outbursts, enough that shi felt one of hir molars starting to break under pressure. The officer leaned over again, chuckling softly, "C'mon, you know I'm right."

Gildedtongue could barely think in the residual wrath brewing in hir cortex, but managed to keep reasonable and silent. Shi knew this man was wrong, completely wrong, however shi could not even fathom trying to attempt to convince him this. The officer produced a small datapad, smiling, "Just sign this with your verbal signature, and maybe I can get the judge to let you off a little easier. After all, you were only doing what instinct dictated."

21:10 – Five minutes before the incident.

Gildedtongue stepped out of the gymnasium to start hir rounds and to take in the fresh night air. Hir soft footpads moved silently across the concrete below hir as shi kept an eye out for any student or students trying to try something against the rules while most of the chaperones were inside.

Shi came across a number of students smoking out behind a dumpster can behind the cafeteria. They were rather surprised to see hir as they probably have found this reeking hiding spot to be useful for previous uses. The chakat was in the middle of checking their identification when shi heard a loud shriek from the parking lot. "Vae! * What's going on?" shi muttered, turning back to the students, "I'll attend to you later."

Shi knew perfectly well that the students wouldn't be there when shi returned, but shi quickens hir step towards the sounds of screaming. Hir breathing was getting harder

as was the pounding of his hearts while a great sense of foreboding swallowed his feelings.

The sounds seemed to come from a PTV parked just next to a light tree. His pace quickened as he saw the back of a young male student in front of the passenger side rear door. The vehicle was rocking rapidly as the screams were getting louder. Gildy recognized it was Dreamweaver!

The chakat was in a bounding sprint as she approached the vehicle. The screams were getting louder as she saw the back of the cheap suit her date was wearing standing in front of the rear passenger door, trousers bunched around his ankles.

"Shit, beast, what, are you 'kats all that shallow? Barely got the tip in." Jacob muttered, not hearing the approaching teacher. "Keep it down, beast, or I'll give you something to scream about."

Gildedtongue was there in a flash, grasping the athlete's shoulder and wrenching him around to look at him. The boy gave a yelp as he was forcefully spun around, looking blankly, then angrily at his assailant. A long, sharp knife clutched in his right hand, dripping with red.

22:30 – One hour, fifteen minutes after the incident.

A knock on the door preceded another detective entering the interrogation room. She was tall with brown hair, clutching a datapad in her left hand. A glance over at the quiet chakat made her visibly shudder. She turned back to the smug looking officer seated at the table. "We got the results in from the hospital. Mr. Miller is in stable condition, however both of his hands will need serious attention. His right hand should require the least amount of care, however his whole left hand will require reconstruction from the most basic level. This isn't counting the amount of plastic surgery required to rebuild his face."

The smug officer nodded, giving a wink to the detective, "Thanks for the report. And the other that went in?"

"The... construct claimed a number of lacerations from the knife, however the medics nor the doctors could find any." She finally said, taking another look at the angry Gildedtongue, then made a hasty retreat out. The officer was quiet for a moment, cradling the cup of coffee in his hands. His eyes shut, as he seemed to be thinking.

"You know, he was one of the best, Shir Gildedtongue. One of the best in his field, and in an instant, you managed to hurt his career, possibly destroy it." He leaned over the table to look at the chakat more intently. "How does that make you feel?"

Gildedtongue remained silent, looking down at himself. His dress was torn in

shambles, blood caking the bottom half of it as a long slit seemed to be healing well across her bosom.

21:15

Gildedtongue couldn't think.

All of hir vision seemed to match the red hue that was dripping from the knife. Time seemed to move slower, more clean and crisp. The left hand of the student pulled back, balling itself into a fist as Jacob threw a sloppy haymaker towards the chakat's temple. It drifted in the air like a toy balloon. Gildedtongue lifted hir right hand, catching the fist as easily as snatching a ball from the air.

Hir fingers curled and clasped around the hand. It had weight and velocity, but it didn't feel that way. Adrenaline pushed out of hir large glands, filling hir body with the potent hormone as shi squeezed the hand much like one would crush a Styrofoam container, feeling it collapse just as easily. Like a paper lantern, shi felt it go flat, then try to push back to regain rigidity, but unable to withstand the force.

Jacob's face contorted and opened in a scream that Gildedtongue couldn't hear, not with all the blood pumping loudly in hir ears. The knife moved faster than the fist, hir left hand couldn't intercept it in time as it scored a slash across hir chest, leaving a deep, bleeding gash in hir bosom. Hir left hand managed to catch up with the knifed hand at the end of his swing.

Hir grip of his wrist made his fingers open up just for a moment, causing the knife to start to fall towards the earth. Hir right hand let go of the remains of the human's fist, falling to snatch the knife out of the air as shi slammed the offending hand on the top of the car.

Shi caught it with the blade pointed downwards, where shi needed it. Hir right hand raised like a priestess offering a sacrifice to a pagan god as it pierced into the heart of Jacob's right hand, pinning it and him to the roof of his vehicle.

Jacob's face was no longer human. A wailing banshee of terror and pain, but Gildedtongue couldn't see that. All shi saw was the various aspects of hir life being flattened out like a ball of clay under a brick.

"Stop it!" a scream pulled Gildy out of hir rage, letting go of the teenager as he slumped forward, held up by his hand still pegged to the roof of the vehicle. Gildy pushed Jacob to the side to see Dreamweaver trapped underneath the seats rigged to hold hir in place. Gildy shoved the backs of the bucket seats, hearing the hinges snap before pulling the young felitaur out of the PTV, wrapping hir arms and forelegs around hir, sobbing loudly.

"Dreamweaver. I'm so sorry Dreamweaver, I should have said something and stop

you. Oh God, My Dreamweaver." Shi muttered, holding Dream squeezing hir tightly. Hir eyes shoot open wide as shi realizes what shi's saying. 'My Dreamweaver? Am I believing shi's my daughter? Am I that lonely I've taken another's child as my own mentally?'"

Gildy's train of thought was cut short at the arrival of the police, called by one of the students shi saw earlier. Hir vision went dark as the stunning weapons struck hir, Dream, and the unconscious Jacob.

06:45 The next morning.

Gildedtongue's eyes opened slowly as the rays of the sun crept through the barred windows above hir. Shi lifted hir head from the ground, looking around a bit, realizing that the prison of hir life has become far more literal than shi'd care to. Shi climbed onto all four legs, looking out of the bars to the hallway, whining to himself, feeling loneliness growing heavily, knowing what shi did has made hir a monster.

Shi barely had the drive to use the toilet, but figured it was best to not dirty the concrete floor. Hir hearts felt like they were made of cast iron as they weighed heavily in hir chests. The adrenaline that left hir body is still making hir hands shake in nerves as hir bloodshot eyes stared blankly at the brick wall opposite of hir.

Shi was alone.

Chapter 5

Day 1

The cell was relatively small. Enough room for hir to turn around comfortably, attend the lavatory and the sink without much effort, and the steel cot was nigh useless, but could be folded against the wall for added room, or be used as a desk or eating bed. The walls were twenty hand-sized brick high. Fifteen bricks to the steel molding around the barred window and a pane of marred Plexiglas on hir side of the bars with images of swastikas and Humans First emblems that distorted the light of the morning sun. The door was a simple affair large and metal, cold, with a panel to slide food and mail in and out of. Shi could not see anything else, nor could she hear anything else in the area.

Some time during the morning she was fed breakfast. Shi couldn't identify the contents but figured the brown fluid in the cup was something akin to coffee. There wasn't even a guard to give the meal, rather an automated serving robot. Gildedtongue picked at the food quietly before starting to eat, sadly realizing that this was probably more nutrients than shi's had in a meal for ages.

Shi slipped the tray and such out of the slot as the bottom of the tray instructed, probably another robot will come by to clean it up later tonight. Shi sighed softly to himself, pacing and counting bricks. Without a book or any paper or a data pad, this was going to be very long.

Day 3

Gildedtongue sighed softly to himself as shi woke up. It took hir a few moments to recall how long shi had been in the cell, two days seemed like an eternity for hir. A message from the server droid beeped that shi would have consul from hir attourney an hour before the proceedings started. That was the first voice shi heard since the guard escorted hir into this room, and it wasn't even real.

No one had come to talk to hir. Not Frank, nor Dreamweaver or any of hir family. Gildedtongue racked hir brain for anyone else shi might know that hadn't come, but none came to mind that shi would have ever considered "Friend."

The room seemed to grow bigger or smaller the more shi paced inside the walls. Shi probably walked a mile without ever leaving the square of the cell. Meals and the light coming through the bars of the window were the only measurement of time in this room. The time could have passed by faster if shi just had someone to talk to.

Day 4, morning

The chakat woke up with a start after another dreamless sleep. It was still dark out and not even the beginnings of dawn poked at the starry sky. The chakat's hair went on end as shi looked around the room, wondering what woke hir up.

"Hello?" was all that shi could croak out. It had been days since shi last spoke and hir vocal cords were stiff and dry. Shi greeted to the phantoms of the shadows of hir cell a few more times, aching for another voice. Figuring it only nerves the golden brown chakat moved to the corner of the room and wrapped himself with hir body, aching for self-warmth.

The chakat felt a hand rest on hir shoulder for a moment. This time shi woke up slowly, blinking the sleep from hir eyes before lifting hir head to look at whatever was there. A tall, older chakat sat next to the waking felitaur, smiling down at hir and reached to stroke over Gildedtongue's hair. "Hey, kiddo. Man, you look like shit."

Gildedtongue grumbled as shi slowly got up, feeling hir joints crack a bit, "Mmmph, thanks, Dad, you always know how to make someone feel special." Gildy looked at the other chakat in the room. Shi was a bit smaller than Gildy, with gray, ratty fur, a ruffled mane, and the long tail of a chakat elder. The slightly younger chakat looked around to see if anyone else came in. Shi saw the locked, solid door and realized that of course no one could have come in and turned to ask Creekstripe just how shi came in, but as shi turned hir head shi realized again, that shi was alone.

"I must be dreaming again," shi muttered to himself, at least, shi thought it was just to himself as shi curled back up again.

The day went on without any more visitors. Gildedtongue spent hir day devising a crude clock using the light out of the window and chiseling hir spoon. Shi failed to remember that the shadow would be sticking outside of the window come midday, but at least hir mornings were less dull, and shi felt at least slightly productive that morning.

Day 4, evening

For failing to return the spoon shi was punished with smaller rations in the evening. Not that less tasteless food could be considered a true punishment; it did leave hir stomachs growling. Shi idly wondered about hir attourney. Probably some young, fresh out of law school student who drew a short straw, that or a soon-to-be-retiring man who wouldn't mind losing a case just to feel his own sense of justice. Either way, Gildy didn't quite hold too much optimism.

"What has caused you to lose your smile, Gildy?" Creekstripe asked hir again. Gildedtongue shivered but figured it just the cooler kicking on. Gildy didn't turn hir head to even attempt to see who said it. At the same time, why fight insanity when madness always beats out rationale.

"I dunno. The fact that I was already sentenced before the police even arrived?" shi retorted to hir father. Shi knew it wasn't true, not officially. There will be a trial of inquisitors and shi will be held to whatever the views of those most pure of thought feel shi deserves. HCKNA trials just barely squeak by Federation standards of justice. "Maybe I deserve it, Dad. Maybe not for this crime, but maybe for others."

"Others? Other crimes? My child, have you been a naughty kitten while your parents weren't looking?" The gray felitaur smiled giddily, giving Gildedtongue's tail a swat. The leonine chakat pulled hir tail away a bit, giving a small growl. Hir father always loved this game, even as a long tail, tormenting other chakat's tails. The story goes that shi met Glade long after pouncing on hir tail.

"Maybe not crimes, Dad," shi muttered, "but, other infractions against humanity." Shi rubbed hir left arm idly, trying to think. "I mean, I've certainly had enough malicious thoughts. And I've started to lash out, to both the clergy and children. Children, Dad!" shi sighed softly, rubbing hir temple.

"You haven't changed a bit, Gildedtongue. Spare the rod to everyone but yourself. You've always seemed to enjoy the role of the troubled elder."

"Someone had to, Dad. You were never exactly one to take things seriously." Gildedtongue retorted, turning back to hir father, snarling threateningly, "Every single time something went on that could have affected us, you'd just throw up your fucking

hands and say 'that's the course of things.' You never tried!" Gilded stood still for a moment, then, realizing shi just went off on hir parent, shi hushed up.

Creekstripe was quiet for a moment; closing hir eyes a moment, then reached out to stroke over Gildedtongue's ear, "My child. I'm sorry if that was the impression you had, but you know now that without the right sort of power here, it is rather futile to try. I just tried to show you how to adapt. I'm sorry that I appeared the coward, but that wasn't what I was after."

The red-maned chakat shuddered and leaned into the ear stroking, "I-I know that, Dad. I just am stressed out and angry, I guess." Shi looked upon the ground a bit more, thinking to himself for a moment, and then asked, "How did you get here, Dad?"

The longtail smiled to himself and padded over to the door, "What, you never tried the door?" shi asked and proceeded to tug a bit on the handle. The door slowly opened to reveal the hallway, "Heh, when you've been in here as often as I have, you know that the big doors are just to frighten you. C'mon." Gildy's sire took hir hand and lead hir into the dank hallway. They passed several of the same sorts of door. The food slot was about eye level as Gildy peeked inside. Each cell containing one prisoner; big ones, mean ones, humans, morphs, all represented, however they all had the same thing in common, a broken soul full of hopelessness. Gildy's empathy was never that well honed; however the degree of despair left hir hearts heavy with grief. Creekstripe saw this and reached to rest hir hand on Gildy's shoulder, giving a comforting pat, "Please come."

They went through a door leading out of the hallway. The room felt better, but empty, there wasn't any feeling. The walls were bare white and the furniture was a simple table and chairs. No art hung upon the walls and in the corner, a Vending Replicator hummed quietly. Gildy's father pushed some chairs to the side and sat down, a paw moved to offer hir to join. "It's not much but at least it's quiet, don't you think?"

"Dead quiet." Gildedtongue responded, moving to sit with hir father, looking around the small room. Shi rested hir elbows on the table and let go of a long sigh. "Dad, can I ask you something?" the chakat looked up through hir mane of hair at the other seated centauroid. Hir father nodded and listened to hir child's inquiry, cocking hir ears towards hir intently. "Why here, Dad? I mean, don't give me that bullshit about your university job. That ended when I was 13, and yet you, Mom, and I kept living here in this..." Gildedtongue fumbled for the right words, "Holy Hell Hole."

Creekstripe went silent for a few moments. The moments stretched for an eternity as Gildedtongue looked up to hir sire, hoping for a real answer. The longtail finally sighed and started to speak, "Well, the job was definitely the first reason. I mean, that's the only reason we moved here. But, you're right, afterwards it really wasn't a good reason." Shi shrugged a bit.

"Well, no good reason is better than no reason, so what was it?" asked Gildedtongue,

getting a little frustrated at the roundabout reasoning shi was going through.

Creekstripe gave a half smile as shi looked at hir daughter, "Well, to return the question, what kept you staying here?" Gildedtongue nearly snarled again, but stopped. It was a relatively legitimate question, even though it dodged hir own. Shi settled back down onto hir haunches and thought about it.

"I guess that even despite having no real power in this government, I still wanted to try and make a difference for the better. I guess that's why I started to teach; to help people fulfill their potential." Shi sighed a bit, slumping atop of the table, looking up as shi felt most of hir energy drained from trying to think. "But, why here? I mean, we could have done a better job in Australia, Europe, or any of the stars in the galaxy! Here it just felt like breaking your hands against a wall trying to get it to move, nothing seemed to do anything!" Gildedtongue hushed a shout, feeling tears of frustration welling in hir eyes.

Creekstripe rubbed hir daughter's head softly, reassuring hir, "You haven't been that ineffective, Gildedtongue. Sure, the majority of your students probably will never have been helped, and most of them not helped by anyone else. But teaching isn't about numbers, it's about the few that actually do get it and do become better for it." The longtail caressed hir child's back, trying to calm hir down.

Gildedtongue exhaled a long breath before blinking hir eyes clear of tears again, gulping down hir throat, "I still haven't forgiven myself for killing you, Dad." Shi muttered under hir breath. Shi yelped at a clap to hir ears and felt hir head being picked up by the sore cranial appendage, looking at the very stern face of hir sire.

"Gildedtongue, you still blame yourself for that? No wonder you haven't done anything or gotten close to anyone since." Creekstripe scolded and sighed a bit, letting go of Gildedtongue's head. The leonine chakat sat up a bit more, looking intently at the table between them.

"But, Dad, a week after, you..." Gildedtongue started, but was quickly cut off by Creekstripe. Hir ears pressed against hir skull and hir tail wrapped around hir haunches in defense.

"A week later I passed on because of complications and my body just shut down. It happens, Gildedtongue, you're not God." The older chakat stood up and wrapped hir arms around hir child, "I'm sorry that I caused you such grief. Maybe it was my fault for asking you to make love. I just wanted to make you happy."

Gildedtongue bit hir tongue, crying a bit more in hir father's embrace, "No, no, it wasn't your fault. I just..." shi started, then recollected hir thoughts, "I just take everything unto myself like always. I guess I still have a lot of growing up to do. I-I love you, Dad." Shi muttered under hir breath, allowing himself to purr.

Creekstripe nodded to himself, stroking his daughter's cheek a bit, "I know. I love you too, Gildedtongue. But I must go now. You must now fight for your life without me. You won't be alone for long, I assure you."

Gildedtongue held still while the arms that held him slowly faded away. His eyes held closed for a moment longer. Slowly they reopened to see that the chakat was in a ruined city, his home. Buildings were burning and the streets lay in ruins. Shi looked around himself for a moment, seeing a discarded vibroblade. Shi picked up the longsword and gave it a few swishes in his hand, getting a feel for the weapon.

Shi didn't have long alone, however. Shi turned slowly behind him. A lumbering hulk of metal and madness slowly walked towards him. Shi recognized it as the Christian Army's Power armor from the Gene War. Shi readied his blade, staring at his adversary. The metal beast saluted with its own claymore, then opened its helmet for a moment. Gildedtongue nearly dropped his weapon as shi saw a familiar golden furred muzzle peering out of the helmet.

It was him. Gildedtongue shook his head rapidly to ready himself, shi had to win. Shi stared for a moment more before the powered monstrosity made two quick moments. Shi couldn't keep up with it as the blade broke through his defenses and penetrated his chest. Gildedtongue screamed in pain as shi felt the electric current from the blade course through his body.

Day 6, evening

Gildedtongue blinked his eyes open as shi awoke. The pain of the sword started to fade as a greater one filled his chest. The chakat lifted his head slowly to see a number of men above him in surgical garb. His eyes went wide as shi looked at himself, seeing a large needle stuck through his chest. The doctors continued to push a yellowish liquid into what felt like his heart. A nurse near his head saw him open his eyes as she yelped, "The Adrenaline is working, shi's awake!" the chakat yowled as the pain came to fully register as shi passed out again. Shaken, but stable, now.

Day 7, morning

Gildedtongue was apparently unconscious and barely alive since the evening of the fourth day. His body was already repairing himself from the shock of surgery. Apparently the correctional facility hadn't changed its medical practices since before the war. Gildedtongue supposed it was easier trying dead people than living people.

The chakat put on the fresh clothing shi was offered by the server 'bot along with his breakfast. The food was slightly less vile today, shi wasn't sure if that was for the trial, or the fact that shi nearly died. Either way shi made a small prayer of thanks before consuming the meal.

An hour later a guard, a real, human guard, appeared and brandished his stunstick at

the crushed chakat. Shi followed his barked orders; silently thanking him for acknowledging his presence and reminding him that shi was real. Shi donned on the tail cuff first, then slowly cuffed his hands behind his join, The guard made sure they were secure before sheathing his weapon.

Shi was lead to the court where shi met his attorney. Shi was right on the first account, as the student seemed to be barely out of his own classes. He looked over Gildedtongue's file again and sighed softly, "Look, I'm not even sure what you did or why you did it. I just got this case last night. But I'm going to tell you to plead guilty. No one's dead, so maybe you'll only get a few years in prison." The squirrely boy said. Gildedtongue only nodded.

The Judge slowly approached from the rear out of a pair of heavy wooden doors. He stared at the court, seeing the appointed jury, then at the accused. "Chakat Gildedtongue, you have been charged with assault on a minor, and the destruction of private property. How do you plead?"

Gildedtongue felt in a daze. Shi wasn't sure what to say. His brain told him to follow the advice of his council, but that just didn't feel right. Shi gulped again, trying to find words, but all that came was a growl deep in his chest.

"Shir Gildedtongue, how do you plead?" the judge repeated, getting a bit irritated already. Gildedtongue already saw this as going down hill as shi looked upon the floor again and resigned.

"I am guilty of these sins, Inquisitor."

The room felt like all the energy and life was sucked out of it at that moment as the chakat resigned himself to fate.

"Very well, the Defendant pleads his innocence. The accused's fate shall be put to the test starting on the morrow. Dismissed!"

Gildedtongue jerked his head up. His eyes gone wide as his mouth became barren of fluid. They didn't want a trial; they wanted a show of good triumphing over evil.

Gildedtongue's ordeals were far from over.

Chapter 6

The chakat and his attorney were lead away into a small square room after that small ordeal. A shiver ran up Gildy's spine as the room brought back memories of the interrogation shi went through when shi was first thrown into the police station. Shi sat down at the table in the middle of the room as the young man near fell into a chair

on the other side. It didn't take a trained empath to see how nervous this man was. The water cooler in the corner bubbled air before anyone spoke.

"Well, that certainly was, not too expected," the man said finally. He opened up his attaché case, pulling out a data pad and what smelled like a peanut butter and banana sandwich. The attorney looked at the chakat, seeing hir salivate as he tore the sandwich in half, giving hir a large chunk, "I can't imagine food in prison to be that great." The leonine chakat took the offering thankfully, trying not to inhale the sandwich all at once. Shi never thought the combination was particularly appetizing, however he was right, this was certainly better than those slabs of protein shi's been eating lately. "I'm Peter Jacobs. I'm guessing we'll be seeing each other quite a bit while this goes on, Gildedtongue."

The chakat nodded after finishing the sandwich, finding hir voice a bit easier now that shi knew his name and that Peter was nervous simply because he was as lost as shi was. Shi allowed himself to purr softly, "Please, Mr. Jacobs, call me Gildy."

"Then call me Pete, please."

The tension evaporated from the room as both people came to relax. Peter turned on the pad and typed a few phrases into it in silence, his left incisor and canine bit into his lower lip as he gave another small sigh, "Well, Gilded... Gildy. I've read over the official police report of the event, and received a long detailed report from the victim and two under aged witnesses, as well as a chakat Dreamweaver. Hir story seems to be rather short, just saying that you were enraged and tried to pull the victim out of the car and after gave him his wounds." Gildedtongue gave a small nod; it was the truth, not the whole truth, but a well-edited truth. The two sat in silence for a moment after that before Pete glanced up for a moment, turning on a record button on the data pad, "Would you like to give your side of that story, Gildedtongue?"

The chakat nodded and gave a small sigh before recounting the events of that night a week ago to the best of hir ability. Pete tapped on the datapad to mark out key points and places for questions but kept attentive. Gildy couldn't describe it, however the eyes reminded hir of hir friend Frank. Gildy's mind wandered in the middle of the story, wondering what the monsignor was doing at the moment, or Dreamweaver and hir parents for that matter. After shi was done shi sat back on hir haunches more flatly, exhaling slowly.

Peter continued to notate in silence for a moment, then raised his head slowly, "None of the other stories ever mentioned an attempted rape, Gildedtongue. Are you sure?"

"I can confirm that Mr. Miller is not orthodox Jewish." The two people in the room laughed out at that. Gildedtongue hinted a blush under hir fur. It had been ages since hir last laugh and despite hir dark humor, it certainly felt good. The chakat shrugged a bit, getting serious again, "I know what I saw, and I can confirm that Dreamweaver would agree to the notion that, yes, Jacob was indeed trying to take advantage of

Dreamweaver."

Peter nodded as he jotted down that somber note. He sighed to himself, shrugging, "Well, unfortunately that is going to be hard to prove. I'm not going to lie, however you're more than willing to agree that whatever jury the judge and the prosecutor set up, they won't be too friendly to our cause." Pete looked over his notes again, "But the cards are certainly stacked against your favor. If somehow we could prove this singular trump card, then we go into a cry of self-defense. However..." Peter was interrupted by a guard who swung open the door with a metallic bang.

"Time's up. The prisoner must return to its cell now."

"However, without it, *Nos futuero*." Peter shrugged as he gathered his things, tipping his head to his client before leaving with one guard. The other brandished a stun stick at the chakat as shi got up slowly, keeping hir hands in plain sight, moving slowly as shi was lead away back to hir cell.

The chakat exhaled softly as shi looked around inside hir cell again. Gildy went back to lie down again. Hir body felt lighter than last week as shi looked over himself, a little leaner and hir fur was dusty from the room, however the meeting with Peter certainly poked a small hole in the shroud surrounding. A small light is always brightest when everything else is at its darkest.

The next day at the court felt just as overwhelming as the previous one. The prosecutor, a middle aged woman, honed to a sharp edge by the whetstone of her career, introduced her witnesses, as a bruised and injured Jacob Miller spoke, then the two students Gildedtongue came across just moments before. The whole of the proceedings felt totally alien to the chakat, however shi could feel the hostility brewing in the room. Gildedtongue turned hir head to see if shi could see any of hir friends. Several holorecorders were in the room, taking down every movement and word to be uploaded to the Kingdom's databases. The audience of the spectacle spilt out into the hallway as the benches were full and people stood at the walls and peeked through the doors. Gildy could swear that they decided to have mass here rather than at the churches.

Gildy's attention was snapped back forward as shi heard hir name called out by the prosecutor. Peter elbowed hir rib gently, giving a glance up to the empty witness booth. The chakat slowly rose and made hir way to the small podium. The bailiff shoved a Bible into the chakat's chest, barking out in Latin for Gildy's affidavit that shi shall speak no falsehoods and follow the Eighth Commandment as declared by the prophet Moses. Gildedtongue returned with the knee-jerk affirmation, but wondered if anyone had ever disagreed and what would happen if they did.

The prosecutor approached the felitaur with eyes that burned with hate and rage.

Gildy's ears pressed against hir skull like a cub that was found next to a broken lamp. Her words offered no respite from the venomous gaze.

"What were you thinking when you maimed that poor boy?" she dripped her alto voice into the air. Gildedtongue's mind scrambled as shi tried to even remember what shi was thinking. Shi wasn't thinking then, it was complete autopilot. Shi opened hir mouth to speak but was interrupted by hir attorney's shout from behind his table.

"Objection, your honor, the prosecution is leading the witness!" Peter yelped almost prepubescently. The judge gave a nod and turned towards the interrogator and interrogated.

"Sustained. Please rephrase your question, Sister Ontario," the judge commanded, leaning back into his seat.

The prosecutor gave a soft sigh as she returned her gaze back to the chakat, crossing her arms over her chest and gave a small smile. "Did you, or did you not attack the victim, Jacob Miller, on the twenty sixth day of November on the twenty first hour of the day?"

Gildedtongue mentally growled, of course the simpler questions could lead to the most amount of trouble for hir case. Shi exhaled again and started to speak, "The circumstances of the..."

"Just answer the question, morph," the woman interrupted, staring colder at the chakat. Gildedtongue turned hir face to the judge.

"Your honor, I..."

"Answer her question, or I shall hold you in contempt, Gildedtongue!" the judge snapped back, a large sneer on his face. It seemed his earlier sustaining of the objection was to look good for the galactic viewership. Gildedtongue sighed again before closing hir eyes, finally speaking.

"Yes."

The rest of the questioning went downhill from that abysmal starting point. The whole day in court the chakat felt like shi was skinned of hir sanity, mind and soul and it made hir weary. The chakat joined hir attourney after the trial was adjourned for the evening back into their advisory room.

Peter placed his attaché case on the table like last time, but took out two sandwiches, offering the second one to the chakat. The dark haired human gave a small chuckle as he broke the silence, "Well, you'll be pleased to know that the hard rock song, 'Chakat Attack' just made number one in sales last night. And after today's performance it should go platinum by teatime tomorrow."

Gildedtongue chuckled at that and settled in, looking at Peter a bit more, "Today sucked, didn't it?"

Peter let out a sigh and nodded, "It's going to be interesting escaping the mouth of this whale, Jonah," he muttered and sat down finally, looking over his notes on his datapad. "Unfortunately, Gildedtongue, I wasn't able to come into contact with either Dreamweaver nor hir parents yesterday. Shi seemed completely tied up at school, and hir parents, well, somehow my communicator can't connect. I wonder why?" he mused idly with a chuckle. He gave another sigh, "I'll try again tonight, but I'm afraid that it might be more of the same."

Gildedtongue nodded quietly as shi ate, giving thanks to Peter before speaking on more important matters. "So, well, without hir it is Jacob's and his friends' words against mine. Somehow I think that is going to be somewhat lopsided against me." Shi sighed softly, thinking to himself, "Well, what else have we got?"

Peter shrugged, "Well, considering you have just admitted to the assault, without that piece of evidence proving motive, we're looking at a very short trial right about now. Or long and drawn out if the prosecution decides to bring in plenty of people to speak against you and your species just for public and protected record."

Gildedtongue nodded glumly, crossing hir arms on the table as shi looked dejected. "Almost sounds like I should have just walked away from it all," shi muttered under hir breath. Peter shook his head as he rested his hand on hir mane.

"Look, we're just a mortal trial. You've got another trial ahead of you and in that case, you did the right thing. Maybe a bit overzealously, but you did the right thing," he smiled and scratched over hir headfur. Gildedtongue purred contently for a moment as shi closed hir eyes.

"So, what's next on your bag of tricks, Peter?"

"Keep trying to get in contact with Dreamweaver, I guess. Then convince the jury that hir testimony is the important one," Peter shrugged as he pulled his hand away, making some more notes on his datapad, "Outside of that, we're completely fucked."

Gildedtongue nodded slightly in hir arms before lifting hir head slowly, giving a half a smile, "Well, heh, if we are, then I'm glad I went through this with you, Peter," shi gave a coy smirk, "You might not be the most experienced lawman out there, but you certainly treated me like a person, which is something I have really needed for some time."

Peter laughed at that and shrugged, "Well, I figured if I have to defend someone, I had better learn to like him, her, or hir." The door opened as the guard motioned for Peter to leave. He packed up his things and gave Gildy a firm handshake before exiting.

Gildedtongue lay in the middle of hir cell, looking around the small room that had become hir private universe these two weeks. The chakat sighed as shi padded around slowly, and then shrugged to hirself. Shi couldn't really do anything at this point. Everything seemed to be on Peter's shoulders. How he manages to keep a smile in an obviously hopeless case is beyond hir, but it certainly had helped hir keep sane again. The chakat looked out of hir window at the shining moon, giving a small whimper as only hir eyes could drink in the freedom.

"Look, I know I haven't been a particularly good or obedient person in this universe," shi muttered, to God or no-one shi didn't care at the moment, "But I have tried. I've tried as much as my abilities allow me to. Isn't that all anyone really can ask for?" shi sighed and dug hir claw into a small hole that pocked the metal and stone, scratching up the inside of it. "I just need a little help right now. I'm not sure what I did was good or bad, or if there is a good or bad. All I know is that I did what I did, and it was what I thought was right at the time."

Gildy walked away from the window, clutching hir shoulders in the cold. "Peter's right, though. The consequences of my actions might not be truly reflected in this case, but either by Judgment or by Dreamweaver's and Mr. Miller's life, my actions, I hope, will do some sort of good." Shi shrugged and sighed, "But I certainly don't want to witness it in this life, rather than the next," shi said before falling asleep.

Gildedtongue was led back into the courtroom, seeing a smiling Peter. Shi sighed in relief as shi padded closer to him, sitting down on hir haunches at the table. Shi leaned closer to whisper into his ear, "So, you got into contact with Dreamweaver?"

Peter shook his head, "Nope, couldn't get a hold of hir nor hir parents," he says as he leaned against the table he was seated at.

"Then, erm, what, you got plastered the night before?"

"Even better, I got a comm last night." Peter responded smugly as he leaned back into his seat. Gildy waited for him to finish his thought, but blinked as nothing else came.

"And?"

"You'll see," the human said smugly as he opened his case again, pulling out his datapad full of notes. The court all rose when the judge entered the room. The other heraldry of the beginning of the court session went on. Gildy wasn't paying much attention as hir brain was trying to figure out what Pete had done. Everyone sat down except for the camera crews, and Peter.

"Your Honor. I would like to move for a recess to investigate the testimonies of the witnesses and defendant." Peter said with unusual confidence. Gildedtongue looked to his side, seeing the human's knuckles become a bright white in a fist.

"Mister Jacobs, you had ample time to review the official testimonies prior to the trial. I doubt anything that would be said would be different," the judge said, holding back a yawn of boredom.

Peter relaxed his fist as he took a short breath, "Then I'm not going to ask them for what they said, but rather what they saw." Peter turned around to see two people in Starfleet uniforms march up the middle of the sea of people and onlookers. Gildedtongue saw the forerunner, an elderly human, with platinum blonde/gray hair. He walked with a slight limp but moved with utmost dignity. Next to him was another officer's uniform, this time wrapped around the top of a skunk. A swatch of cloth was missing over the right breast as Gildy blinked to himself, a skunktaur telepath.

Peter smiled at his own theatrics as the whole courtroom rose in murmurs. The judge pounded his gavel to little avail before the bailiff shouted a bark for order. The older gentleman sighed to himself, "Mister Jacobs, what is the meaning of this?"

"Your Honor, I request that master Miller, the two witnesses, Dreamweaver and my client undergo a mind read."

"On what grounds?" the judge asked, a bit upset that he seemed to be losing control of his court.

"I have reason to believe that Miller and the witnesses have all committed perjury which would hurt my client." Peter stated, looking over his notes on his datapad.

"Mister Jacobs, you are aware that in this Kingdom no one can be forced to such," the judge thought for a word, "unholy means of information gathering."

"I am aware, your Honor, however I can assure you that my logic is fair."

The judge bit the inside of his cheek in consideration. Gildedtongue felt beads of sweat well up under his hairline. It was a bold move by Peter, and one that could be easily swatted away by the man in the black robe. The judge's gavel cracked on the table twice more, "Very well, Mister Jacobs. The court will reconvene at fifteen hundred hours. Until then you may conduct your investigation. Bailiff, please escort the victim, the witnesses, and the defendant to separate rooms. Also put a word in to the school to bring Dreamweaver here."

Peter collapsed in his chair exhaling a breath that was held since he first stood up. Gildedtongue couldn't help but lean and hug his attorney, making him giggle a little, "Mmmph, hey. We're not done yet!"

"No, but we're getting closer." Gildedtongue smiled softly. Shi didn't care that the cameras were focused on hir and Peter. Shi was close to winning.

Gildedtongue sat in hir cell alone. Hir tail bushed up as it flicked around like mad. Shi couldn't remember any other time shi was this excited to meet anyone and shi didn't know hys name. After a few minutes, the door opened up and the Skunktaur walked in quietly, looking around with a critical eye.

"Not exactly the Ritz hotel." Hy said to himself before looking at Gildedtongue. The chakat started to pad toward the chakat-kin, opening hir arms to the officer. Shi stopped when shi saw the skunktaur lift hir hands in front of hir, "Please, Gildedtongue. I would rather keep this as impersonal as possible. I don't want anything to possibly bias my findings."

Gildedtongue nodded as shi sat down again. Shi watched the skunktaur set up a camera, turning it on towards the middle of the room before sitting in front of Gildedtongue.

"I am going to go into your memories, Gildedtongue. I will see what you saw, hear what you heard, smell what you smelt, taste what you tasted, feel what you felt, but most importantly, I will know what you thought. For the purposes of this reading, Gildedtongue, I shall say aloud your thoughts and anything else of note. Do you understand?"

Gildedtongue could only nod, but remembering the recorder shi spoke up, "Yes, I understand."

The skunktaur nodded to hymself, "Good. Do you agree to the memory read?" The chakat nodded and affirmed again. The skunktaur exhaled slowly before placing hys fingers along the temple and cheeks of the felitaur. The skunktaur whispered gently, "Then take me to that time."

The recording flickered on the viewscreen as it projected the image of Gildedtongue and the skunktaur. The recorded skunktaur was reiterating Gildedtongue's thoughts before asking, "My daughter?" then slumped a little as the feeling of the abrupt stunning ended the memory. The jury sat in some boredom, as only a few who have researched into chakats knew the weight of that thought. Peter smiled softly as he rose again, "I have two more pieces of evidence to offer to the court. First I would like to give young master Miller's mental recollection. Then I would finally like to offer Dreamweaver's."

Peter typed out a few keys on his datapad before the image of Jacob Miller's memory scanning came up. The two witnesses had refused to be scanned, but they weren't

completely necessary. The young human was seated in front of the skunktaur, with two guards on the far corners of the room. The skunktaur asked him the same question he asked Gildedtongue earlier. Then Jacob became quiet as the skunktaur started to speak for him.

"Just a bit longer, then I'll ask it if it wants to go out for a ride. Fuckin' God, will it ever shut up." The skunktaur said in the recording. The courtroom grumbled in dissent as some murmurs of lies and trickery bubbled among the visitors.

The skunktaur went on for a few minutes until they reached the car. "Johnny said the seats should be able to hold a half a thousand kilograms, should hold a squirmy morph. Let's see if it works. 'Hey, sorry babe, you'll be okay there.' Fuckin' tail getting in the way. 'Shut up, will you? Keep that up and I'll give you something to bitch about.'" The skunktaur continued, making the room get louder in their anger. The judge's gavel slammed a few times for quiet, which the visitors offered begrudgedly.

"Fuck its tight, but shallow, can't get in deep enough for fucking," the skunktaur muttered with Jacob's mental voice. "What, who's there? You! I'll fucking gut you, you piece of shi- Argh! Yagh!" the skunktaur yelped before going limp again, just like the last recording. The visitor section was in an uproar, screaming for the blood of the officers. Peter remained calm as he sat. He had a final piece of evidence to show, his final trump. He looked over at the jury. Some were angered much like others in the room, though some were in shock, just where he wanted them. Peter rose slowly, exhaling evenly.

"I'd like to finally display Dreamweaver's memory scan. I believe it should put the final questions anyone might have about the events to rest." Peter stated. The small population there wasn't too happy about all the theatrics, but glad to see this near the end. Peter's hand trembled as he moved to tap on his datapad. He gulped quietly to himself as he closed his eyes; this one was definitely the worst of the crop.

The beginning of the recording was the same as the last one with general questioning of agreement to the scan. Dreamweaver sat on his haunches like Gildedtongue did earlier. It was the first time Gildedtongue saw even an image of Dreamy since the events. Shi looked just as ragged and exhausted as the longtail that had been put on trial. The events of the dance played out with a teenage jubilation of young love. A sense of confusion and urgency came up as Miller asked Dreamweaver to the car. Dream wondered if his date was feeling ill and followed him closely. Miller was a gentleman as he opened up the door for him, but as shi climbed in, shi felt his right foreleg and hindleg slip under the seats.

"My legs are being crushed!" the officer plead to no one, "I have to back out to adjust myself. Wait, what the hell is going on? Oh shit, is he trying? Oh God. 'No, Jake, I don't want to! No, stop!' I can't seem to get the leverage to break off the seats or slip

my legs out." The skunktaur let out a yelp of psychic pain; "he's dragging a knife on my flanks. Maybe if I just give him what he wants he won't hurt me." The skunktaur whimpered openly, letting tears flow as he felt the chakat's memory. Dream was quaking in the grip the skunktaur had on him. Shi whimpered softly.

The officer continued slowly, "I can't relax enough to even give him what he wants. Oh shit, this can't be how I die. What, why is he stopping? Is that Gildy? Oh thank God." The skunktaur and the chakat both flinched as the moment of the shattered hand passed through the memory. "Oh, oh Gildy, you can stop now. Oh God, thank you. 'Aiee!'" the skunktaur let out another yelp, most likely the moment the knife went through the roof of the PTV. " 'Stop, Stop it, Gildy! You've finished him!' shi can't hear me. What's going on..." the skunktaur slumped again as the memory once again ended with the feeling of the stunner.

The image flickered off of the viewscreen. Everyone in the room was eerily silent. No shouts of dissent, no demand of genetically engineered blood. Just deafening silence. Peter slowly rose, himself still shaken from seeing the events a second time. He coughed into his fist to garner some courage. "The Defense rests, your Honor." Peter slumped back into his chair, emotion and adrenaline causing his hands to shake and spasm randomly.

The judge nodded and banged his gavel on his bench again, "Very well, we shall listen to the closing arguments. Sister Ontario, you have five minutes." The nun rose slowly, clearing her throat softly. She knew that the jury's decision has been skewed far beyond her ability to sway at this point. She, however, continued to hammer the fact that Jacob Miller's career has been completely ruined because of this bout of vigilante justice. Had Gildedtongue reported the activity rather than take the law into his own hands, shi might have not been in this mess. She rest her case and stormed back to her seat. Peter took a sip of water from a nearby glass before standing up to the jury.

"Members of the jury. What you have seen was not an act of malice, but rather an act of mercy. While action is what our laws are based on, we must temper all these actions with motives. Immanuel Kant, an 18th century philosopher claimed that motive and drive was above all action. In this case, I would say he is correct. Gildedtongue's motives were pure and good, the motive of defending those who cannot defend themselves. Many of you might feel that is true, but shi went too far." Peter shrugged, "But you must look upon your own virtues, and accept that Zeal is something to be praised. Shi made sure that the defenseless was to be defended in the future.

It is in this logic that we must uphold justice and law to its fullest extent and find my client, Gildedtongue, innocent, for only then will justice truly be served. I thank you, and praise be." Peter calmly returned to the table with Gildedtongue. The judge rapped his gavel again, dismissing the jury.

"At ten hundred hours tomorrow, you shall return with your verdict. Until then the defendant will remain in its-hir cell. Court is adjourned."

Gildedtongue was nigh dancing on the ceiling as shi was led back to hir cold cell. Shi couldn't believe that things were going so well. Shi never felt the door close behind hir as shi looked around the empty room shi had called home for two weeks. Shi lay on hir back, looking up at the ceiling, resting up for the morrow. Things couldn't get worse after this, could they? Shi had it made, right? The nagging uncertainty certainly felt heavier as it dragged hir back to earth. Sure, the evidence pointed toward hir innocence, but sometimes bigotry and hatred outweighed fact. Shi sighed softly to hirself as shi curled up around hirself, fighting to accept sleep.

Gildedtongue awoke to the pounding of a fist on hir door. It opened up as three guards seized hir roughly. The chakat yelped in pain, wiggling around in their grip, trying to find footing and leverage to pull away. The police seemed particularly aggressive and never used to physically touch hir before. The half awake chakat felt hir clothing pulled off of hir before being pushed into a running tap of cold water. The feline bathed quickly, using hir pads to scrub off any dirt. It wasn't a particularly good job, however it had been since the incident since hir last cleansing.

The water shut off as quickly as it had came. Another quick set of raps on the door before the guards came to grab hir again, tossing hir garments into hir hands as they resumed their march, making the chakat keep up and dress at the same time. The series of corridors to the courtroom felt more labyrinthine than before, maybe because shi just wanted to hear the verdict and leave. They paused in front of a familiar set of wooden doors and the guards put hir hands into binders behind the chakat's back.

The courtroom felt painfully bright compared to the last sessions. The murmurs of the attendees made a sea of noise. Calm, but a stone could easily ripple and drive it violent. The chakat was lead next to hir attorney. Peter smiled and nodded to his client, giving hir a thumbs up. Gildedtongue could only respond with a Sign of the Cross and clasped hands in dramatic prayer, hoping this will go well.

The jury certainly took their time arriving. Gildedtongue's mouth was dry and hir tail wrapped tightly around the table leg in front of hir. Shi took a look around the room while they waited. Again, most of the attendees were angry citizens baying for blood and vengeance; the rest was the media looking for a good story, which usually entailed blood as well.

The members of Gildedtongue's jury finally filed into their box. A deathly silence filled the room as the twelve, heads down and lips unquivering took their seats.

Gildedtongue couldn't breathe, the air too thick with suspense to fit into his mouth. As soon as they sat, the room burst into a frantic muttering, making last minute speculation of the oncoming verdict. The banging of the judge's gavel brought the attendees to a complete silence. His old, tired eyes surveyed all before him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this court has resumed session. Members of the jury, have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked, turning over to the box.

"We have, your honor," an older, frail man spoke. He slowly stood up, opening a small fold of paper, looking over it a few times before continuing. "In the case of Jacob Miller v. Gildedtongue, in the event of malicious and unlawful acts of assault..."

Time seemed to completely stop for Gildedtongue. Shi could count the nanomoments between the beats of his hearts. His eyelids tried to close in a blink to moisten his eyes, but it wasn't moving fast enough. Gildedtongue could smell Peter's fingernails digging into the palms of his hands, making a small blood vessel burst, losing his life essence. The slow feeling of the shower's moisture evaporating from his fur. Everything seemed to wait for the next words from this man's lips.

"Not guilty on all charges."

The mob that had gathered in the seats made their disgust well known, screaming obscenities and booing the jury. Neither the judge, nor the guards could ever hope to quiet the people there. Gildy didn't particularly care as shi wrapped his arms around Peter's body, hugging him tightly, giving his cheek a kiss. Calls of rage claiming that the Federation had meddled with the trial peppered the room as the judge pointed to the chakat, asking the bailiff to escort him out into the Judge's chambers. Gildedtongue was led away as the room continued to fall into chaos.

The judge's chambers were the opposite Gildedtongue would have thought. Rather than anything remotely elaborate or ornamental, it was almost a monk's cell. A desk with a name plaque stating "High Inquisitor Saul Robinson" was in front of a data pad and an open book. Gildedtongue hid a blush, realizing that shi never knew the judge's name prior to the trial, and it was already over.

Saul sighed as he removed his heavy robe, showing a lithe, small man dressed in a simple white tunic and white pants. He hung his robe on the wall before sitting down, interlocking his fingers, staring at the chakat. "Lord knows how you've done it, but you managed to avoid the wrath of the law. Obviously there is something to be said about luck." Gildedtongue swallowed dryly, keeping at the far wall of the room, staring at the only other occupant.

"But, it is in the ways of men to destroy things that should not be," Saul muttered, turning his gaze icily to the Gildedtongue. "You are simply a thing created by man in a war that needed more soldiers than were pushed out of the womb to fight it. Oh,

sure, you yourself weren't, nor was your," Saul tasted the air in thought, "type. But you are all from the same mud. A mud of people who thought they could be greater than God.

"Through some sort of sick turn of events that will only try the faith of those blind to the truth, you managed to break free. But like any farmer that owns a dog who has tasted the blood of man, there are many people more than willing to put you down. How much farther do you think your luck will hold, construct? How fast do you think you can precede the devil? Don't think that your wars will always be taken to the civility of this building. The longer you remain here, the more you are tempting the fates God placed here!"

Gildedtongue felt hir claws pricking over hir palm. Hir eyes looking over the angry defeated inquisitor as shi shook hir head. "Your words are dead, old man. Your words and the words that you claim to follow and uphold. This whole country is a mockery of the truths that it claims to be based upon," the chakat growled offensively. "I thank God every day that I'm not cut out of the same cloth as you." Hir hand outstretched and a finger damning the man before hir, "Not all humans, but you and your kind, Inquisitor, a complete disgrace to your species and your religion. If I am sent to the last level of Hell simply for not being like you, then I shall call it Paradise, for nowhere with the likes of you could be called Heaven."

Gildedtongue felt hir whole body trembling in a thousand emotions. Fear, anger, pain, disgust, and sorrow filled hir chest. Hir hand slowly lowered as shi closed hir eyes lightly, exhaling the rest of hir breath before resuming to speak, "Know this, Inquisitor. Know that I shall not be remaining in this tainted pit of hellfire for much longer. I have wasted half of my life hoping for some sense of human decency, but came across only barbarism. This "Place of Peace" is merely a cesspool of hate and insanity. Good day, sir."

Gildedtongue stood up and walked out of the room, letting the doors slam behind hir. Shi returned to hir cell where shi picked up hir effects from that evening weeks ago. A torn dress, a purse with a bus pass, a credstick, some cigarettes and a comb. That was all shi had.

No, shi had freedom and hope.

Chapter 7

En route home, Gildedtongue passed by hir school. Shi ran hir identification card through the reader at the front door, which rejected it. After three more times at this game, Gildy sighed and proceeded to the security office. When shi went in, three guards were at their desks, and while they were unarmed, they all crouched down for a pounce. Gildy's hands shot up in defense before peeking around hir arms at the people there. The humans seemed to sit back down again. The oldest one, a fat, portly

gentleman in his late forties, crossed his arms as he approached the chakat.

"Well, lookit th' kitten that mewled out of goin' t' th' pound. Whadda want?" he sneered. Gildedtongue's nose crinkled at the odor of poorly maintained teeth and an all too healthy lust for cheap whiskey.

"It seems that the main door isn't accepting my card." Gildy said, holding up the rectangle of plastic between forefinger and middle. The three guards started to laugh loudly, slapping their knees and grinning at the felitaur, enjoying the punchline shi came to be, though shi wasn't sure what the set up was.

The portly guard smirked and snatched the card from Gildy's fingers, taking it back to his desk where he had a press. With a loud thunk, the card came out riddled with holes, to whit he tossed it back to its owner with a cavalier flick of the wrist. Gildedtongue fumbled to catch it, pressing it against hir breast as shi stared at the two guards, "Right. I'll still need access to my room to gather my effects."

Gildedtongue was answered with the shove of a box towards hir. Hir property was jumbled together in a tall heap, with a few broken items to show off their lack of care. Gildedtongue picked up the box and gave the guards a nod before stepping out, hearing their laughter erupt while the door was in the middle of closing. Gildedtongue made hir way to the bus stop, sighing softly to herself as shi waited, looking over hir things. Hir teaching certificate was torn half way, and an array of photographs were mangled out of recognition. Shi sighed softly to herself. The photos could always be reprinted and the certification was only a symbol of hir ability, and certainly not hir ability itself.

The bus stopped and the driver greeted Gildedtongue with a sneer. Most definitely hir face was recognizable by many this close to the trial. Shi sighed softly to herself and boarded the bus quietly, swiping hir pass. 'At least something works right' shi thought to herself as the terminal beeped in compliance. The chakat made hir way to the back of the bus, greeted either with spits in hir path, or cowering. Gildedtongue idly noticed that there was no other morphs on the bus, but shi was too tired to care as shi sat down in the 'taur area, getting ready for the ride home.

Time ticked slowly as Gildy kept to the recesses of hir head, closing hir eyes lightly. The more that shi thought, the more the sinking feeling grasped at hir throat, shi merely left hir cell for a larger cell shi's grown far too accustomed to. Unfortunately shi's far too little cash to simply pick up and move out. Hir wages prior were barely enough to keep rent up at hir apartment, and savings were a joke. Shi honestly didn't think about retirement, preferring to croak right in the middle of class.

Shi got off in front of hir complex. Hir tail keeping low as shi stared up at the monolith of concrete and steel, glistening with glass. Shi tried to call it "home" but the words seemed out of hir vocabulary. Shi shrugged and approached the door, using the retinal scan to get in. It had been only two weeks and yet the place seemed too

strange to hir. The four flights of stairs a bit more labouring than a month ago. Shi sighed, just thankful to be near hir bed.

The door to hir apartment was ajar and light pouring out. Shi was certain shi closed the door when shi left, or someone else would have. Shi set the box down and extracted a lump of iron ore from an asteroid mining colony that shi used as a paperweight. The chakat cautiously approached the door, giving the door a firm push to expose whatever was inside. Hir right arm twitching in attack before quickly relaxing, seeing an older human dressed in black with a white collar, a bottle of wine in his hand. "Frank! Oh shit, I thought you were a looter!" Gildedtongue laughed to himself as shi shook hir head, picking up hir box.

"No, not me. Though I'm going to say that I don't think there's much to steal," he said, sitting down at the kitchen table with a folding chair he brought. Gildedtongue set the box inside the entry, closing the door behind hir. Shi smiled a bit at hir friend, shaking hir head a bit. "I just decided that your home could use a bit of warmth while you were out."

"Well, I gave you clearance to my place for a reason. My place is yours, my friend," Gildy said, sitting down at the table across from the monsignor. Frank nodded and chuckled as he poured out two glasses of red, handing one of the glasses to the chakat as he offered a toast.

"To justice being served properly and friends coming back home again," the priest smiled and sipped out of his glass. Gildedtongue looked into the pool of crimson nestled silently in the container. Frank cocked his head a little as he reached out to grab Gildedtongue's nearest hand, "Is there something the matter?"

Gildedtongue thought for a moment before tilting hir head back and swallowing the entire glass in one gulp. Frank's eyes went a bit wide seeing his friend do that. Gildedtongue grumbled as shi put hir glass back down on the table. "Damn, I need to get drunk," shi muttered darkly.

Frank's frown got heavier as he moved from across the table next to the chakat, leaning close, "Gildy, what's wrong? You seem very distant." Frank's hand reached up to clasp on Gildedtongue's shoulder. Shi grunted lightly, but allowed it as shi stared into hir empty glass.

"I don't know, Frank. You'd think after a couple of decades I'd just get used to it all. I'd take it as just another fact of life, but..." Gildedtongue trailed off into nothing, wrapping hir tail tightly around hir haunches, grunting softly to himself. "Shit, even I'm doubting if I should have just let him do what he wanted. I mean, if everyone keeps telling you that you're worthless, sooner or later you're going to start believing them. I mean, Jesus Christ..."

Gildedtongue's speech was cut short by a firm cuff across the face. Hir cheek stinging

by the surprise more than the act as his eyes went wide. Shi grunted, looking back at a very furious Frank. "That was for blasphemy, as well as blaspheming our friendship. Everyone telling you that you're worthless," Frank spat at the ground, then looking back up at Gildedtongue. "We've known each other since we were children climbing trees, and have I ever said that?"

Gildedtongue sighed and whimpered to himself, shaking his head slowly, "No, Frank. I know that." Gildedtongue sighed again, nursed his cheek as Frank tended his hand for a moment. Gildedtongue broke the short silence, "But, I mean, I didn't see you, or anyone else at the trial. It felt like you were all looking away when I was in real need of help." Frank nodded a bit to Gildedtongue's words, and then chuckled softly.

"Gildedtongue, you are such a Doubting Thomas. Just because you didn't see myself or anyone else, didn't mean we weren't working to help." Gildedtongue cocked his head slightly, blinking a bit at Frank. The monsignor continued, "Contrary to popular belief, Federation admirals don't simply pop out of thin air to solve petty trials." Frank smiled as he poured another glass for Gildedtongue, "That skunktaur that attends our school, Tarkiee? Turns out that his cousin's mate's brother was at the local starport when the trial started. So, a few calls later, and getting his to get in touch with your attorney, and suddenly you've got yourself a defense."

Gildedtongue swallowed enough of that story as he could, but then furrowed his brow, looking closer at Frank, "Yeah, that's all well and good, but how could you have known about the defense, and what we needed to prove anything. Isn't that a long shot, even for the Almighty?" Gildedtongue's arms folded in front of him leaning away from the priest.

Frank nodded softly, looking at his still untouched glass of wine, finally taking a sip from it, "A very good observation, Gildedtongue." Frank rummaged through his pockets before pulling out a small datapad, showing it to the chakat. Gildy's furred fingers tapped through it. Several memos and letters sent to the staff of the school with mention of the school's official view of the events, as well as notes explaining that Dreamweaver and his family were sent to a faith based trauma management camp to work themselves through the ordeal. Frank spoke after a few minutes, watching Gildedtongue scanning the documents, "It doesn't take a warp drive engineer to see the attempts to cover up something big. Besides, I know you. I'd take quite a bit to raise your ire."

Gildedtongue nodded slightly, "Well, alright, but how'd that link you to talk to Tark about this?" Gildedtongue rested his elbows on the table, leaning a bit closer to Frank as his tail twitched a bit in curiosity.

"Turns out you must've been kept rather in the dark in that cell of yours." Gildedtongue nodded to Frank as he continued, "Well, after the incident, there was a considerable amount of aggression on both sides of the species line." Frank started,

looking back into his glass. "About two days after you were taken in, a small group of morphs went to the local market in the upper class section and started opening fire with some older automatic weapons."

Gildedtongue blinked in horror. Shi gulped dryly as Frank continued to talk about the events of the last two weeks. Acts of terror popping up all over, each more gruesome than the previous, morphs attacking humans, and humans seeking revenge for their fallen. "Tark's mother died in the latest drive by strafing run. Hy came to my classroom after school, shaken and distraught, luckily hy knew I was your friend," Frank shrugged lightly, "I asked hym if hy had any other family around, and hy mentioned hys mother's friend, Zool..."

Gildedtongue interrupted Frank, shaking hir head slowly, "That's why hy was so curt with me. I started all this." Gildedtongue sighed softly. Frank grumbled and shook his head again.

"You might have been that straw to break the camel's back, but this started a long time ago, Gildy." Frank reached to pat his friend's shoulder. The silence was broken by a resounding explosion, causing the building to quake. "God damn this, they're here!" Frank shouted, grabbing Gildedtongue's arm, looking to the door.

Chapter 8

Smoke billowed from the second floor's windows. Several large vehicles were surrounding the building and a mob of humanity was screaming up at the building. Gildedtongue kept hir head down as shi peered out of hir window, grunting lowly, "Frank, what the hell is all this? Who are they?"

"I don't know, but I'm guessing they're looking for their own justice," Frank thought quickly, wringing his hands, "We're going to have to get to the basement. Get below the flames."

Gildedtongue nodded as shi made hir way to the door. Shi paused to peek through; making sure no one else was there. Shi nodded to Frank who crept next to hir. The floors were warm on the chakat's bare feet as the fires raged in the level below. Gildedtongue shook hir head lightly, "Not sure how we'll get down, but we've got to try." The two approached the stairwell, a strong gust of heat only fanned by the screams for blood by the populous below.

Frank balked at the flame, trembling visibly as he witnessed Hell first hand. "I-I can't do this, Gildedtongue," the monsignor cowered behind the door, swallowing dryly.

Gildedtongue shook hir head and swore as shi closed hir eyes, snatching Frank and

putting him on his 'taur back, "I'm no hero, but I'm not about to let you die here." With that Gildedtongue burst into the fire.

The urine and vomit stained carpeting on the stairwell provided ample fuel for the blaze that engulfed both people as the chakat plunged into its belly. His eyes stung from the smoke and heat as shi only opened them to see where the flames burned hottest. Shi coughed out some smoke and hissed as shi felt his sensitive whiskers get singed. His paws groped out in the fire as shi made his way downstairs, feeling the coughing priest screaming more. Shi tried to ignore his wails, moving faster.

The fire continued to smother the two as the centauroid fought on, whimpering lightly as shi felt all four of his lungs yearn for new oxygen. Shi knew that Frank must have been doing worse. Shi pried his eyes open to catch a glimpse of sanctuary as shi gave a pounce forward. Gildy and Frank tumbled down the stairs to the base of the first level in relative safety.

Gildedtongue gave Frank a moment to revive himself. The priest patted down his clothing, finding most of the woolen uniform left only scathed. Most of Gildedtongue's fur had turned black from the ash and the flames, crisp and warm all over his body; his face drenched in sweat as they both panted.

Gildedtongue's ears swiveled towards the floor above, hearing young screams in the fires. The chakat bit his lower lip hard, letting blood run down his chin before starting to make his way back up. Frank's hand shot out to grab Gildedtongue's tail, making him turn around to see Frank, "No!" he screamed. The chakat pulled his tail back angrily, starting back up before shi saw the floor of the third level come crashing down to the floor of the third level. The screams were stopped short.

The chakat's mouth was left agape, as shi couldn't quite comprehend what just happened. Frank gave another tug onto Gildedtongue's tail, starting to drag him towards him. The two started towards the base floor, "Dammit, we've got to get out of here!" Frank continued to tug on Gildedtongue's arm as they made their way down.

The doors were opened wide for the emergency evacuation as the two saw that the mob of people had scattered for fear the building collapsing on them. Frank and Gildy stumbled out of the building, coughing heavily as they ran to the other side of the street. Gildy turned back to see his home still flickering in its destruction. His coughing continued as shi tried to expel the smoke from his lungs. His body retched as shi threw up bile and wine on the sidewalk. Frank held the trembling 'taur's shoulders as he looked around, "My car isn't far from here. C'mon, let's get you somewhere safe."

Frank drove an old hatchback that wasn't long for the world. Gildedtongue managed to get in the rear of the vehicle, trying not to take up all of Frank's rear view. The leonine 'taur grumbled a bit in the back, instinctively starting to lick the soot from his

fur, but coughed at the taste of smoke and toasted hair. Frank got in and revved up the engine. The car sputtered to life as it snuck its way through the streets of the slums. The two were silent through the trip as both went through the events through their mind. Gildedtongue watched his apartment complex slowly disappear from view. Frank finally broke the silence, "There wasn't anything for you to do, Gildedtongue. I really didn't think they'd try anything on you this fast."

Gildedtongue blinked a bit back up to Frank, "They, them, who the hell are you talking about? Stop making my life some sort of conspiracy theory!" Gildedtongue yelped in exasperation. The car shook as Gildedtongue adjusted himself, trying to get comfortable. Frank shrugged a bit as he shook his head.

"It is only thus as you seem convinced that you have no allies, Gildedtongue," he said, looking at his friend currently blocking his rear mirror. They stopped at an intersection as Gildy gulped lowly, seeing if the cars stopped around Frank's car would recognize him. Shi blinked to himself and shook his head a bit. Frank snickered a bit, "Not that your current sense of paranoia is completely without merit. It just saddens me that you feel such."

The car pulled out and started to the north. Gildedtongue remained silent for a moment before saying, "This isn't the way to your barracks." Shi blinked lightly as that paranoia seemed to build up in him again. Shi hissed at himself and swallowed it back down, trying not to be so concerned about every little thing.

"That's right, Gildy. I'm certainly not going to take you into the lion's den, if you'd forgive my irony," Frank chuckled a bit as he continued to move through the suburban landscape. Gildy blinked lightly to himself as shi observed the homes, so much different than where his apartment was. Shi had probably passed through this part of town a few times, but never really looked. The whole place felt very homely. "I'm taking you to Dreamweaver's home."

"Wait a minute, Frank! Think of the scandal! I couldn't stay with a stu..." Gildedtongue's words went dumb as shi gulped to himself, shi obviously wasn't a teacher any more. Frank sighed softly as they drove on.

"I do want to thank you for saving my life, Gildedtongue," Frank said, looking back at the chakat. Gildedtongue shrugged and dismissed his words, saying that it was nothing. Frank shook his head softly, "No, I mean it. I was frozen in there and you dragged my sorry ass out of there. I owe you a great deal."

"I managed to save the hides of an old man and my own. What about those children in the house?" Gildedtongue asked, cocking his head softly, grunting in disgust with himself. Frank turned around slowly, looking back at Gildedtongue.

"Gildedtongue. You can't damn yourself simply for not being God," Frank sighed to himself as he pulled into a driveway, shutting down the engine before climbing out.

Gildedtongue spilt out of the hatch with a slump, finding his legs have fallen asleep. After a moment to regaining his footing, Shi and Frank rang the doorbell. A dark head peeked through the window, and then cautiously opened the door a crack.

"Who's there and what do you want?" The centauroid asked, obviously keeping most of his bulk against the door. Gildedtongue and Frank exchanged glances for a moment before the priest spoke.

"Startail, it's me, Frank, we spoke on the communicator. I've got Gildedtongue. We'd certainly appreciate it if you'd let us in!" the monsignor chuckled nervously, blinking a bit. The feline's face changed for a moment as the door flung open, a black chakat, speckled with white spots wearing a vest nearly pounced atop of Gildedtongue. The leonine chakat's tail poofed up in surprise as Shi found himself in a tight hug.

"Erm, hello?" Gildedtongue said finally. His body had completely frozen up inside the embrace of the stranger. Shi gulped softly and slowly moved to pat the other chakat on the anthro back. "Maybe we should go inside." The other chakat's embrace loosened as his face gained a tinge of red blush, ushering the two into his home. The house had an unusually sterile feeling to it all, the lack of any odor except for the small bit of Dreamweaver told Gildedtongue that Startail and his mate didn't spend much time at home.

A naked lynx faced chakat approached from the other end of the hallway, "Starry, have you seen the news? Some building caught on fire not too far away." Shi stopped and looked at the two new guests, immediately raising his arms to cover his bare breasts at the sight of the priest, "Um, hello." Frank shook his head and raised his hands.

"It's okay, Fire, we're among friends." Startail smiled a bit, bowing his head to Gildedtongue and Frank, "I'm chakat Startail, child of Moonsong and Shadedancer. This is my lifemate." Shi said, putting his hands on the other chakat's shoulders.

Shi purred and bowed his head as well, "Chakat Firefoot, child of Raineyes and Jude." Gildedtongue nodded the two, cocking an eye-ridge at Firefoot. It wasn't unheard of for chakats to change their names at their coming of age, but this was certainly one of the rare occasions Shi had heard of a chakat changing their names to a more religious name. That or Firefoot's grandparents named his sire after a saint, even more rare. Gildedtongue mentally threw that piece of trivia into the back of his tired mind.

Frank smiled softly, "Monsignor Frank Johnson of the diocese of St. Altretic." The human looked around a bit at the two relatively quiet hosts. Understanding their apprehension, he smiled softly, "Don't worry, I'm interpretive rather than fundamental."

Firefoot exhaled as Shi finally lowered his arms from his bosom. Much like the

religious and political conflicts of the old, things tended to boil down to progression versus tradition. While no official political parties exist in the Kingdom, many refer to themselves as either interpretive or fundamental, stating how they felt how the Bible should be followed. That being said, it has been a long, long time since an Interpretive person has been in any real power. Gildedtongue took the silence as his cue to speak, "Ah, heh, I'm chakat Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe. Thank you both for lett..."

Gildedtongue's words were cut off by a sudden muzzleful of chakat bosom as she was hugged tightly a second time. The chakat's body once again seemed to go as rigid as a rail, eyes wide and his hearts slamming in his chest. Startail and Frank chuckled at the sight before Startail tapped his mate's shoulder, "I think Gildedtongue would like some air."

Firefoot shook his head a bit, purring loudly as she continued to hug the older chakat, "Nope, going to smother him. Least I could do for him for what she did." Gildedtongue's eyes went a little wide as she felt his loins starting to react to the position, finally moving his paws to gently push the other chakat away, standing up quickly to let himself slide back into his sheath.

"Heh, tha-thank you two." Gildedtongue muttered, his ears as bright red as his mane. She shook his head again, grunting softly to himself. "That fire occurred at my home, his Firefoot." The chakat said, gulping as she rubbed the back of his neck, wincing at the slightly raw skin from exposure. In the light of the entryway, she could see that Frank was black and red from ash and flame. His clothing hid any charring in the black. His own tattered shirt was reduced to strands, leaving most of his body bare. The chakat gulped and nervously raised his arms to cross over the front of his body. "I could really use a shower and a new top, if it isn't too much of a bother."

Firefoot nodded, gulping and feeling a bit put off when Gildedtongue pushed her away. She looked down the hall, "You can use the master bath, just inside that room and to the left." Gildedtongue nodded and excused himself. She watched as the two chakats lead Frank into the kitchen, while the priest started to relate the events.

Gildedtongue looked over the amenities. Nothing one would find on videos of wealthy people's homes, but certainly more posh than the chakat ever knew. She clambered into the shower stall after throwing out his ruined top, purring loudly as she felt the warm water cascade over his body, being a long time since a good warm shower. Gildedtongue looked over the fur shampoos, trying to economize on it, not wanting to indulge too much on the kindness of this mostly strange family.

The soot and ash washed off of the chakat easily, not having enough time to settle in his fur. The blackened spots along his arms and legs, though, were seared hair and will only wash out by having new hairs grow in. Gildedtongue closed his eyes slowly, feeling the water cascade over his form, drawing the day down into the inky black of

the drain.

The calming effects of the shower drew the chakat's mind out of the initial shock of the fire and the flight, as it finally started to process it. Hir possessions were all destroyed, even down to the clothes on hir back. Shi never got to know any of hir neighbours well, but now, thanks to hir, their own homes and lives taking a heavy turn to the worst. And those children...

Gildedtongue curled into the corner of the shower, feeling tears mix in with the water splashing along hir face. Hir hands gripped at hir shoulders as the prickling of hir claws teased against hir flesh. The chakat felt another wretch of nausea attack her, but as shi coughed there was nothing left to purge. Shi lifted a trembling hand to slowly close the faucet running the shower, not wanting to waste too much water.

The older chakat wrapped around himself, shivering visibly, trying not to cry, but hir body wasn't listening. A head popped into the bathroom, followed by a young body carrying a load of towels and a new shirt. Gildedtongue heard a whine from outside the shower, so shi slowly poked hir head around to see Dreamweaver shivering slightly. Gildedtongue sighed to himself, cursing to himself and how even the most minor psychic ability leaves some without the ability to have a breakdown in peace.

"D-Dreamweaver. It's all right. I'm just really stressed out." The older chakat started to step out of the shower, but stopped and hid hir body, not wanting to stand naked in front of hir student. The younger chakat's muzzle trembled for a moment before dropping the fabrics and leaving the room in a hurry. Gildedtongue sighed to himself, reaching for the first towel to start drying off hir fur.

Chapter 9

Gildedtongue slipped on hir borrowed shirt and walked over to the kitchen area, guided by the scent of freshly brewed coffee. Frank was seated opposite their chakat hosts as Startail was finishing a story about Dreamweaver. Gildedtongue coughed, making hir presence known as the others turned to greet hir.

"I see that there was a chakat under all that dirt," Firefoot said behind a half a smile. Gildedtongue blushed lightly and went over to the table, finding an untouched mug of the caffeinated drink. "Frank filled me into your predicament, Gildedtongue, you're more than welcome to stay here."

Gildedtongue gulped down what was in hir mouth with a hard swallow, grunting softly to himself. "Thank you, shir Firefoot, for your kindness. However, it seems wherever I am is a likely target." The leonine centauroid frowned to himself, "I wouldn't want any more harm to come to you two or Dreamweaver than already has."

Startail shook his head, reaching to rest a hand on Gildedtongue's shoulder, "Nonsense, Gildy. It seems like you're in need of sanctuary more than anyone right now, and we'll try our best to offer it to you." Frank nodded lightly, patting Gildedtongue's shoulder gently. The four stayed quiet for a moment before Gildedtongue broke the silence.

"After the trial, the judge took me to his chambers and explained to me this sort of thing would happen, and if it did, the law would not protect me. It's sad to see how right he might be." Gildedtongue looked more into his mug, seeing his reflection in the brown fluid. "I think I need to get out of here, and fast."

The three nodded their heads quietly, closing their eyes. Frank broke the silence, "And where do you think you'll go, friend? G.N.A. is close by, but not sure how much protection they'll give you. Maybe more in the Canadian sector, but most of the west coast is dominated by the fox' and wolftaur clans. Unfortunately they're pretty well known for xenophobic ideologies."

Startail leaned back, "Oceania and Europe are both pretty open, especially Australia. A number of chakats I've worked and dealt with are from there. Pretty friendly folks." The four didn't notice a shy set of paws creeping towards the kitchen, eavesdropping on their conversation.

"The Lunar colonies and space stations are always looking for workers. Though, heh, I don't think spacecraft construction and repair would be your specialty," Firefoot said, to Gildedtongue's outstretched disgusted tongue. The interloper made his way into the light as shi spoke.

"Well, there's always Chakona." The four turned to see Dreamweaver, wrapped in a warm terry half-robe, watching the conversation. Gildedtongue gulped a bit, remembering his flight earlier, hoping the child had calmed down a bit. "I mean, they're always looking for teachers and chakats are almost always welcome."

Gildedtongue nodded half way, then looked at himself, "Except that passage to there is a good sixty-six thousand credits and I have..." shi paused a moment, looking at his shirt, then let out a sarcastic chuckle, "...I don't even have the shirt on my back."

Dreamweaver gave a defeated look to Gildedtongue, starting to turn away. The middle-aged longtail padded over to hug the youth. Dreamweaver froze for a moment before wrapping his arms tightly around Gildedtongue, purring loudly. Gildedtongue blushed to himself, gently nuzzling into Dreamweaver's headfur, inhaling his scent deeply. Both stayed still for a moment like that.

Frank looked at the clock and sighed to himself, "I think it's about time that I head back to the barracks. I'll keep in touch, Gildy, Startail, Firefoot." He started to the door and smiled at Dreamweaver, "And I'll see you in class." Dreamweaver gulped and nodded to the human, as he whistled to himself, showing himself the door.

The four chakats remained quiet for a few moments after hearing the door shut and their guest starting to head home. Startail looked over at Gildedtongue again, "Well, I suppose we should get you some blankets and a mattress out into the den for you to sleep. You must be exhausted."

Gildedtongue nodded lightly, grunting as shi did realize how fatigued shi was. Dreamweaver smiled to the older chakat, "I'll show you where to find the 'loo and get the mattress pad out." Gildedtongue gave a small smile to Dreamweaver as shi followed hir into the hallways. Gildedtongue fought back the burning question of why shi ran off earlier, letting age and experience remind hir that some bits of information are better left for time to tell. Dreamweaver pointed out the facilities and pulled out an inflatable mattress and blankets out of the linen closet. "Heh, we don't get as many guests as I'd like, but eh," shi shrugged lightly, purring loudly as shi walked with Gildedtongue back to the den.

"Heh, I'd imagine you'd like lots and lots of guests all around." Dreamweaver nodded as shi set up the bedding in the common room. Gildedtongue sat on hir haunches, quietly watching the teen busy himself. The older chakat cocked hir head to the side and asked, "So, what is the fascination with Chakona? I mean, it's not any better than any other planet out there." Gildedtongue shrugged.

Dreamweaver blushed to hirself, "Well, partially, because I've always wanted to go. Hehe, always interesting to see a homeworld tailor made for you after you've come into existence. But," Dreamweaver paused as shi fluffed up one of the pillows, "Mostly I just think that a place like that, far away, might make you happy."

Gildedtongue nodded quietly to hirself, "Well, I'll try to keep it in mind, then. Thank you very much, Dreamweaver, for all you've done." Gildedtongue nodded at hir sleeping arrangement stretching long as shi got hirself mentally ready for the first sleep in a real house in quite some time. Granted, shi was heavily disappointed that it wasn't hir own home, or hir own bed, but it should do well enough for hir.

"You're more than welcome, Gildedtongue. Dream well and see you in the morning." Dreamweaver hugged hir former teacher tightly, then headed off to hir own room next to hir parents' room. Gildedtongue looked around the area before turning the lights off, just so shi doesn't trip over an end table or anything, should shi have to wake during the night. The warm blankets encased the chakat in their embrace, helping hir find slumber.

"Why didn't you help us?"

"Did you really think your life is more important than ours?"

Gildedtongue found hirself surrounded by walls of fire. All exits were cut off from hir

as shi breathed the foul air heavily, trying to avoid the vaguely humanoid shades drifting towards hir. "Pl-please, go away!" The chakat wailed, but they didn't listen to hir pleas. The chakat grunting, feeling hir feet burn and throb in pain as shi found hir pads dashing themselves against rubble and debris.

The shades got more and more as they stepped out of the flames. The chakat grunted as shi fell to the ground, feeling hir feet let out underneath hir. Each shade dashed across hir back, sucking the warmth from the chakat's body. Gildedtongue felt hir limbs getting heavier and heavier as the flames approached hir body. Shi loosened a feral roar, trying to pull out, but to no help. The shades joined each other in loud laughter, witnessing the fires licking and consuming the helpless felitaur.

The heat and pain ended as Gildedtongue's eyes fluttered open momentarily. Shi grunted and slowly lifted hir head, looking around. Dawn had already passed as the rays of sunlight poured through the flats of the window shades. Gildedtongue smacked hir tongue against hir dry mouth, grunting as shi stretched long, lifting hir head high enough to see a naked Dreamweaver watching a viewscreen. Gildedtongue's ears heavily blushed as shi pulled hir head back down, cursing the stirring in hir loins.

The sound of the television mixed with the quiet crunching of cereal. Gildedtongue curled back up into a sleeping position; letting hir ears do the perceiving. The latest news bulletin drolled on, "...and in other news, the violence continues in the city of St. Altretic and the surrounding regions. Seventeen men, ten women and three children were killed in a bombing planned and executed by constructs in the marketplace district. Riots and violence that had been spurred on by the arresting of a chakat-type construct teacher several weeks ago, which had been growing steadily and spiked after a controversial verdict yesterday. Now onto weather..."

Gildedtongue felt tears well up in hir eyes and splatter on the bedding below hir. Hir body trembling visually on the makeshift bed behind where Dreamweaver sat. The younger felitaur whimpered softly as shi felt the sudden empathetic pangs the older chakat was in. Dreamweaver turned to look at the guest and shuddered herself, putting hir bowl down and quickly made off to hir room where the door closed with a quiet puft of a slam not wanted to be heard.

Gildedtongue slowly sat up, sighing in resignation as shi shuffled the shirt shi slept in, whimpering how the coarse material had rubbed and irritated hir breasts. Shi figured out why most chakats slept in the nude before looking around for the kitchen. Finding a glass shi poured in some water to hydrate hir parched mouth before hearing a "Good morning" behind hir.

Startail sat on hir haunches, nodding to the guest before shi went to prepare some toast. Shi was as bare-chested as Dreamweaver, though it didn't affect Gildedtongue

quite so much. Gildedtongue finally returned the greeting, wiping dried crud from his eyes. "Sleep well last night?" Startail asked, fetching some marmalade from the refrigerator.

"Well enough, thank you, despite the dreams," Gildedtongue answered honestly, giving a double shrug of his arms and forelegs. Starry nodded to himself as she hummed in thought.

"Dreams keeping you stressed? I don't blame you, considering the recent events." Startail mused to himself, applying the spread to his bread. She shook his head lightly in time with his knife. "Considering the vibes gushing out of you, I'm surprised you aren't hallucinating and flashbacking."

"Pardon?" Gildy blinked lightly at Startail as she sipped another mouthful of fluid, gulping it down lightly while listening.

"Well, you know, empathetic resonance and such. A chakat's ability to read emotion in others and project their own." Startail shrugged softly to himself, then smiled at Gildedtongue, "You, Gildedtongue, are projecting very negative feelings at a very constant rate. Granted, the events of late probably uncorked quite a bit, but this is very impressive." Startail hummed to himself as she continued to munch on toast.

Gildedtongue sighed a bit to himself, "Ugh, just when I just wanted to wallow in my own misery alone for a bit." She grumbled and finished off the water in his glass, feeling the tinny flavour wash over his tongue and down his throat. Startail chuckled softly.

"Ah, but misery loves company, and it does seem that we're hardwired to bring in enough company," she frowns a bit afterwards, looking a bit closer to Gildedtongue, "Though, oddly, doesn't seem like anyone else is helping cheer you up." Starry shrugged to himself, "Now, I just work on reactor coolant systems and certainly no psychologist, but you seem to be leaking a lot and not taking anything in. Heh, poor kitty is going to be drained soon." Gildedtongue rolled his eyes lightly and set the glass next to the sink.

"Erm, right, possibly. Though, would explain why Dreamweaver has been so upset as of late," Gildy mused to himself, running his fingers through his mane of hair to get the flat "bedhead" look off of him. Startail nodded quietly, finishing his light meal.

"More than likely. I don't think she's mature enough to really expect such an onslaught of emotion, especially from someone she cares a great deal about. I guess we'll have to have a talk with him sometime soon." Startail looked lost in thought for a moment before opening a junk drawer and pulled out a swatch of cloth, handing it to Gildedtongue. It was too small to be a headband or neckerchief, so more than likely an armband of sorts. Part of the cloth was stained with blood, but the red strip had a very distinct symbol in the middle of it: a large capital H with a 1 sticking out of the

bridge. Gildedtongue looked over the band a bit more and shrugged to Startail. The other chakat nodded.

"Rev. Johnson handed that to me after you went to the shower. He said that he found it on the ground after you both got out of the fire. Any clue what it might be? Maybe something around the school or whatnot?" Startail cocked an eyeridge as Gildedtongue studied it a few moments more, giving a shrug and handing the band back to the younger chakat.

"Beats me, what it is. One H? Seems like a quarter of what a group of agricultural girls would be a part of." Gildedtongue half chuckled, but was quieted by the rather blank look on Startail's face. Gildedtongue coughed lightly, clearing hir throat.

"In any case. I probably should not be here too long, considering." Gildedtongue looked out of a nearby window, seeing the sunrays trickle through and illuminate the dancing dust. Gildedtongue sighed softly to himself, "Probably best I keep on the move a bit more, though not quite sure where to go."

Startail nodded again, leaning against a countertop as shi hummed again, "Well, luckily for you, Zool is coming around today, on Frank's request. With any luck hy should be able to get you back at least some of your money and identifications before we start thinking about shipping you out." Firefoot padded in through the hallway, moving around the table and putting away the chair Frank used last night.

"Well, before shi leaves, we'd better have at least some send off ready for hir." Firefoot chuckled to himself. Gildedtongue blushed firmly and coughed into hir fist.

"Well, not too sure that'd be necessary. Don't have too many contacts here, or elsewhere really," Gildedtongue shrugged and looked at the couple, and then chuckled quietly, "Though, if you both are Dreamweaver's parents, which you are, it means that I'm not going to have any peace until I agree."

Startail snickers softly, "See, you can teach an old 'kat new tricks."

Chapter 10

Gildedtongue excused himself to the restroom, leaving Startail and hir mate with each other. Things just seemed to be moving far too rapidly for the chakat's comfort as shi found shelter in the small tiled room. After hir business and washing hir paws shi splashed some water from the sink on hir face, hoping to help wake hir up. Shi took a long look at himself in the mirror, memorizing various scuffs and burned places of fur all over hir face. Hir lower eyelids sagged from poor sleeping and stress. Hir once fiery red mane was peppered with white and gray hairs, giving hir a rather mature

look for someone barely middle aged. Shi grumbled a bit as hir whiskers were well singed down to hir muzzle, hir teeth yellowed from being unable to brush them since the dance. Hir eyes glassy and worn and...

Gildedtongue shut hir eyes tightly and looked away, not really wanting to take any more inventory of himself. Shi discarded hir top and made hir way into the shower to see if shi couldn't scrub off any more charred fur and not have a bald patch. The warm water invigorated hir flesh as shi loosened hir vocal cords to purr again. The water and shampoo didn't seem enough to remove the feeling of filth all over hir body, but shi figured shi at least looked clean. Shi squeezed some toothpaste on hir index finger to scour away the plaque from hir teeth as well as shi could as hir foreleg paws used a towel to dry off hir fur. Shi left the bathroom a little tussled and unbrushed, but felt cleaner than in the morning.

Dreamweaver burst out of hir room, wearing a hastily thrown together outfit, and shrieked as shi ran smack into Gildedtongue, causing both felitaurs to tumble heads over tails down the hallway towards the front door. As the dust cleared, Dreamweaver found herself firmly inside of Gildedtongue's arms and forelegs as the teen looked town at the leonine chakat. Both of them couldn't find any words as they stared blankly at each other. Gildedtongue's hearts started to race again as shi gulped back the swelling in hir mouth. Another swelling in hir body slid out of hir sheath against Dreamweaver's rough loincloth, causing Gildy to moan in discomfort. Dreamweaver's eyes closed as shi felt the knocking penis as shi rocked back momentarily.

"Dreamweaver! C'mon, you'll be late for class!" the oblivious voice of Firefoot rang out and Dreamweaver was off like a rocket once more. Gildedtongue used hir tail and hindlegs to cover himself as shi lay in thought, feeling hir ears burn with blush. A few mental calculations reminded Gildy that shi was in the middle of leaving rut.

"Well, somehow I don't think Dreamweaver minded that one bit," came a chuckling voice. Gildedtongue let out a quiet meep of embarrassment as shi rolled onto hir bellies quickly to hide any evidence, yelping a bit in pain from laying on hir hind leg. Startail shook hir head and smiled, continuing to laugh at the sight. Gildedtongue gulped a moment and wished that shi could just get absorbed into the floor, after being caught nearly dry-humping hir hosts' daughter.

Startail stopped laughing, cocking hir head gently to the side as shi got a better look at Gildedtongue, "Sheesh, hon. It isn't that bad. Dreamweaver has had hir eye on you for some time." Gildedtongue turned hir head away and hid it under hir hands, pulling lightly at the skin on hir face as shi growled at himself. Startail took a very concerned look at Gildedtongue, laying next to hir and resting a hand in hir mane, "Gildedtongue, are you okay? Don't you think this is a bit overdramatic?"

Gildedtongue lay quietly for a moment, lifting hir head a bit as shi let out a quiet

chuff of a sigh. Shi looked up at the concerned chakat, then shook hir head lightly, regaining hir composure and covering hirself back up with the towel shi had brought with hir out of the bathroom. "It still feels wrong, Startail. I don't think that any amount of genetic impulses and ingrained preferences will really substitute a few decades of teachings that the flesh is a thing of sin and evil."

Startail didn't have a response to this. Shi'd never come across a chakat who thought that with such conviction. Gildedtongue pulled away from the hand on hir head as shi sighed again. Startail saw the chakat turn to leave, realizing shi had to speak shi found hir voice again, "Di-did your parents teach you that?" Gildedtongue paused, then shook hir head quietly.

"No, Startail, they really didn't teach me much of anything." Gildedtongue turned to see the perplexed face of one of hir hosts. Shi cleared hir throat and continued, "I wasn't exactly an expected child. My parents were in their late nineties when I was conceived, and at that point in their lives, they were more concerned about their work than family." Gildedtongue shook hir head a bit, "Of course I was loved, I just... needed to find someone else for guidance."

Startail nodded quietly to hirself as shi listened to the older felitaur, "And, should I ask who you turned to?" Gildedtongue nodded to hirself as shi started to walk towards the table, finding talking in the hallway much too awkward for conversation.

"I was enrolled to learn in the Federal Monastery. There I found myself with the best of libraries, educators, and facilities the Kingdom has to offer. Unfortunately, they also were very traditional in their values. That loincloth they make Dreamweaver wear would have been a luxury. They had their own devices to raise a beast of lust proper. Wraps for the breasts have dulled their sensations, and various chastity belts have made me very stressed any time I've had an erection."

Startail shook hir head, "I can't believe this, Gildy. Sounds like something out of a horror film. How could your parents let you go through that, Hell, how could the Federation allow such practices in an allied nation go on?" Gildedtongue nodded to hirself, taking the objection and digesting it.

"Well, for starters, communication in and out of the FM is well monitored and checked and rechecked for sinful or heretic material or text. Visitors are not welcome to maintain a disciplined and focused sanctuary. As far as Federation involvement, I have no clue. We saw a few inspectors walking about, but I noticed most of them find their way to the Monastery's winery sooner or later." Startail nodded, one of the biggest exports of the HCKNA is high quality wine, despite being located nowhere near wine country, they have developed very choice products.

Startail frowned quietly to hirself, "Very interesting. It's still a little hard to swallow, Gildedtongue." Shi went to get a few mugs of tea, handing Gildedtongue a mug of microwaved water and some teabags. Startail drummed over hir mug quietly, "Seems

I probably shouldn't have taken that contract here, considering the practices that seem to be all around the place." Shi sipped from his mug quietly, "And you growing up without love in a place your parents couldn't look into."

Gildedtongue shook his head softly, "Well, I wouldn't call it completely without love." Shi chuckled to himself as he watched Startail's perplexed face. Gildedtongue kept quiet while letting the teabags embitter the warm water. "Frank and I had known each other before the Monastery, being neighbours. We were both enrolled into the system at the same time, and while the rules do separate the sexes, apparently my penis trumped my breasts and vagina and I was in the men's barracks. Frank and I remained fast friends, much to the chagrin of staff and teachers. Anyway, as boys become men and kittens become chakats, so did Frank and I, and notice our maturities we did." The older chakat giggled quietly to himself, "This was early enough that those wraps and restrictors weren't in place, since they weren't quite sure what to do."

Startail nodded quietly to himself, "Well, considering the environment, I couldn't imagine you two consummating your new found attraction." Gildedtongue gave a kittenish smirk behind his mug, sipping quietly. Startail blinked a bit at this, "You did? Where?"

Gildedtongue kept quiet, letting the memory sweeten the tea before setting the mug down, "We found that there was only one room in the Monastery that wasn't under digital surveillance, the Sacristy." Startail nearly did a spit-take as he listened to the story.

"What, right there in front of Jesus and everything?"

Gildedtongue couldn't help but giggle again, "Usually there's people in and out of there all the time to pray, so there isn't much need for anyone to keep an eye out for vandalism or general hoodlum antics, but Frank and I timed the average time between prayer groups and figured we had twenty minutes." Shi giggled again, "I guess there really isn't a force on Earth to keep randy teenagers away from each other." Gildedtongue closed his eyes and smiled wide, "God, he was trembling so as we snuck in, I didn't know how I looked like, but I could tell you that my hearts were ready to break my ribcages they were beating so fast." Shi purred gently to himself, sipping another mouthful of tea, "Two blushing virgins in the holiest room of the whole complex."

Startail shook his head softly, "Heh, how sacrilegious. Were you two caught? I mean, you were banking on averages and Murphy certainly should have stepped in at some point."

Gildedtongue purred quietly to himself, shaking his head gently, "I swear, the trinity was just enjoying the show. No one had stepped in there while we were in there. Apparently the archbishop had made a surprise visit, and everyone was at the other

side of the complex listening to some speech. It was hours before we stepped out, and no one afterwards suspected anything, though I swear the room must have reeked of sex." Shi chuckled again to himself.

The darker chakat nodded to himself as shi enjoyed the amount of bliss emanating from the usually dour chakat. Starry bit hir lower lip softly as shi cocked hir head to the side, "Two virgins, eh? So, you were each other's firsts? So, what happened afterwards? I mean, did you two still find places to make love?"

Gildedtongue shook hir head slowly, looking down at hir mug, "Thanks to the uncovering of events in the 20th and 21st century, new ministers and nuns are to undergo, ah, 'voluntary' sexual suppression therapy. Frank hasn't had an erection since he was seventeen." Gildedtongue sipped from hir mug again, "He has aged well, and had he not become a priest, he'd be staving off suitors from left and right." Gildedtongue's ears were tinted with blush as shi looked down into the mug, "Anyone in the world, really, and yet he chose me."

Startail smiled and sipped from hir mug a bit more, "Well, if you were that chakat I was seeing during this little trip down memory lane, I could see what he saw. You're going to have to come out of this shell sometime, Gildedtongue."

Gildy nodded softly, "Yeah, I know." Shi continued to look in hir mug, "Startail, I know I don't have a place to say anything, especially about Dreamweaver, however, I do see a lot of me in hir, and a lot of my parents in you two. You love hir dearly, but..." Gildedtongue bit back the words, looking at the concerned face of the parent in front of hir. Shi had come this far into the sentence, so shi might as well finish it. "You love hir, but I think you two really need to show hir more. Keep hir from class and take hir to work for a day. Talk to hir about hir flights of fancy and hir hobbies. In my short time teaching hir, shi seemed to always drop by my room to talk about things more fit to be heard from a parent, and I think it's because I'm the only one shi can talk to. You both do need to go on your career, which includes many trips, I know, but... You do have another job."

Startail closed hir eyes. Shi looked a little hurt, but as shi thought to himself, hir face softened a bit to resignation, nodding quietly, "I guess you're right, Gildedtongue. I don't know, my parents were always a bit too inquisitive in my affairs, so I guess I'm trying to give Dreamy enough space to grow, but maybe I do need to peek in a bit more, Firefoot too." The sound of a PTV shutting down outside the house alerted Startail's ears as shi looked out of the window, "And speak of the devil, that must be Firefoot with our other guest."

Gildedtongue had a confused face, not knowing that they invited someone else, but didn't complain. Shi followed Startail to the front door, looking out the window. Firefoot stepped out of the driver's side and a skunktaur padded hys way out of the otherside. Gildedtongue thought shi could recognize hym as the skunktaur that

helped hir earlier in the trial, Tarkiee's relative, Zool, though the exact relation escaped hir, as did hys name. Gildedtongue retreated back into the bathroom, shi showered in and pulled out the shirt from the floor, pulling at the wrinkles with hir hands before donning it. By the time shi got out, the three others were at the table. The skunktaur stopped the conversation, giving a polite but curt nod to the oncoming chakat.

"I suppose you're the reason I'm here. In many ways I was hoping that our time in the cell would have been the only time our paths would meet, but seems that fate has mingled our threads once more." Hy closed hys eyes, relaxing a bit after seeing the nervous face of the older chakat, "I know I shouldn't blame you for Tark's mother, but in a way it is difficult not to. You didn't ask for any of this." Gildedtongue nodded dumbly as shi sat down at the table with the other three. The skunktaur looked over a PADD, grumbling a bit to hymself, "You lost just about everything in that fire, if what Firefoot and Frank says is true. That should make things a little more complicated but still probably workable. Name?"

"Chakat Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe."

"Birthdate?"

"26/7/55"

"Federation ID Number?" the skunktaur asked, lifting hys eyebrow. Gildedtongue swallowed softly. Shi'd seen it on a few cards but never really needed to put that to memory as shi had little need to travel interplanetarily. The skunktaur sighed to hymself and bit hys lip, trying to think of how to get it.

Startail blinked softly, "Shouldn't you know your Confirmation ID? That should be cross referenced in the Kingdom's database."

Gildedtongue nodded softly and with a rhythm recited, "Jude 566-46-4665."

The skunktaur chuckled to hymself, typing in the number, "Patron Saint of lost causes, if I remember right." The Federation officer got quiet as hy looked over hys PADD, stroking hys chin softly, "You're also dead."

Gildedtongue blinked quietly before unconsciously pinching hir foreleg. The skunktaur felt a grin widen a bit more as hy relaxed, "They probably found scraps of your fur in the debris, and since you didn't stick around, they declared you legally dead. On the bright side, this should avoid needing to fill out emigration papers. We will, ah, point out the clerical error after you've arrived at your destination, so long as you keep quiet until you leave for..." the officer trailed off biting hir lower lip again as shi looked up at Gildedtongue, "Where was it that you were going?"

Gildedtongue had no clue where the location came out of hir. Shi had been too

confused by the chaos of yesterday to really come up with a reasonable answer, however the word had bubbled in hir lungs and sprung out of hir mouth before shi could find time to filter it.

"Chakona."

The skunktaur lifted hys brow quietly, leaning back, "A chakat with a history of violence against children wants to go to the chakat homeworld?" Firefoot and Startail glared at the skunktaur, the fur on their tails poofing out.

"How dare you say that Zoolhook!" Firefoot spat. Gildedtongue meekly looked at the conversation, but was happy to finally hear the full name of the officer shi was talking with. The skunktaur, Zoolhook, sighed to hymself.

"I know why there is the history, that doesn't get rid of the fact that it is there, and Gildedtongue, in the trial, had admitted to dealing severe damage to Miller's hands. As long as the person in charge of your case is willing to do the extra work to read why you did it, maybe you have a shot, but it certainly is a black mark on your record." Gildedtongue nodded and frowned to himself. "But, with this information, and the information I'll get putting this into the database, I might be able to find a sponsor to speak on behalf of you to make things more smooth." Zoolhook said, closing hys PADD and stood up.

Gildedtongue blinked at how rapidly this was going. Hir brain finally caught up with the pace before shi looked at Zoolhook, "How exactly am I going to afford the transport to Chakona? I don't think that the Federation is just handing out tickets." Zoolhook nodded to himself, dusting off hys uniform.

"Very true, Gildedtongue. However, there are a number of supply vessels that run between here and Chakona. It might take a while longer, and you'll be working your passage, however you should also be able to earn some extra money to get an apartment in Chakona, and find work there. You certainly aren't the first broke chakat who decided to make a new start on their homeworld."

Gildedtongue nodded softly to Zoolhook, watching the officer start for the door. Zoolhook paused for a moment, looking back to Gildedtongue, "I'm sorry if I seem a bit cold, Gildedtongue, Valtee's death is still very fresh upon my soul." Gildedtongue gave a sympathetic nod as the skunktaur left, Firefoot following to drive him back to the base.

"So, I guess Dreamweaver convinced you, eh, Gildedtongue?" Startail chuckled to himself, smiling to the older chakat, "Guess you're going to go to the homeworld like shi suggested." Gildedtongue nodded meekly as shi looked at the walls quietly. Startail continued to give a Cheshire grin before leaning back, "Mmmmm, well, I suppose a proper send-off is now required, considering you'll soon be among the stars. Should give your friends a warm farewell, eh?"

Gildedtongue nodded quietly to himself as shi stayed quiet for a moment, "Not that there will be many to say goodbye to. I've been so much the recluse I honestly don't think many are going to notice." Shi chuckled to himself, but stopped at Startail's frown. Shi looked down again, gulping softly, "Well, obviously I'd like Frank to be there, you, Firefoot, and Dreamweaver, even though we've only recently met, we seem to be friends in need." Gildedtongue stroked his chin softly, "Peter, definitely, I certainly wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him." Gildedtongue mused a bit more to himself before shrugging quietly, "Other than that sadly, I can't think of many else."

Startail frowned slightly to himself, "Heh, alright, well, I'll see if I can't contact them." Shi stretches a bit, "I'll tell them to bring some guests as well, just to liven it up a bit more, if you're comfortable with that?" Gildedtongue nodded and smiled quietly. Shi got up to stretch again, feeling much better after all of that talking. Shi gave Startail Frank's information, but wasn't sure about Peter's, but figured that they would be able to look it up.

The next few days went relatively uneventful until the party that was scheduled on Friday. Gildedtongue was a little uncomfortable not being able to contribute much, but Startail and Firefoot insisted that shi wasn't a leech, just someone in need of help.

"I can't see much of a difference," Gildedtongue muttered under his breath, then let out a yip as shi felt Firefoot's tail swat against his rump.

"Hush you, and go put on something nice, now, they should be arriving in half an hour," Firefoot chided a bit, shooing the older chakat into the bathroom. Gildedtongue let out a meep of protest before the door closed behind him. Shi looked at a shopping bag before him, peeking into it. Startail had gone out shopping earlier that day and brought home some clothes for their guest, much to Gildy's embarrassment. The declaration of death had ruined much of any chance for collecting any insurance, or any funds in his account, being absorbed by the Kingdom due to a lack of will, or next of kin.

Inside the bag was a gorgeous maroon blouse that Gildy could hardly believe shi should wear. Shi closed his eyes and shucked off the shirt shi was wearing all day, quietly putting on the blouse, buttoning up the front. Shi grunted slightly as the shirt felt a size small, blushing firmly looking in the mirror at how it certainly made his smaller bosom perkier. "So, that's how Startail shops for Firefoot," shi muttered under his breath, giving a small chuckle.

After giving his fur a vigorous brushing, Gildedtongue left the tiled room to find that Frank had already arrived. He was smiling and went over to give his friend a firm hug. Gildedtongue closed his eyes tightly, purring loudly as shi returned the hug, giving Frank a nuzzle before they broke the embrace. "Well, looks like you'll

be able to escape from here after all. I'm really going to miss you."

Gildedtongue blushed firmly, looking down and away for a moment, still standing close to his oldest friend, "Well, don't miss me yet, Frank, I'm still here." Shi purred a bit more, keeping his smile wide. Frank nodded and ran his fingers through Gildedtongue's mane, giving him a kiss on the forehead.

"Can we get you something to drink, Reverend Johnson?" Dreamweaver asked, approaching the two, stepping his way between his parents. Frank closed his eyes as he smiled wide, letting out a quiet chuckle.

"Please, Dreamweaver, tonight, I'm just Frank. This isn't a night proper for titles, just for people." Frank chuckled a bit, then added in a moment of afterthought, "And whatever beer you have available would be fine, I haven't had a larger in, Lord knows how long." Frank started to take off his collar and traditional shirt, revealing a button down blue shirt underneath. Firefoot insisted on taking the removed clothing as Frank smirked, "Certainly feels nice being in something more in the less department."

Gildedtongue started for the table as the rest of the group joined him. Dreamweaver rendezvoused them there, handing Frank his drink. Shi blushed and looked at Gildedtongue, "Erm, I invited 'Kiee here and Zoolhook, I hope you don't mind terribly."

Gildedtongue shook his head quietly, "No, I don't mind at all. Heh, will be nice to see more people who were involved." Shi purred quietly to himself, looking out the window quietly. "Frank, since I apparently am dead, there must've been a number of questions directed to you about your whereabouts."

Frank nodded quietly, "Absolutely, though most don't question the work of missionaries out to convert others." He winked quietly as Gildedtongue giggled a bit. The five began the evening exchanging conversation, and bottles of beer, juice, and soda, some more restricted than others. It wasn't long before the doorbell rang again and Dreamweaver got up to answer the door. The familiar voice of Peter greeted Dreamweaver while sneaking out into the kitchen area. A young, feminine voice accompanied it as Gildedtongue cocked his head a bit. Standing next to his former attorney was a stunning morph of a vixen. She stood about a whole head taller than Peter and was full of curves. Gildedtongue barely pried his eyes off of the newcomer to greet Pete.

"God am I so glad to see you, Gildedtongue. When I first heard you had died I... well, let's just say how happy to see how wrong they were." Peter's hand was like a vice around Gildedtongue's before he pulled the older chakat into a tight embrace. The vixen giggled to herself, watching the human practically molest the chakat, not that shi was minding much.

Gildedtongue chuckled and eventually pulled out of the hug, nodding to the vixen, "Peter, you must introduce us to your companion," shi chuckled and ruffled through his hair quietly. Peter nodded and moved next to the vixen, gesturing to her.

"Heh, of course. Everyone, the vixen you're all salivating to is Theresa. She and I have been mates for the last six years. Heh, we'd be more if the Church would let us marry."

"Well, I think we're married enough to God and everyone else, who cares what those stuffed shirts say." Frank seemed to laugh the loudest as Firefoot leaned next to Theresa, whispering in her ear. The russet vixen's green eyes became like dinner plates as her ears splayed against her skull. "Present company excluded, my apologies."

"None taken. Though I think the only stuffed shirt here is on you." Gildedtongue blinked a moment at Frank. The monsignor chuckled and shrugged, "Hey, no amount of therapy is going to remove a good appreciation of pretty things." The party grew in laughter again as the two skunktaurs stepped in the door.

"Seems like we're late for the joke," Tookiee smirked, moving to give Dreamweaver a hug. Hy glanced a bit at Gildedtongue, giving a sheepish wave as the older chakat gave a nod back. Zool approached Gildedtongue, offering hys hand.

"A good day to you, Gildedtongue. I hope our presence here isn't unwanted."

Gildedtongue shook hir head, "No no, Zoolhook, quite the opposite. If it weren't for you, I'd probably be in a cell somewhere gathering dust. I can't express enough how much I owe you." Zoolhook nodded quietly to hymself, giving a small chuckle.

"Just keep out of trouble and a low profile from now on, that's all I ask."

Gildedtongue chuckled and nodded quietly as the party started properly. Conversation ran as freely as wine and cards were exchanged in games of poker and Sheepshead.

It was one thirty in the morning before things quieted down. Dreamweaver was sitting on hefty trove of points earned by the card games and the adults playfully accused hir of hiding the good cards in hir headfur. Laughter was held by all as Peter and Theresa got up.

"Well, I need to head to the office in the morning, so I'd best be on my way." The human cracked his back and ran some tired fingers through his hair.

"Heh, I can't imagine you doing all that well after getting a morph off, though, Peter," Firefoot said, leaning against the table they were playing at.

"Quite the opposite, rather," Peter chuckled a bit to himself, "See, certain bigotries are overlooked when you're considered good enough to save a hopeless case." Gildedtongue blushed a bit to himself, but nodded in understanding. Peter rummaged through his jacket for a moment before finding a slip of paper, giving it to Gildedtongue, "Not sure if gifts are appropriate at these sorts of gatherings, but, ah well, no give backs." He snickered.

Gildedtongue opened the paper, eyes going a bit wide as shi blushed hard, "Erm, an IOU for two thousand credits." Gildedtongue gulped a bit, "Ah, heh, I don't think you really should have, Peter."

The lawyer shook his head quietly, "I should and I am. Actually, that's half of a bet I had with someone in the office. Heh, I guess he's rather regretting having shook on that." The group laughed loud again, as available tails swished in the celebration. Peter continued, "I would have transferred that to your account directly, but, it's a little hard giving money to a dead person."

Gildedtongue nodded to himself as shi tucked the paper into hir blouse, "Well, means that I have to contact you when I get planetside, no?" Peter nodded and gave a bit of a wink. Zoolhook got up slowly, stretching a bit himself.

"Since we seem to be giving good news and gifts, I suppose I should tell you that we've found you a transport vessel willing to take you on their crew, as well as a sponsor when you reach Chakona. You'll be aboard the *Purgatorio*. An ore transport vessel that stops in Chakonan spaceport a little more than a year from now. She's a large ship with plenty of families on it. More than likely you'll be tutor to the children. She'll launch at nine hundred hours prompt on Sunday."

Gildedtongue nodded quietly, giving a small smile mixed with jubilation and fear, realizing that all shi's known is going to be gone so soon. Shi cocked hir head to the side, "Erm, who is the sponsor?"

"You'll be called tomorrow morning concerning all of that. Right now I'm absolutely bushed and 'Kiee, your sire will kill me for keeping you out this late." The teen grumbled a bit as hy nodded, giving Dreamweaver a hug as the skunktaurs joined Peter and the vixen. Frank was rather quiet during all of this, looking deep in thought. Gildedtongue noticed this in hir friend as shi approached him.

"Frank, something wrong?"

Frank signed a bit before giving his oldest friend a firm hug, and then smiled quietly. "Back when I decided to go to the monastery and become a priest, my father had taken me aside and given me this." Frank took off a small necklace he wore. It was rather plain, a gold chain and a small Byzantine cross hanging from the bottom. Gildedtongue blinked softly, never having seen Frank take it off since he first started wearing it. Frank continued. "My grandfather gave it to my father when he went to

join the military, telling him that his child was dead and his son had been reborn as a man. My father told me the same as I left home. Now, since I have no one to offer the same, I am going to tell you, Gildy, that my friend has died and has been born anew as a free person that I hope will be my friend again."

Gildedtongue fought back tears, feeling the necklace slowly rest in hir hands. Shi wrapped hir arms tightly around hir friend, finally feeling tears run freely down hir cheek. Frank coughed in the firm hug, but returned it with vigour. The two didn't hear the quiet applause or see looks of approval. Gildedtongue finally broke the embrace, feeling hir hands tremble as shi tried to put the chain on, nearly dropping it. Frank smiled and took it from hir, slowly putting the necklace around hir neck, then kissed hir once more.

"You are going to keep in touch, aren't you, Gildy?" Gildedtongue could only nod mutely; wiping hir face messily before the three sets of guests left the house. The house went dead as Startail and Firefoot started to clean up. Gildy was still slightly in shock from the events. Dreamweaver approached the middle-aged felitaur, gulping to himself.

"Gildedtongue?" Shi asked quietly, breaking Gildy's trance momentarily, bringing hir focus onto Dreamweaver. The younger chakat felt rather foolish for a moment before regaining hir resolve, taking a deep inhale, "I don't have anything as useful as Peter's or Zoolhook's gifts, or as meaningful as Frank's, but," Dreamweaver paused for a moment. Gildedtongue blushed as shi saw this train from a mile away, but wasn't sure what shi'd do until it arrived.

"Gildedtongue, I want you to be my first."

Gildedtongue blinked, not quite expecting the train to be that one. Shi had figured that Dreamweaver already had hir first, shi had a number of boyfriends and girlfriends, and hir parents were supportive enough for that sort of action. Gildedtongue was momentarily confused, but gazed into Dreamweaver's eyes. This wasn't a kittenish infatuation, but a look of intimacy and love. Gildedtongue nodded quietly before speaking finally, "I'd be honoured to be your first, Dreamweaver."

Gildy avoided the coy approving grins of Dreamweaver's parents as shi took Dream by the hand as they retreated into hir bedroom.

Gildedtongue blushed as shi closed the door behind hir. Dreamweaver smiled and giggled a bit nervously, heading to the pile of pillows shi called hir bed. Both chakats stood in silence for a moment, unsure of what the next move should be. Dreamweaver took the initiative and stepped forward, smiling to himself and kissed Gildy firmly on the lips. The older chakat felt warm as shi accepted the kiss before returning it. Both felitaurs caressing over the fur and flesh before them.

Gildedtongue exhaled in a huff as shi broke the kiss, finally, slowly opening Dreamweaver's buttoned-up shirt. Shi blushed firmly and smiled at the exposed breasts, lowering hir head to lap at the nipples. Dreamweaver gave a satisfied coo as beads of milkwater welled up. Gildy grinned and drank them down quietly, purring louder.

Dreamweaver's curious tail snaked around a bit, slowly finding Gildy's swollen length throbbing between hir hindlegs. The feline's tail tip ran along the pulsing flesh, making Gildedtongue stop hir suckling to moan. Dreamweaver smiled quietly, continuing hir attack on the thick flesh as shi leaned over to look at what shi was playing with, and blushed furiously at the thickness of what Gildy was protruding. Gildedtongue gulped and leaned back, offering himself to Dreamy's ministrations, purring deeper.

Dreamweaver closed hir eyes and muttered to himself for resolve as shi turned around, lifting hir tail high for Gildedtongue. The older chakat nodding to himself as shi slowly moved a finger along the proffered holes, eliciting a giggle out of Dreamweaver. Gildedtongue purred a bit louder, slowly lifting hir forelegs to wrap around Dreamweaver's rump. Hir hearts throbbing in hir chests as shi kissed Dreamy's cheek and lips as well as shi could, finding himself fully atop of the willing friend.

Gildedtongue's shaft found purchase, slowly sliding between Dreamweaver's petals. Shi felt extremely warm as the older chakat purred louder. Dreamweaver grunted, feeling the thickness penetrate hir as shi tried to relax, letting Gildy's shaft past hir vaginal sphincter. Gildy whined a bit more, adjusting himself a bit and pressed harder. After a bit more fussing, Gildedtongue finally slid past there as both chakats mewed in pleasure. Dreamy's eyes a bit wide at the size of Gildedtongue, and Gildy in the pure pleasure of being close to someone else.

Gildedtongue started to pull out, huffing in need as shi slowly began hir pace in Dreamweaver. The older chakat already a bit worked up due to the near novelty of the act and the amount Dream had worked hir up. Gildedtongue closed hir eyes and let out a muffled yelp as shi felt hir shaft spasm and convulse, spilling hir seed deeply into Dreamy's channel.

The younger chakat murped and went cross-eyed for a moment, feeling the warm goo that had splattered in hir, wondering what it was, but was informed quickly when shi felt Gildedtongue thickness starting to go soft in hir. Dreamweaver blushed furiously, nowhere near pleasure as shi gulped up at Gildy, "Erm, done already?"

Gildedtongue blushed firmly, giving a small nod, "Ah, yes." The older chakat keeping still as shi closed hir eyes, feeling hir whole face get as red as hir mane in embarrassment. Gildedtongue felt a bit bad seeing Dreamweaver's disappointed look on hir face as Gildedtongue continued, "Erm, just, heh, been so long and you felt so

good, was hard to even try to control."

Dreamweaver nodded a bit to himself as Gildedtongue slowly pulled himself off. The older chakat grunting as shi flopped onto hir backs, looking up and over at Dreamweaver, breathing a bit slowly. Dreamweaver smirked a bit to himself, pouncing atop of Gildedtongue, giving hir lips a strong kiss as shi pressed hir own sheath against Gildedtongue. The older chakat nodding a bit as shi felt Dreamweaver's shaft press slimily against hir. The teen grunting a bit as shi measured up a bit, feeling hir tip poke and prod against flesh before pressing forward. Gildedtongue's eyes went wide as shi felt Dreamweaver miss the mark and press under hir tail. The older chakat grunting and relaxing as much as shi can, giving a slightly pained smile to Dreamy.

"Erg, you're, rather tight yourself, Gildy," Dreamweaver muttered slightly obliviously, finding it odd how dry it was as shi grunted. Dreamweaver blushed as shi felt the wet warmth of Gildedtongue's sex against hir belly as shi looked down in the dark, seeing hir length hilted inside of Gildy's rectum. Gildedtongue grunted as Dreamweaver started pulling out, the older chakat holding Dream's hand a bit, smiling, despite the discomfort.

"Mmmph, oooh, it's okay," Gildy muttered, giving Dreamweaver a bit of a nuzzle as the younger chakat nodded a bit, starting to press back in, giving both chakats another moan of intimacy. Dreamweaver's foreleg paws flexing, causing Gildedtongue to wince as shi felt Dreamweaver's claws press and prick through hir skin. Shi bit back hir pain and was thankful that shi and Dreamweaver didn't have much of an empathetic prowess to affect each other as they continued to grind against each other.

Dreamweaver shuddered visibly above Gildedtongue. The older chakat grunting as shi felt the warmth of climax inside of hir, making hir smile pleasantly as shi purred in contentment. The older chakat pulling the striped felitaur to hir, purring louder as both cuddled in the aftermath. Dreamweaver felt hir shaft pop out of Gildedtongue, making both shiver against each other. After a while they finally snuggled up more before falling asleep.

Gildedtongue slowly blinked hir eyes awake as shi felt the cobwebs drift from hir head. Shi felt sore in a number of places, not having that sort of exertion in a long, long time. Dreamweaver's snoring was broken by long bouts of purring as shi still slumbered. Gildy slowly crawled off of the sleeping pad, making sure that Dreamweaver was still asleep. Shi crept to the bathroom to perform hir usual rituals, feeling considerably more relaxed than ever before. Shi certainly needed some sort of intimacy and was glad to have such an energetic and caring lover.

Though neither of them, for the rest of their years, will ever consider that evening

the best sex they'd ever had, it will certainly rank high up on the most emotional encounters they've had.

Gildedtongue stepped out of the bathroom slowly, running into Startail, who was grinning like a proud kitten. Gildedtongue quickly found out where Dreamweaver's smile came from. Startail asked playfully, "Sooooo, it was good?"

Gildedtongue could only give an embarrassed nod and a large gulp. Shi had just deflowered their daughter and the sire was completely nonplussed by it. This had been very contrary to what Gildedtongue had believed. Of course shi knew that most chakats were more concerned about emotional relationships and physical relationships are just a common result of such a relationship, but Gildy was still a little wary in this field. The older chakat gave a guttural grunt that could have meant anything before retreating back into Dreamweaver's room.

The dark, cross-striped chakat slowly blinked hir eyes open, smiling a bit more at Gildedtongue's backside as shi certainly enjoyed that look in the morning. Shi purred a bit more, reaching to rub Gildy's exposed ankle, making hir jump a bit in surprise, treading on fingers, emitting another yelp from Dreamweaver before Gildy fell backwards onto the waking chakat.

"Mmmph, sorry," Gildy muttered as the chaos settled. Dreamweaver giggled between grunts of pain, but smiled at the silliness of it all. Both chakats slowly got out of the bed again as Dreamweaver rubbed hir flanks against Gildedtongue. Both chakats left the room as Dreamweaver went to the bathroom and Gildy went to the kitchen. Startail was there at the skillet, frying a number of eggs, bacon, and potatoes. The older chakat slowly sat down at the table.

"Sorry for leaving the mess all for you and Firefoot last night," Gildedtongue muttered, trying to wake up a bit more. Startail chuckled and scooped a portion of the concoction onto a plate and set it in front of Gildedtongue with a large mug of coffee.

"Think nothing of it, I guess that's Fire's and my gift to you, a bit of sanctuary," Startail chuckled as shi went back to rouse hir still slumbering mate. Dreamweaver smiled and kissed Gildedtongue's cheek as shi walked by, helping himself to some of the breakfast. Gildedtongue only then noticed the undressed state of everyone in the house, but was rather calm about the whole thing, munching happily on the food.

"Thank you, again, Gildy. It wasn't exactly how I dreamed it, but it had it's own charm." Gildedtongue stuck hir tongue out to the sassy teen, but nodded softly. Both chakats sat close with each other, inhaling each other's scents as they purred happily. Firefoot stepped out of the room, not even covering hir cavernous yawn as shi held onto Startail's shoulder for support in hir escape of the warm siren's call of bed. The offer of coffee and breakfast snapped hir away from thoughts of slumber as shi drank the hot bitter brew with gusto.

"So, you're going to be leaving pretty early tomorrow, Gildy. Without traffic it's still a good four hours from here to the starport. So we'll be getting up pretty early." Firefoot said behind his mug of coffee, feeling the sand dust from his eyes. Gildedtongue nodded quietly, also realizing she'll need a good night's sleep, so probably not a good idea to sleep with Dreamweaver again. The four continued to eat in silence before the viewscreen chimed happily. Firefoot excused himself and went to answer the phone. A few moments she came back and smiled at Gildedtongue, "It's from Chakona, I do believe this is your sponsor."

Gildedtongue got up and made his way down the hall to the viewscreen, a small chill ran up his spine as she spied a familiar white tiger patterned face staring back at him. The chakat on the other line purred and gave a happy wave, "Good morning, sleepyhead. Guess I'm going to have to look after you."

Gildedtongue felt the fur on his neck and back rise in ire as she swallowed a growl. His fists bunched and his claws pierced his pawpads in both surprise and anger. She stared at the screen for a moment before finally speaking.

"Hello, sister."

Chapter 11

"Not exactly the friendliest response to someone trying to help," the green-eyed chakat on the other end blinked a bit. She looked older than Gildedtongue, but had aged softer, more grandmotherly than Gildedtongue had.

"I suppose you'll be ready to gloat that I'm leaving here, then?" Gildedtongue crossed his arms in front of his bosom, arching an eyebrow. The white tiger returned with a smirk as she purred through the viewscreen.

"Oh, no. Well, not yet anyway. Honestly, the only reason that I accepted this sponsorship was because we're sisters. I know you don't exactly like me for making fun of your little fairy tales that you believe in, but that doesn't change the fact that we're still blood."

"I suppose you're right, Jadestripe," Gildedtongue sighed quietly before shrugging, "So, what do I do?" The leonine chakat felt his tail wrap around his hindlegs in submission as she stared at his forty-year senior sister who was looking over something off screen.

"Right now, your primary goal will be to get here. After that you'll have to go to the Skunktaur Archipelago where your embassy is. From there we can get your visa and work on getting you to be a full-fledged citizen." Jade chuckled to himself before she

continued, "I'd be able to do this sort of thing faster if you weren't dead."

Gildedtongue nodded quietly, biting his lower lip in thought. After a moment of taking his sister's time she finally said, "I... I want to thank you, Jade, for helping me through this. I know I've been considerably distant to you and Ebonwave," Gildedtongue paused a bit, cocking his head to the left, "How is Ebony?"

Jade closed his eyes tightly and looked away, "Ebonwave was caught in an atmosphere pop terraforming a moon on Alpha Proxima fifteen years ago. They said she didn't feel a thing. Luckily his cubs were fully grown." Gildedtongue winced and performed a quick sign of the cross. She had been so far away she was nearly a stranger to his own family.

Jade shook his head from the memory, then gave a weak smile, "Well, it'll be good to see family again soon. My older cubs would love to meet the elusive Auntie Gildy, as would our newest granddaughter, Aeonflare." Jade smiled quietly and nodded to Gildedtongue. "I guess I should sign off now and head to work. See you in nine Terran months."

Gildedtongue missed the closing connection by a millisecond. The chakat went to join the rest of the household to finish his meal in uncomfortable silence. Dreamweaver stared at his teacher for a moment before breaking the deafening nothingness, "So, erm, that was your sister? She looked rather nice."

Gildedtongue responded with a grunt and was content to leave it with that, but decided to be more polite, "Yes, that was Jadestripe, my older sister. Apparently she will be my sponsor when I arrive at Chakona, and vouch for my abilities and sanity." Gildedtongue punctuated it with a sip of tea, which turned into gulping down the rest of the now tepid drink.

The other three chakats kept relatively in silence before Firefoot spoke, "Didn't know you had any other siblings. Why haven't you left here earlier, or have them visit you more often?" A common question on the minds of the other felitaurs.

Gildedtongue sighed as she leaned back, feeling his spines pop. "It's hard to consider some people your siblings when their children are older than you are." The other sisters nodded at this. Gildedtongue continued, "Besides, most of them weren't exactly supportive of my choices to stay here in the Kingdom," Gildy purred a chuckle, "Ironical that I'm the least pessimistic of my sisters, it seems."

Gildedtongue took a more serious face, "But, we were never very close. They already had lives by the time I was born, and I had my own path, which wasn't quite what they were understanding of. I guess it's hard for a number of 'God is Dead' scientists to understand the splendor of faith, even when it does spit in your face often." Gildedtongue shrugged, "They tried to coax me out of here, with words, books and even flesh." Gildedtongue shuddered a bit at an old memory, "But

everything felt so empty, or left me rather uncomfortable."

Dreamweaver reached over to pet over Gildedtongue's shoulder. Shi responded with a very light purr, leaning into Dreamy's hand. The chakat gave a quiet sigh and resumed hir thoughts, "I suppose I should look at that fire as a blessing, heh, not much need to pack anything when I don't have much able to be put into bags." Dreamweaver gave a rather sad face to that comment. Gildedtongue gave a quiet chuckle and reached to stroke under Dreamweaver's chin, "Don't worry, I'll be taking your gift along with me, close to my heart."

The teenaged chakat didn't hold back another whimper as shi looked down at the ground, "It isn't that, it's just..." Dreamweaver trailed off slightly, looking for the words buried in hir head, "Just that, it seems all of a sudden, and, well, that's the proverbial 'it,' you know. You'll be lightyears away, we can send mail, of course, but that still takes months sending them via ship. God, I find a companion and someone I love and shi's already leaving."

Gildedtongue whimpered slightly, stroking over Dreamweaver's cheek, holding the cub close, closing hir eyes, "You knew before you offered that I was going to leave. This was going to happen."

Dreamweaver shook hir head and grunted to himself, "I've loved you longer than that, Gildedtongue. Shit, sometimes it's all I..." The teen's speech was interrupted by a gentle finger to the lips.

"I know, Dreamweaver. And it does pain me to know, however," Gildedtongue paused, looking into the tear-glassed eyes of Dreamweaver, "I think your love should go to someone more your age, someone who isn't going to hurt you, who likes the things you like." Gildedtongue sighed and whimpered, seeing the young chakat's face. Hir thumbs wiped away the tears welling up in hir eyes before shi lowered hir head to kiss along Dreamweaver's lips. "I do love you too, Dreamweaver."

Dreamy nodded quietly, giving Gildedtongue a strong hug as shi squeezed the older chakat's ribs.

Dreamweaver's parents watched in silence before Gildedtongue finally pulled out of the embrace. Dreamweaver still looked shaken, but wasn't quite as hurt as before. Gildedtongue smiled quietly, stroking along Dreamweaver's cheek, "You'll keep me updated on what you're doing, right? I want to hear about every companion and mate and what you're doing." Dreamweaver smiled involuntarily as shi nodded, giving Gildy a kiss on the cheek. The older chakat sighed softly to himself, "I suppose I should put my affairs to rest before I leave." Gildedtongue thought to himself, then made a half hearted chuckle, "Though, I guess that's what happened last night, eh?"

Dreamweaver made a small chuckle at that, but sighed as shi leaned against Gildedtongue. The older chakat closed hir eyes and caressed over Dreamweaver's

sides quietly.

The rest of the day went by quietly. Dreamweaver seemed a little distraught still, but accepting the inevitability of Gildedtongue's send off. The older chakat packed what little was given to hir, packing the clothing into a pair of saddlebags shi was given. Shi touched the cross around hir neck in quiet remembrance, letting a few tears run freely along hir cheeks. The finality of it all was getting to hir, but shi had to remain strong, at least for Dreamweaver's sake.

Gildedtongue was roused awake by a prodding Startail. Hir dreamless slumber blinked away with the crust that had gathered in hir eyes. Shi slowly got up from hir makeshift bed in the middle of the living room to be greeted with a warm mug of coffee. Shi gratefully took it and swirled the fluid in hir mouth to get rid of the dry taste lingering in there.

The wakeup didn't last long as shi felt herself hurried to the lavatory. Gildedtongue nodded tiredly and entered to flush out everything shi had accumulated in hir sleep. Breakfast was only a few slices of toast and marmalade resting atop of a piping hot mug of coffee, both devoured with the same urgency before everyone piled into the PTV outside.

Gildedtongue inhaled the sweet outdoor air for the first time in weeks, having had kept hidden in fear of recognition. The predawn grey blanketed the streets as the vehicle pulled out and made its way to the spaceport. Star and Fire sat in front, quietly directing the PTV through the roads as Dreamweaver lay clutching the older chakat tightly. Gildedtongue ran hir fingers through hir hair quietly, keeping hir head down, resting hir muzzle against Dreamy's. Gildedtongue let hir eyes close for a moment in hir early morning drowsiness.

But, as with all "momentary eye rests," Gildedtongue blinked open hir eyes to see the travel reached its end. The space port certainly wasn't one officially used by the Feds, and probably only barely passed protocol. A massive ebon lump sat in the middle, a long cylindrical fuselage with some engines that looked bolted onto the sides. An enormous opening stuck out of the side as a modified *Marauder* class mecha hauled material in and out of the ship. The nose of the ship had the name *Purgatorio* painted in white. The PTV slowly drove into the dirt clearing around the ship, obviously not at an official space port, but at an official quarry.

The PTV rolled to a stop and the occupants took a moment to stretch their limbs in the otherwise confined space. A human female and a large leonine morphic female. Gildedtongue slowly untwined from Dreamweaver's sleepy grip and stepped out of the vehicle. "You must be chakat..." the human trailed off, looking over a datapad,

gripped in her left hand, and below that a number of papers and some cards, "Wanderer. A pleasure to have you on board. I'm captain Matilda Jefferson. This is our accountant, Thirtysilver." the Caitian bowed her head to the chakat as the captain pushed the pile of documents and the datapad into Gildedtongue's hand. The older chakat looked a little puzzled, but decided to swallow the information down and save digestion for later.

Gildy was tugged around by a teary eyed Dreamweaver. The older chakat looked into his eyes and took him into his arms, hugging him tightly. "I'm so sorry that I'm going. But, I will never forget you, Dreamweaver. Thank you for everything."

Dreamweaver looked bewildered at Gildedtongue. Shi blinked a few times, "But, erm, I don't think I did anything."

Gildedtongue shook his head, "You never gave up on me. You kept badgering me to loosen up, and it's something I needed all these years." Dreamweaver blushed and shrugged nervously, but kissed Gildedtongue's cheek before backing up next to his parents.

Gildedtongue adjusted his saddlebags before slowly making his way to the ship, following the captain and quartermaster. A longing glance back to the family that sheltered him before shi trudged into the ship's cargo bay. The majority of the cargo was various ores and raw material for replicators. Space colonies and various planets always increase in population, and with more people needing resources, more allotment is needed, more than what the Federation has time or realistic resources to keep ahead of, thus they employ private cargo ships, which also carry non-priority mail and, in the case of Gildedtongue, the occasional set of passengers.

Gildedtongue scanned through the pages, seeing the flight path will be anything but the direct path from Terra to Chakona, stopping at a number of stations and terraforming colonies. By the final count, it will take nearly a full year to land upon Chakonan soil.

The new identification documents intrigued the chakat quite a bit. They seemed mostly accurate, but his birthdate, birthplace, and, obviously name, were noticeably fudged. Shi hoped that people wouldn't be too curious to ask him too much, though it would get some getting used to answer to a name not his.

Shi took one last glance out to the port. Dreamweaver waving in his melancholy, obscured by the *Maurader* and Firefoot and Startail giving weak smiles before trying to usher Dreamweaver into their vehicle.

Gildedtongue blinked back a few tears before making his way up the stair towards the spine of the ship.