

Gildedtongue's Story

By Robert Adrian

Book Two: Purgatorio

Chapter 1

The metal doors leading to the spinal hallway slowly shut, obstructing Dreamweaver and his family from view. Gildedtongue felt a lump in his throat swelling as his eyes blinked away some tears. Trembling hands lifted his bags as he took a breath to resolve his courage. Things will certainly be a lot more different.

A small, mousy human led Gildedtongue to his room. He looked almost twelve as his sandy blonde hair adorned a bright freckled face. His body was a bit tall for his age and his skin unusually pale, easy markers to tell he's lived most, if not all of his life in an old spaceship like this one. The boy took several looks at the chakat, unused to seeing passengers looking quite so sad. He looked down at the ground as Gildedtongue opened his bags to pull out his clothing and put them away. "Momma tells me that you're gonna be th' teacher here?"

Gildedtongue bit his lip back from correcting the youngster's speech, but responded with a nod, "Did she now? I suppose that's true. I'll have to check with Captain Jefferson about that." He turned to see the puzzled look on the boy's face, responding with one of his own.

"Th-thought that's how you got on cheap?" the boy queried. Gildedtongue mentally smacked himself, noting that he had better go through his information more thoroughly later. He forced a smile and coughed.

"Well, of course. I just meant to ask her what curriculum I should be teaching you all." The boy mouthed an 'oh' and shrugged as he took that time to depart. The chakat grunted as he sat on his haunches, looking out of the window, seeing that the cargo had either been dropped off or packed in as the crew and mecha were making their way back towards the hangar bay. Gildedtongue let out a slow exhale, this was his first time in space, and this wasn't a massive Federation ship, one with full gravity, giant crew of engineers, and all the luxuries of home. The *Purgatorio* was certainly an older ship, one that probably only barely met the standards of being a space-faring vessel. On the opposite side of his bed was a waterless toilet and a small sink with a sign reminding the user to conserve water. An irony that a ship designed to transport mass for replicators seemed to lack them, or just have them in the galley. That last

thought caused Gildy's stomachs to roll, apparently the small meal before leaving Startail's and Firefoot's home wasn't what hir body considered breakfast. The chakat let out a sigh and decided to wait at least until the ship called for lunch. Hir daily cycles would be determined not by light but by meals and fatigue, shi figured, so time to get used to that.

Gildedtongue thumbed through the datapad shi was given. Shi was indeed the on-board teacher, and looked over the roster of hir students. The children seemed between the ages of eight and thirteen, the children of the crew, more than likely. A mixture of humans, morphs, and even centauroids. The blonde boy from earlier was named "Dominic" and the "Momma" from earlier was Terry Wu, the ship's physician. Gildedtongue raised an inquisitive eyebrow, as Dominic certainly didn't seem to have his mother's gorgeous oriental features at all. The chakat cross linked several more students with their "parents" and found, for the most part, it seemed that most were adopted. Either that or all of the crew managed to break down genetic breeding barriers, and in that case shi wondered how a 4'11" woman birthed a wolftaur.

The chakat's musings were cut short as shi heard the voice of the captain ring through the P.A. system. "Good morning, this is your captain, Matilda Jefferson speaking. We'll be dusting off within a few minutes, so I'd recommend finishing up whatever you're doing and get yourself strapped down. Just a reminder that we do have guests along with us this trip, and I'd appreciate it if you made their trip just that much more comfortable. That is all." The chakat blinked and looked around hir room for something that looked like straps. Aside from the bed and the dresser there didn't seem to be anywhere to hide them. Panicked sweat drops formed along the chakat's brow as shi moved atop of the low built 'taur bed and gripped at the sides, feeling the ship shift underneath hir.

The *Purgatorio's* engines whined, starting to push the massive ship skyward. The middle aged chakat whimpered as shi clutched harder on the sheets and the mattress underneath. Higher and higher the ship climbed as Gildedtongue's grip faltered. Flames licked at the window from the friction of the thinning atmosphere. The chakat gulped as hir hands and forefeet gave way, causing hir to tumble to the other end of the room. Hir head broke hir fall with a hard crack as everything turned dark.

A blunt, throbbing pain brought the chakat out of hir slumber, feeling a hand cupping the back of hir sore head. Wincing and growling, Gildedtongue opened hir eyes in slits, sneering slightly. A concerned face looked down at hir, black and white striped with a pointed muzzle. One green eye looking over hir, and another eye hidden behind an electronic monocle. Shi pushed the badger away slightly, moving hir free arm to support hir upper torso, closing hir eyes again, "Ugh, that hurt."

"I'll bet, Wanderer. By the looks of it, you've been out for at least two hours." The well built morph said quietly, though the chakat still groaned from the headache. Shi

got up slowly and looked out of the window, seeing the blackness of space about, without the lens of Terra's atmosphere, it looked bleaker than usual. Gildedtongue held hir head as shi started to walk towards the bed to rest, grunting as shi lost hir footing and tumbled softly across the floor. "Careful, now." the other occupant said, "Ship's gravity is only sixty percent what you're used to. You don't quite have your space legs yet." The badger helped hir up with relative ease, maneuvering hir onto the bed. Gildedtongue loosed another groan as shi looked up at the badger with an inquisitive look.

"I suppose introductions are in order. I'm Saldura Holbock, chief of the security detail on the *Purgatorio*. I came in to introduce myself earlier and bring you to dine, but that's when I found you passed out. Are you feeling all right? I didn't feel any lacerations or skull breakage, but perhaps we should go to Doctor Wu anyway?" the badger asked, placing a heavy hand on Gildedtongue's shoulder. The chakat waved away that notion, feeling a bit nauseous from the headache but largely in the pink anyway. Shi looked over the badger with more scrutiny now that shi wasn't seeing double any more. A dark olive green uniform that would have probably felt more at home during the Napoleonic era than modern times covered over a stocky yet muscular frame. On the left hip dangled a sheathed sword, the cross-framed cross-guard dangled under hand. The right hip carried a pistol of some sort, but Gildedtongue certainly wouldn't be able to identify it. The badger's face had a warm glow to it, either compassion or the lights of the room was still too bright for the chakat's bruised brain. The monocle looked like it plugged right into the badger's skull, flickers of data over the eye behind it told Gildy that the badger was probably hooked right into the ship's computer. Neither the clothes, nor the tone of voice gave Gildedtongue a clear guess on the sex of the chief.

"Erm, right. I'm chakat Gil-erg, Wanderer, child of..." Gildy trailed off, forgetting if it was hir parents shi should mention, or other programmed ones. Hir face went crimson in blush as shi gulped, completely botching the introduction. Shi looked away for a moment, but brought hir attention back to the badger from Saldura's laugh.

"Acting isn't your strongest of suits, is it, Gildedtongue?" The chakat whimpered softly, but was somewhat relieved to know that the security officer was in on the plan. At least shi didn't need to worry about being thrown into the airlock and spaced for being a stowaway. "It's all right. I'll try to call you by your, ah, official name in public, but do try to learn who you are." Gildedtongue nodded sheepishly, getting up slowly, looking over at the chronometer. "I suppose you're hungry," Saldura said matter-of-factly, "C'mon, let's get over to the galley before the Twelve is up."

The galley was mostly empty by the time the two went in. A morph in an extraordinarily ridiculous chef's hat gave the chakat and the badger trays with tomato soup, cheese sandwiches, salads of unknown plant matter, juice and some sort of flan

dessert. Gildy gulped to himself, having rarely splurged on this amount of food, shi looked for the place to pay for the meals, but saw Saldura already heading for a table. The chakat sheepishly followed, glancing about and sitting across from the badger at a small table in the back. Shi moved the chair to the side and placed hir tray down. Saldura looked over Gildedtongue's meal, then up to the chakat, "You should probably go for seconds after this. I know 'taurs eat more than that."

"Erm, no, that's okay, this is more than I ever eat at one sitting," Gildedtongue explained to the perplexed mustelid. Saldura just shrugged after that and started to eat. "So, how many people know about, well, about me?"

Saldura thought about the question almost over dramatically, dipping the corner of the sandwich into the soup before biting into it, "Well, the captain and I do, and my mate, which means by now the entire ship does. Another chuckle rumbled through the badger before another bite.

Gildedtongue sighed to himself, "Well, I guess I have room to slip up, then." Shi muttered before starting to eat. The taste of the food quickly told Gildedtongue that it was from the ship's replicator. Shi quietly finished hir salad first before asking, "So, what am I supposed to be teaching the children? And what happened to their last instructor?"

Saldura leaned back, picking at hir own salad, pulling some bits of alien lettuce-like leaves out, "Prior to you, they've mostly been using the ship's database's teaching programs for learning. I know it's not the best way to teach especially at this age, but the Federation authorized and okayed it, and you're the first thing resembling a teacher on this ship since Matilda, Thallon, Thirtysilver, and myself started this crew." The badger shrugged lightly, "Probably the best thing to do is as the kids tomorrow and figure out how to get them on the same page."

Gildedtongue nodded softly. About twelve children, all of various ages and educations needing to be dealt with. A momentary longing for the hours of thirty plus screaming children ran through the chakat's brain, but quickly pushed aside. The 'taur will figure out how this'll work, somehow. "Well, I guess I'll be earning my keep that way." Shi chuckled dryly, prodding the flan with a claw, somewhat disturbed by its tenacity of retaining its same shape. "Erm, you mentioned a mate. I'm guessing also a crew member on board?"

The badger nodded quietly, "Yeah, Thallon. Best damned mechpilot I've seen, and that's saying something as most of those things ain't exactly built for 'taurs." Gildedtongue nodded and cocked hir head. Sure, morphs, humans, and 'taurs were in plenty of romantic relations across the galaxy, but shi had to admit that prior to Peter and Theresa, Gildy only knew of them academically. The teacher certainly was going to be taught a lot this trip. "He was working that *Maurader* when you got on board." Gildedtongue nodded, guessing Saldura was female by that comment, but on the

other time, could be a gay male, or, obviously, several other options. Shi mentally sighed, this wouldn't be answered without a blunt question and shi certainly wasn't sure how to go about it.

The conversation went on for what felt like hours. Without the sun it was hard for the chakat to gauge any sort of time without looking at a clock. Finally Saldura stood up and offered a hand to Gildedtongue. The chakat blushed slightly, taking the hand and walked with the badger to hir room. "Tomorrow at 0900 you'll start your teaching, so, probably best if I give you some time to get ready for that," Saldura said with a small smile. Gildedtongue could only muster a small nod to that, trying not to look into the badger's eyes. The security chief gave another coy smile and leaned over, kissing Gildy's cheek, causing all the hairs on the centauroid's fur to poof out. "I think I'll drop by to see you after class," shi said before padding off.

Gildedtongue could barely breathe after that, taking a few steps into hir room and closing the door behind hir. Both of hir hearts were slamming against hir ribcages as shi moved to flop on the bed. Hir purring was well out of control as shi started to rummage through hir things. As shi thumbed through a datapad, hir spirits sank as shi remembered the mention of Thallon. Certainly shi wouldn't want to be the "other woman." "What do people see in me?" shi asked idly of himself as shi hooked into the ship's database to see what the children were learning.

"Good morning, class."

"Good morning, Missus Wanderer."

Gildedtongue covered hir muzzle in a cough, initially deciding not to correct them, but then decided that shi wouldn't be a good teacher if shi left that in the air, "Ah, it's *Shir* Wanderer," shi stated to the class' dead reaction. The room shi was teaching in was an empty quarters. Children sat radiated from the chakat, either on the floor, the bed, or leaning against the wall. The chakat choked back a grumble. This certainly wasn't "ideal conditions" for a learning environment, but one must do with what one has. Shi looked over hir datapad, clicking hir tongue against hir teeth, then sighed as shi addressed hir students. "As I think we all are well aware, you all have been learning on your own. Some of you are far in your lessons, some of you have just begun your journey. As I can't exactly give totally unique lessons to each of you, I can certainly give you unique assignments designed to hone your skills." *And also to really exacerbate the notion of cheating*, shi mentally added. "To introduce myself, I'm chakat Wanderer, child of Ebonyheart and Trueair. I've received a dual masters in Education and Interpersonal Communications from the Federal Monastery of the Holy Christian Kingdom of North America. My chief hobby is pre-War literature thus you'll be finding a lot of the assignments somehow associated with such." A human boy raised his hand.

"Will you be trying to convert us to your faith?" the boy asked with a hint of experience in his voice. Certainly the missionaries from the Kingdom have been around quite a bit and are known for their preaching tenacity. Gildedtongue shook his head slowly.

"Certainly not, David. My job is to simply expand your knowledge on literature, sciences, mathematics, and history. If you have questions pertaining to my faith or any other, I'll do my best to answer them, in private." David quietly nodded, somewhat satisfied with the answer. "Now, I suppose you all know a little bit about me, so it's best if I know more about you all. So, I'd like for you all to give me your name, any nickname I should call you, and what you like to do."

Each child sounded off around the room. Gildedtongue smiled slightly to himself, at least there wasn't anyone too shy in the group, probably stemming from life on the ship, everyone knew each other pretty intimately. Of course, that would mean Gildy certainly would remain the outsider for some time. When they were done, Gildy took a moment to digest the new-found information before starting his lesson. Shi got up slowly, opening a cabinet and pulled out an old, heavy tome. The cover's text had mostly been faded out of visibility and the spine was heavily cracked. Gildy opened the book up slowly, the musky odour filling the small room. "Le Morte D'Arthur, by Sir Thomas Malory. How many people here are familiar with King Arthur?" About two hands rose to the question, which surprised Gildedtongue. Stories tens of centuries old aren't quite well taught, though many of their archetypes are through more modern stories. "Well, if that's the case, I suppose the beginning is as good as any place to start."

"And Kevin, I want you to write a two page essay on electromagnetism and how it might have applied to the Sword in the churchyard." The students all wrote down their assignments before the wolftaur, James, questioned.

"Isn't it a bit silly that we're writing about a fake story that was written centuries ago? I mean, couldn't we just do simple problems like we always do on the computer?" The other students gave a mutter of approval of this question. Gildedtongue gave a small smirk to himself as Shi leaned back.

"That would be the easy way through it, wouldn't it? However, I'd like to believe that the best way of teaching is not simply parroting information over and over again and memorizing facts, but actually sitting down and applying what you've learned to things. It makes you think more about it and forces you to actually know more to complete the assignments." The students all gave another grumble at that. The chakat certainly had his work cut out for him. "Now, if anyone has any problems or questions, I'll be more than happy to help you. But, as of this moment, class is dismissed."

None of the students stuck around after that, making twelve bee-lines out to their

respective rooms. The chakat gave a small sigh and closed the book, putting it into hir bag. Shi turned hir head, hearing the door opening behind hir, greeted by a long, vulpine face. "Ah, shi seems to have made it past hir first day." the stranger said with a smile.

"Oh, it takes more than twelve kids and eight hours to vanquish me." Gildy gave a small smile, then looked over the incoming fur. He looked like a foxtaur, though seemed much more built than one shi'd seen in pictures or newsreels, more muscular and toned and taller. His fur had a light red tone that almost seemed pink in the harsh interior ship lights. He moved in closer to the chakat. "I don't exactly think you're here for lessons, so, who are you?"

The tod chuckled to himself, offering his hand with a bow of his head, "Ah, excuse my rudeness. I'm Thallon, Thallon Rosefur. I'm the ship's mech pilot and I've been somewhat, ah, prodded to make sure that you're okay after your first day." He chuckled softly, scratching the back of his head with his free hand. Gildedtongue nodded and took the offered hand and gave hir own introduction.

"So, you're the one that's been spreading naughty rumours that I'm not who I say I am, eh?" shi asked somewhat knowingly, then nodded to himself, "And you must be chief Holbock's mate. A pleasure to meet you." The memory of the badger's kiss causing the chakat's face to blush slightly, but shi slowly swallowed that down. Thallon nodded with a coy grin.

"That's about the size of it. So, have you eaten yet?" Thallon asked. Gildedtongue nearly responded before hir stomachs beat hir to the punch. "I'll take that as a no. C'mon. We've got to fatten you up somehow!" Thallon punctuated that with a predatory grin, producing a meek 'meep' from the chakat. Gildedtongue followed the other 'taur through the spine into the dining room. The room was just as empty as the last time the chakat ate. The vulpine gave a small chuckle and prodded the chakat, "Actually, you should eat and sleep in regular cycles. Since we don't exactly have a sun out here, the only way you'll be able to keep track of time is scheduling. Otherwise you kinda go a little psychotic out here in deep space." The chakat nodded slightly, having noted that shi hadn't really slept after climbing aboard the ship.

"So, Thallon. Ah, what's with all the children on board? I mean, aside from a couple, it doesn't seem like any of them are any of yours," Gildedtongue asked, picking up hir helping of stew and bread. Thallon furrowed his brow slightly as he took a table in the corner, the same one Saldura took hir to.

"One of the more interesting aspects of this job is that we find ourselves in some of the sections of the galaxy that are under rule of the Federation in name alone. As long as a warlord or a bandit group doesn't stir up too much trouble, they can enjoy a lot of power in some of the further colonies and planets on the edge." Thallon sipped his drink as Gildedtongue listened closely.

"We were doing a simple delivery to one such colony about three years ago and en-route we had come across a barely puffing derelict. Life support was nearly dead and none of the escape pods had fired off. We were running far behind in our shipments but the Captain decided to take a look anyway. There was no reason to. The ship wasn't even giving off a distress signal." Thallon leaned to the side, resting on the wall, "I guess it's what's called 'Woman's Intuition' but not much reason that we docked with the ship.

"We just did a quick sweep of the corridors that weren't spaced. A locked room had something knocking at the door. At first we just thought that it was a bit of debris that was floating and bouncing off of the walls, so we didn't open it at first. The open rooms had the definite marks of raiders in there. Hell, these weren't even proper pirates. Each room still had plenty of valuables in them, they just were there to get their rocks off killing people." Gildedtongue whimpered a bit to himself, not feeling all that hungry any more.

"We took a torch to the locked door, hoping that maybe we'd find something breathing. The twelve kids there had managed to hole up in a pantry room, feeding off of cans of emergency foodstuffs and water, though that supply ran out days before we got there. Each looked rather scrawny when we got them, but the doc got them pretty well intact." Gildedtongue gave a warm smile at that. "Initially we were going to just dump the kids at the nearest Federation station we came across, but, after a month or so of them with us..." the todd trailed off, shrugging his shoulders and forehips. "The outlying stations are pretty much as shady and as crooked as the bandits, if not more so at times. So, pretty much we decided to adopt them and give them a home aboard the *Purgatorio*. They seem pretty happy with the arrangement and we're trying to bring them up as well as we can. It isn't easy, but I guess that sort of thing isn't meant to be."

Gildedtongue had to wipe a few tears and nodded quietly. Shi noticed shi had been choking hir napkin pretty firmly and gulped as shi put it down. Thallon gave a small smile and reached over to pet Gildedtongue's sides, "But, now they've got a proper teacher, so should be even better for them."

"I suppose so. But, I'll try to keep that in mind in my teachings. I don't think I want to pick at any scabs." the chakat said quietly, then took to himself to finally start to eat. They ate the rest of the meal in relative silence.

When finished, Gildedtongue wasn't sure what to do, but Thallon offered hir a hand. Shi took it and followed him back through the corridor. The foxtaur made some joke in the hallway, but the chakat was feeling a bit nervous and only gave a polite laugh, not really remembering what was said. Shi gave a few looks over the todd. Young, at least half hir age, strong looking and rather sure. Probably what Dreamweaver would have been like as a foxtaur, and twice as old as shi is now. Gildedtongue mentally was a bit repulsed with himself as shi somewhat realized that shi slept with someone

about a quarter of hir age.

"Yoo hoo, Gildy. Thallon to Gildy." The tod had been several paces behind the chakat as shi turned around, obviously having been lost in hir own mind for a few moments. Shi backtracked to the door as Thallon smirked. "Well, thanks for the lunch. Hope you don't mind that I prattled."

"Oh, no problem at all, Thallon, I..." the chakat's speech was cut short as shi felt the tod suddenly embrace hir and dip hir anthro torso down a bit, kissing the chakat deeply. The door opened as Gildedtongue's wide eyes darted into the quarters, seeing Saldura there in a bra and boxer shorts with a suitable bulge from the latter half. The chakat's blush got hotter as shi fought for a moment before being let go. The lighter gravity letting Gildy get hir footing and standing up a moment before dashing off to hir own quarters.

"Think that was totally necessary?" the badger herm asked hir mate as shi looked down the hallway.

"Absolutely, m'dear. Shi needs to loosen up a bit."

"Really? Well, I don't know about hir, but I know someone here going to loosen up." Saldura grabbed Thallon by the lapels yanked him into the quarters before locking the door behind them.

Chapter 2

Dreamweaver yawned as shi left hir room, hir hair in a dishevelled mess as shi looked back, smiling as the snoring skunktaur still lay in hir bed. Hir face warmed in a smile as Zool snorted a bit, scratching along hys join. The teen chakat went to finish hir morning ritual before making hir way to the kitchen. Hir parents smiled as they read over the morning paper and sipped coffee. The three laughed at some joke, smiling wide.

The laughter halted quickly as a brick was thrown into the window, spraying glass all over their breakfast and colliding with Firefoot's head, dropping hir to the ground. Dreamweaver screamed in bloody horror as Startail quickly grabbed hir daughter, making their way to the middle of the house for more protection.

Upon opening the door to Dream's room to pull out Zool, they found three heavily padded humans already inside, kicking the adolescent skunktaur repeatedly. Zool's only response was a gurgled moan as hys hand, twisted in pain, trembled.

Startail couldn't quiet hir sobbing child as shi shoved the both of them into a nearby

closet. The sounds of their four hearts deafening in the darkness, but not loud enough to stamp out the sound of heavy boots of the people looking for them. The door swung open suddenly and loud bangs rang in Dreamweaver's ear. A shower of red from hir sire coated the teenage chakat's fur.

Dreamweaver was shivering in shock, slowly looking up at the assailant. A masked figure, carrying a large bore black powder rifle chuckled. His stubbled face was seen up to the nose as Dreamweaver saw the ecstatic glee in the man.

Dreamweaver closed hir eyes, mewling in fear.

Gildedtongue gasped as hir eyes went open again. Both hir hearts were slamming in hir chests. *A dream. Dear God, just a dream*, was all shi could think. Hir trembling hand lifted up to wipe hir forehead, which was soaked from hir sweat that also drenched the pillow hir head laid upon.

It had been ten days since Gildedtongue started hir journey to the stars, and each night a new terror lay in hir land of slumber. Shi groggily went to the desk, pulling out a small single serving coffee maker to chase away the night ghouls with some caffeine.

Gildedtongue flicked on a switch on the side of hir datapad, double checking the feedback shi will give back to hir students during class on Monday. Shi rolled hir eyes slightly to himself, trying to at least think less Hicknian (a somewhat less than flattering title of a resident of the HCKNA), and more like a proper Stellar Federation citizen. "A datapad is simply called a PADD, and days aren't named, they are numbered," Gildedtongue muttered to himself, adding, "Yeah, like my days are numbered."

Gildedtongue put the datapad back down and stretched hir long backs, feeling a crack at hir lower back, huffing at the small release of endorphins. Shi had two more days, or cycles, rather, to finish grading the papers and shi was nearly finished anyway, so a small excursion into the ship's interior wouldn't be too harmful for hir job.

The hall was filled with humans and morphs milling to and from their posts. The 0600 shift change had begun and while the evening crew were eager to eat and get some rest, the morning crew were begrudgingly heading towards their duties. The crew of the *Purgatorio* was the right size that the crew could be split into four groups, the 0000-1200 crew, the 0600-1800 crew, the 1200-0000 crew, and lastly, the 1800-0600 crew. This allowed for half of the crew to be on hand at any time, without risk of a radical change of crew members, or any time with a surplus of hands.

The chakat adjusted hir shirt, still a tad crumpled from sleeping in it, but was mostly free from wrinkles. Hir mane of red headfur, streaked with grey hairs, was a bit of a

mess but no more so than some of the other waking crew members.

Shi picked up a tray with a bowl of some thick brown substance (previous consumptions told hir it was oatmeal, or at least claimed itself to be), some alien fruit that looked vaguely like a purple banana, but under the skin it was eaten much like an apple.

The chakat sat alone in a corner, watching the other people milling about, talking and laughing, though, people nearer hir own table were considerably more quiet and sullen, which reminded the chakat of the words Startail had told hir, about being a leaking source of negativity. Shi let out a small sigh and tried to feel a bit better, but it definitely would take more than that.

Shi nursed on a cup of coffee as someone padded up to hir table. Shi glanced up, seeing the smiling, cocky foxtaur standing before hir. "Now, this looks a bit odd, a kitty trapped in the corner," Thallon gave a smirk, "Mind if I sit down?" Gildedtongue responded silently with a shake of hir head, letting the foxtaur alight himself upon the floor opposite of the chakat. "So, shir Tutor, how have studies been going for you?"

Gildedtongue smiled a bit, feeling a bit better with someone taking interest with hir as shi set hir cup down, "Well, if you must know, it's one hell of a challenge. Sometimes I feel like I'm a bit over my head, but..." shi shrugged and smiled, "I suppose it is best that I get used to it."

Thallon chuckled warmly, looking over the chakat, "Mmmm, well, no matter, sounds like you're having fun, though." The chakat blushed softly and nodded, enjoying a challenge that was a strain on hir mind, not hir patience. The foxtaur leaned back, looking over the felitaur, "Though, you've been spending far too much time at work, and people have commented that they've only seen you in passing from your room, here, and the classroom."

Gildedtongue blushed lightly, looking down, "Well, I don't want to get in anyone's way. You all seem a bit busy."

The foxtaur shook his head, "Honestly, en route, the only ones busy are the engineers making sure the drives don't fall off." The foxtaur chuckled to himself, thinking softly, "But, come now, all work and no relaxing makes for, ah, Wanderer to be a dull chakat." The foxtaur offered his hand to Gildedtongue, lighting a roguish smile, "C'mon."

Gildy tentatively grasped Thallon's hand, looking up slightly before feeling his grip strengthen, pulling hir out of the room rapidly. Shi couldn't help but give a slight giggle as Thallon ran through the hallway. Gildedtongue's feet barely had time to touch the ground in each bound. Shi cascaded against Thallon's frame as he stopped, looking up at the training room door, "All right, let's see what you can do."

Gildedtongue's face skewed in confusion as shi went in with Thallon. The foxtaur letting go and went over to talk to a middle-aged man sitting behind a mesh barrier. The chakat studied the room, most of the paint had been chipped away or peeling, but had been kept in largely good condition. Some benches dotted the walls, broken by small end tables. A few magazines lay sprawled on the tables, probably dating back decades. The chakat started to move to look at one before feeling something pressed into hir hands. Shi snapped out of hir daze to look at a grinning Thallon, then down at the long rifle shoved into hir hands, "Um, methinks our interpretation of relaxation seems to be a bit different, Mister Rosefur." Gildedtongue blinked softly, looking over the long weapon.

Thallon gave a short chuckle, "Well, possibly. Though I wouldn't worry yourself in trying it out. It's merely a laser tagging device, and you'll be on your own for this one." The chakat nodded, testing the weight of the rifle and looking over the components. It seemed like the only movable parts was the trigger, a dial, and what shi figured was the power pack compartment. Thallon lead hir into a large, empty room, lined with a yellow grid. Several crew members following hir inside, giving hir a small bit of panic. The foxtaur rested his hand on hir shoulder, "It's okay. Just a bit of target practice." The foxtaur went over to a small console, turning it on. The air felt thicker as ozone filled the room.

The holoroom was an older model of the popular holodeck. The images created were simply images projected into a thick mist of air. This allowed for less need for replicators and force fields, thus were cheaper and less power hungry.

Three small spinning diamonds came into existence, making quick, yet predictable motions in the air. Gildedtongue could hear the crew muttering behind hir, a few wagers being made behind hir back. The chakat sighed to himself, pulling the rifle to shoulder and gazed down the iron sights. Shi wasn't exactly sure what shi was doing, or even how to aim the bloody thing, but shi was certainly put on the spot to give the crew members a bit of a show by imitating films and videogames. Shi exhaled slowly, trying to steady hir hands, pulling the trigger.

Nothing happened. The chakat blinked a bit, pulling it a few more times, looking confused at the long arm. The crew behind hir were roaring in laughter as the chakat heard small amounts of FedCred coins being exchanged with a joyous tinkle. The chakat's ears hid well in hir red headfur as Thallon calmly walked over to the chakat, showing hir the thumbswitch, moving the weapon from Safe to Semi-Automatic. Fully Automatic the next click upwards.

Gildedtongue blushed and mouthed a thank you as shi returned to the fighting stance. The diamonds continued to flit around the air before hir. The chakat took aim at the shape and gave another tug on the trigger, this time the rifle lanced out a beam of light, hitting wide, and giving Gildedtongue a sharp kick in the shoulder to simulate recoil. The gathered crowd continued their laughter as more money was heard being

exchanged.

Gildedtongue's embarrassment slowly rolled into rage as shi focused on the holographic shapes again, hir thumb pushing the selector up once more as shi shouldered the training weapon, starting to spray the back wall. Beam upon beam of light splattered against the simulation while the motor in the stock pummeled against Gildedtongue's shoulder harder and harder, bruising the muscle underneath. Diamonds popped up and exploded with each hit, sending up new targets. Gildy let out a scream, continuing to hold down that trigger, feeling each blow against hir shoulder.

Shi didn't know how long it had been since the simulation had turned off, but shi was stirred back to the real world by a hand on hir free shoulder. The training rifle whirring and clicking while hir finger held the trigger in a death grip. Shi blinked softly, looking at the other crew members, many whom were dead quiet by that time. Shi swallowed a dry mouth again, licking hir tongue around hir mouth in an attempt to wet it. After a few moments shi managed to speak, "So, um, how did I do?"

"Well, I won't give you points for accuracy, but you managed to complete the simulation pretty damned quickly." Thallon gave a chuckle and a smile, tugging the faux weapon out of Gildedtongue's hands. The chakat looked idly at hir palms and fingers, the contours of the weapon imprinted deep into hir skin, a reminder of how tightly shi held it. "Maybe if you're interested, we can come back alone for more precision shooting."

Gildedtongue nodded mutely, feeling Thallon's arm wrap around hir shoulders, guiding hir out of the holo room, the other crew members giving the two wide berth. The chakat couldn't help but blush at their reaction in hir shame. A few more murmurings followed the two centauroids but were hushed, at least to Gildedtongue's ears, when the door closed behind them. Thallon smiled, approaching the quartermaster, handing back the rifle, "You might want to recharge this, and, ah, give it a slight once over. Wanderer here had some steam to let out." Thallon smiled, giving Gildedtongue's shoulder a soft pat. The chakat winced, the feeling of the bruising starting to get noticeable as the adrenaline started to wear thin.

The foxtaur guided the chakat back to the galley, smiling a mischievous vulpine smile. Gildy would normally feel defensive at the expression, but at this point felt unusually at ease, finding his handsome face and confident stride to be rather appealing. "Stuffing me even more, aren't you?"

Thallon chuckled, walking into the medium sized eatery with Gildedtongue, shaking his head, "Just making sure you're keeping your day cycles in check. Your metabolism is good at keeping a clock." he smiled, "Besides, I think you've been to the two most entertaining rooms on this ship."

Gildedtongue nodded quietly before smiling softly to himself, "Well, I suppose,

though, I guess I haven't seen where you do your work." Thallon cocked his head, then let out a small chuckle, popping the top of a soda can before grabbing a few sandwiches and another can for Gildedtongue.

"That so? Well, if you want to check it out, I'm sure we can do a quick run over there." Gildedtongue nodded quietly, remembering shi still had some more work to do, but supposed it could wait just a little more.

Thallon's nigh cubbish energy kept up as he pulled hir through the spine of the ship, stopping halfway to head into the belly hangar. Gildedtongue remembered the large catwalk and felt a twinge of vertigo, gazing several stories down to the bottom of the ship. Piles of ore and resources filled the bulk of the ship, having been on a pick-up run on Terra. Both centauroids made their way through the clanking catwalk before making it to the mech's landing. The vulpine popped open the canopy, letting Gildy get into the vehicle first before slowly resting atop of hir lower back. The whole thing was rather cramped as Thallon closed the hatch above them.

A few flicks of various switches and buttons and the machine's HUD flickered up. Thallon typed something out on a keyboard and the word "Simulation" flashed on the screen. The whole viewport flickered for a moment before it phased into a lightly forested environment. "All right, Gildy, now, just think of this like driving a car, a really big car." The chakat underneath him blushed slightly, giving a small chuckle.

"I actually never have driven. Never really had a need for it." The chakat's embarrassment leaked over to Thallon, who only returned a chuckle.

"Okay, fine. Well, played a videogame?" the chakat nodded, "Good, then this should be even easier." Thallon wiggled slightly, getting comfortable on top of his friend, resting his hands on Gildy's as he navigated them to the hand controls. "So, these are for your torso, pull the left forward and the right back to turn right, and the opposite for left. Both forward and you'll tilt down, both back and up." the 'taur said, guiding Gildy's hands through the motions. The image on the viewscreen scanned and panned as the controls were used. The chakat nodded, feeling somewhat good about this. Two hands certainly were easy enough.

Thallon smiled a bit more, "And at your forefeet, should be four pedals in a bit of a cross with a large top." Gildedtongue nodded, looking down over hir breasts to the worn, metal plates below hir. "You've got heels, so put them on the ground and rest your toes on the forward pedal, yeah, both of them." The chakat nodded and moved hir forefeet how shi was told, yelping and jumping as the whole cockpit vibrated as the image on the screen showed hir lurching forward a step. Thallon laughed loud, feeling himself setting on Gildy again, "Okay, careful, things are a little touchy." Gildy nodded quietly, trying to calm down again. "The levers on either side are for left or right movement, and since this is an old clunker, for you to actually turn, you have to be going forward or back to do so. So, just move your left or right paw to the

right pedal in the direction you want to go in." Gildedtongue nodded as shi did so, going forward and right, expecting the cockpit's movements now as the images moved around.

"That back one is important. Tap it once and it'll do an emergency stop. Hold it to go into reverse. Really important to do narrow turning." Gildedtongue nodded, looking over the pedals, then back up at the screen. Shi closed hir eyes for a moment, gathering hir thoughts before shi started to take some practice walking in the simulation. The cockpit continued its gentle rumbling to feedback hir movements as shi looked around the empty world.

"So, is this all that there is to this simulation, Thallon?" Gildedtongue asked, looking back up at the vulpine.

"Well, there's also various obstacle courses, some cargo loading training, as well as some combat protocols, but I guess I figured you were kinda done with guns and such for the moment." The male above hir chuckled softly. His fingers moving along hir forearms quietly as Gildy drove the robot around, trying to avoid trees and other shrubbery, but found that hir new metal feet knocked them over or crushed them easily, or at least in this virtual world.

"So, where did you get this thing?" Gildedtongue asked, looking back up at Thallon, "I don't think that these sorts of things are all that common, and not exactly something you just go to a garage and pick one up."

Thallon nodded and laughed, amused by that thought as he found himself hugging Gildedtongue tighter, "No, no, we didn't do that. At least from what Sal and the Captain tell me, they found this hunk of junk frozen over on a run to Io. Obviously it needed heavy repairs, as well as modifications to remove the weapon systems, scanning systems, targeting systems, system systems, and the ilk, but as soon as they did all of that, this has been re-designated from a combat and scouting mech to a powered load lifter, thus the cannons on the arms have been retrofitted with lifting claws, and the chin laser hard-point has been refitted with a small tractor beam." Thallon looked up at the roof of the cockpit with a sneer, "One that never actually seems to work."

Gildedtongue nodded and stopped hir movements, using the back tap, causing the cockpit to rustle a bit more. The chakat's eyes went wide as shi felt the foxtaur's crotch grind against hir hindquarters at that point, making hir face alight in blush. Shi coughed and smiled lightly, "Ah, heh. Th-thank you, Thallon, but, ah, I think I should be going now."

Thallon gave a small chuckle, "Mmmmmph, I don't know, something rather nice about laying atop of a chakat in heat." His body gave another wiggle as Gildedtongue responded with a tremble and a happy purr. Hir enjoyment was cut short as Thallon's words registered, *That's why I'm feeling more friendly, dammit*, shi cursed, *damned*

hard to keep track of the days out here.

The chakat looked for the canopy opening, muttering various apologies, most in English, but a fair bit in Latin. Thallon chuckled and pushed a few buttons, terminating the simulation and let the cockpit open above the two, stepping out and letting Gildedtongue get out as well, "Heh, I guess I shouldn't have been so forward." the foxtaur rescinded.

"Oh, no, it's, it's all right." Gildedtongue smiled, climbing out as well, keeping hir hind end pointed away from the other 'taur as shi backed up. "I just really need to get my work done and I don't want to take more of your time." Shi yelped as hir posterior touched the cold metal guard railing, nearly jumping a metre into the air. Both 'taurs laughed at the predicament, one in nerves, the other in genuine mirth.

"Alright, Gi-Wanderer. I'll see you later?" Thallon asked, cocking his head to the side. Gildedtongue gave a blushed nod before retreating into the spine. Hir pace felt light and easy while hir tailtip swished rapidly back and forth, leaving a red blur. Ducking into hir room quickly, shi leaned back against the wall next to the door as it closed with a clunk. Hir ears red with blush as both of hir hearts pounded against hir sternums.

"For Chrissake, you're at least twice his age if not more, and he's got you blushing like a teenager." Gildedtongue chastised himself, slowly regaining hir composure. Shi started to groom hir back fur, smoothing the ruffled hairs that the fox messed up with his laying on hir. Hir fingers brushed over a wet spot just above hir tail where his crotch would have been. Hir fingers trembled slightly, bringing it up to hir nose to inhale, bringing hir lusts right back to the forefront. "Oh God." shi muttered at the musks before picking up a change of clothing and made hir way to the communal showers, hoping the ship had an ample supply of cold water to take the edge off.

The chakat made hir way back towards hir quarters, fur still moist, but hir mind considerably more at ease as shi felt hir hormones a bit more in check. Gildedtongue nodded slightly to a human and a lynx morph chatting in the hall. Both treated hir with a wide smile and wave. Gildy had to admit it being rather odd to be surrounded by such friendly faces. Shi would have liked to have said it made hir feel better, but truthfully it made hir even more tense. Undoubtedly decades of putting up defences against just about everyone shi'd met had hardened hir heart enough to put a thick coating of doubt on each person shi saw. Gildedtongue made a mental note to try and work that out before planetfall as well. *That and everything else I need to work on.*

The teacher went back to grading, chewing on the butt of hir stylus as shi thought, going through the report printed on the screen of the PADD as hir thumb scrolled through it. Dr. Wu's child certainly used plenty of creative arguments in his writings, but at times he needed to be reeled back. Shi jotted a note on the report that shi

means to speak with him after class.

Hir eyes shut as shi rubbed them through hir lids. Shi wasn't used to this sort of eye strain, but blamed it mostly on the ships' interior lights. They were dull and soft and shi apparently became too used to the bright fluorescents of the Kingdom's lights. Shi had two more papers to go through so shi decided to just take a break, walking over and flopping on hir bed. The chakat's form went limp on the mattress, hir limbs all akimbo, taking up most of the surface as shi sighed. Hir tail twisted curiously as shi rubbed hir tail tip along hir inner thighs, kneading along the muscles in self massage.

The chakat let out a hiss as shi felt the long hairs of hir red tip brush against hir swollen folds, shuddering in bliss as hir fingers moved over hir breasts. Shi figured shi had enough time to indulge herself in some sin as shi kneaded over hir nipples, frowning a bit at hir own form. One nub more inwardly pointed than the other, thanks to the chest wraps shi wore in school through puberty, designed more for binding than support. A hand reached for the nightstand, pulling out a box of condoms shi found earlier, sliding one of the sheathes over hir tail-tip before returning it to hir entrance, teasing herself a few more moments before gently pushing inside.

Shi found herself purring, hir mind racing through hir events as shi found herself with a fantasy to enrich hir actions finally. The young 'taur holding hir in his arms. That kiss that he stole from hir. The memory of his weight and motions above him. Hir breath quickened as shi ran his voice through hir head more and more, biting hir lower lip to keep from making noise in hir self-love. Hir tail moving along each of hir buttons as hir fingers squeezed hir nipples hard, finding herself needing to milk them to get any stimulation from them, but enjoying it all the same. Hir claws on hir legs lashed out into hir mattress as hir whole body tensed. A strong warmth courses through hir body before shi collapsed once again. Hir chests both heaving as hir eyes were open, staring blankly at the ceiling. The chakat's eyes felt heavy as shi nestled more in the bed, yawning widely. Hir energy now well spent as shi decided to take a nap before continuing hir work.

Gildedtongue was awoken by the sound of a fierce knock on hir door. The chakat looked around bleary eyed for a moment before snagging a t-shirt from hir dresser, going to answer whoever was there. Hir face twisted in a scowl as shi opened the door. "Yeah what?" shi snarled initially, then caught herself looking into the monocled eye of the security chief. The large badger staring back, then smirked at Gildedtongue's face running a gambit of expression from annoyed, to embarrassment and now a meek sense of happiness. "I'm sorry, do come in, Officer Holbrock." Gildedtongue muttered, backing up.

Saldura nodded as shi stepped in, holding a large tray with covered foods that shi placed upon Gildy's desk, moving hir PADD to the side with the back of hir hand. "Not a morning person, I see?" shi asked, getting Gildedtongue's nod. "That's fine,

I'm not much of one myself, but, one must be able to put on a professional face, no?" Gildedtongue blinked slightly. The badger herm shi initially met was all business, warm, but with a professional distance to it. This one seemed downright flirtatious. Saldura handed Gildedtongue a cup of warm liquid. Shi sniffed at the tea before sipping it, some alien leaf with a slight black pepper taste to it, but the contents were ample enough to wake the groggy centauroid up fast.

"No, and yes," Gildedtongue said, blinking the last of the sleep from hir eyes. Shi took another sip of hir tea before setting the cup down on the desk, seeing the other items on the tray, a pair of overstuffed wrapped tortillas, by the smell of it with egg, some sort of sausage, and peppers. Shi reached for one, looking into Saldura's eyes for permission. The badger cocked a snide look and nodded softly before the chakat took one and started to eat it.

The taste was indescribable. Everything in it tasted different, somehow. Shi had eaten plenty of breakfast burritos before, but this was something else. The meat had a certain tang to it and the peppers had a mild flavour to them all. Shi managed to swallow a mouthful before asking, "What is this?" and going for another bite.

Saldura grinned, leaning on the desk as shi murred quietly before speaking, "Real, natural grown meat and vegetables, none of that replicated stuff you've probably processed your whole life." Gildedtongue froze in mid bite, hir eyes wide open as shi looked inside. Sure, it looked just like most of the food shi had eaten, but computers, trying to maintain perfection and idealism in their replication programming had forgotten the enormous variety that nature had given everything. Shi had never eaten a "bad" meal hir whole life, the replicated foodstuff always cloning the finest of materials, so this difference made hir tastebuds come alive with new and interesting sensations. The chakat devoured hir meal vigourously, scarcely coming up for air, feeling a bit sheepish at how fast shi went through the food. "Heh, I take it you like it," Saldura said smugly.

"Yeah," was all Gildedtongue could mutter before sipping another mouthful of tea to go with hir hearty meal. Feeling much more awake and hir hunger pushed well out of hir needs shi looked back at the badger herm. "So, why offer me such a meal?" shi asked, cocking hir head, "I know the fox and wolftaurs ate such food, but it certainly wasn't commonplace where I was, and I'm pretty sure even less so on a ship travelling across the stars for months at a time. Forgive my curiosity, but you've certainly piqued it."

Saldura laughed and sat down on Gildedtongue's bed, smiling at the other occupant, "Well, for starters, I heard you missed supper, and you need to eat, as I'm sure we've nailed that fact into your head." Gildedtongue nodded and rolled hir eyes at that. "Secondly, Thallon told me about yesterday, and I wanted to make sure you know that I harbour nothing ill about it, in fact, I was hoping that he would have done something to help you relax."

Gildedtongue blushed at the badger's frankness, coughing lightly as shi still felt the pangs of hir second day in heat rise. Shi coughed a second time to clear hir throat, "Well, I was in heat at the time, you know."

Saldura nodded and smiled, "Yes, I knew that. We do have condoms on board for a reason, you know." Shi chuckled softly. Gildedtongue stood up and walked over to the nightstand, picking up the opened box shi grabbed one out of last night before tossing it to the badger. Shi caught it deftly with one hand, looking at it, "Jericho brand condoms. We made sure they would be the right size for a centauroid occupant, you know."

Gildedtongue sipped hir tea again before sighing, slightly to cool hir mouth, and slightly in exacerbation. Shi sorted hir thoughts for a moment before speaking, "I chose Gildedtongue as my name during my coming of age ceremony, my birth name, however, is Joshua." Saldura nodded, crossing hir legs slightly as shi listened to see where this was going. "Named after those condoms you have in your hand, the hero who with his army, tore down the walls of Jericho, the invincible fortress." Saldura opened hir mouth in a questioning protest before Gildedtongue lifted hir finger, "The odds are astronomical, I know especially with modern prophylactics. Ninety-nine point, a bunch of nines and a three at the end, I remember. But, take in consideration how many times people have sex in this galaxy, and how many times people have protected sex in this galaxy, and how many times people have protected sex when fertile in this galaxy." Gildedtongue looked at the ceiling, moving hir head slightly as if to stir the calculation in hir brain, "You've got to say that there are certainly at least hundreds of unplanned pregnancies a year at least. Simple statistics." Saldura nodded, processing that information.

"Well, I suppose you're right. Heh, so, you should at least know that the chances of it happening again in a genetic line is astronomical atop of astronomical." The badger smirked hir lips tightly.

Gildedtongue shot back another smile, "No, it's the same, that's faulty logic." Saldura shrugged lightly and Gildedtongue nodded, "But, you're right, the odds of it happening is not exactly one to be overly concerned about. I guess I'm just a bit cautious."

Saldura smiled softly, standing up in front of the chakat as shi slowly opened hir uniform, revealing very little underneath except salt and pepper fur and flesh. Gildedtongue's ears almost exploded in hir blush as shi quietly watched the stripping before hir. Hir eyes stop at a thickly furred patch of brown pubic fur surrounding a plumped sheath and heavy scrotum. As Saldura let go of hir uniform, the whole thing fell in a heap around hir ankles. The chakat whimpered slightly as shi looked back up into Saldura's eyes just as shi disconnected hir monocle, smiling wide, "Well, if you're concerned about probability, then how about a zero percent chance of cubs between a biped and a centauroid?"

The chakat's mouth was opened wide ready to answer but only breath came out. Saldura smiled wide, closing the chakat's maw with a kiss as shi pulled off the chakat's top, breaking the kiss for a moment to pass it over hir head. Gildedtongue looked into Saldura's eyes for a moment before whispering, "Thank you." The badger herm just smiled back, running hir fingers through Gildedtongue's flesh, hir purple toned erection throbbing in the air for the chakat to see and smell before the security officer got to work.

The badger's fingers caressed over the chakat's flanks as shi moved around hir, looking over hir new lover. The morph's tiny tail flitting rapidly behind hir while shi whispered words Gildy couldn't make out. The chakat groaned softly, leaning into the hands, expertly kneading over hir fur and flesh, massaging hir worries out of hir body. The chakat's tail raised slowly, exposing himself intimately to this new friend, swallowing a lump in hir throat as hir lustful blush had a twist of shame in it as well. Saldura looked into Gildy's face, shaking hir head quietly before hir fingers caressed over the chakat's sacredness.

Both hermaphrodites sighed in pleasure as Saldura took the next moment to mount Gildedtongue proper. The chakat feeling the thick length of hir lover spreading hir wide as the badger groaned in lust. The symphony of flesh slapping against flesh filled the room, accompanied by the moans and growls of the participants. The chakat's long tail slowly entwined around the badger's middle, holding hir close as shi whimpered lustfully. The two groaned as Gildedtongue felt Saldura's claws dig into hir flanks, feeling one last firm push before shi felt a warm rush enter hir belly. The chakat biting down a roar of pleasure as hir body trembled blissfully under the badger.

The taste of breakfast nowhere near met the pleasure that hir new-found friend gave hir that morning. The chakat wasn't sure if it was hormones or lust or love or just being at the right place at the right time, but after the badger collapsed on hir back, shi at least knew that it certainly felt good. Gildedtongue groaned lightly, smiling back at hir lover before slowly stepping on hir bed, not letting the badger fall off of hir back as shi lay down, purring all the while. Shi closed hir eyes gently, stretching long, "Well, certainly a good way to wake up."

Chapter 3

Gildedtongue spent the rest of hir day off continuing to grade papers. The badger herm had gone back to hir own duties after bidding the chakat a good day with a promise to see hir again in the evening. Hir mind went back and replayed the activities through hir head as shi felt the warm feeling of the gift Saldura had left within hir. Shi closed hir eyes, momentarily enjoying it, then felt hir soaring heart plummet like a stone.

The badger was someone else's mate. Saldura himself had said it was fine, but shi had never gone to speak to Thallon about this; maybe he wouldn't be quite so open about it. Then again, the foxtaur had been dry humping hir in the cockpit earlier that afternoon. First Dreamweaver, then nearly Thallon, then Saldura, all in the span of a single week. The chakat lifted a hand to clutch at hir own shoulder, shivering slightly. Shi felt so perverse and slutty. Shi knew and read all the articles about hir own species, how shi was supposed to act this way, and shi felt even worse that shi was feeling bad about this.

Shi needed to take a walk. Putting the PADD to the side and pulling a shirt over hir head shi made hir way through the ship's spine. Several crew members passed and presented Gildedtongue a friendly smile and wave. Shi returned each with a nervous wave and nod, keeping hir gaze mostly fixed to the floor below hir. In hir head shi felt that all of these people knew of hir sexual escapade and were sizing hir up. Hir hearts beat faster as shi felt this anxiety continue to course through hir whole body. Shi finally made it to the end of the spine, nearly bumping into the doorway leading right into the bridge. The massive bulkhead was designed to keep the pilot and captain and whoever else was inside extremely safe. A biometric security device was bolted to one side of the blast doors, glowing quietly, waiting for someone to try their luck. Shi looked behind hir, seeing the long way back, unable to make out the end of the corridor to the engineering bay.

As shi continued to stare down the hexagonal passage shi felt sick to hir stomach from vertigo as shi looked back towards the floor in hir return walk. Shi kept count of each door and bulkhead to fill hir troubled head with useless and distracting information. Eight pairs of doors, or the equivalent thereof, per bulkhead. Some rooms, such as the galley, armory and Holo Room Suite took up a full bulkhead side. Names of crew etched into a shining metal plaque on each door, breaking up the dull gunmetal grey- and rust-coloured interior. This was the first time the chakat had really got a close look at the ship and it certainly looked as if it had seen better days. As shi passed through one bulkhead, a human with a hand-sander was buffing off a patch of rust, finding bright shiny metal just underneath. Shi couldn't help but smile; the old thing did look like shit, but everyone within was still proud enough to try and make it a home.

The warm feeling was cut short when she heard the crew member spit loudly on the spot he was working on and continue to buff. The chakat fought down conflicting actions of giggling and revulsion as shi made hir way back into hir quarters, the bit of respite helping calm hir down a little as shi inhaled deeply. The odour of sex and the badger still hung thick in the air, bringing back the chakat's blush as shi held hir head. Shi had to get hir work done, but afterwards, shi wanted to talk to Saldura and Thallon and apologize.

"For what?" shi asked herself, turning on hir PADD again. "Mature adults having consensual sex... behind the back of one of their mates, who was dry humping the

other one earlier that day. Shit, I see why every other chakat doesn't think about this," shi muttered as shi spent most of hir time correcting spelling and grammar whilst hir brain was on other things. Hir psuedothumbs rubbed against each other underneath hir desk, adding to hir multitasking brain in an effort to push out hir current line of thought.

The current homework piece compared modern astronavigation techniques to the early transatlantic sailors of Terra's history. No matter the knowledge of stars and the size of the sails, those who voyage into the unseen always do so blind. The teacher looked out of the porthole, seeing the slow moving stars move past. Shi could only figure that shi was facing core-ward, but shi could just as easily be facing the black as far as shi could notice. The computers were all that told anyone what direction they were heading inside, forcing all occupants of space to merely accept the cryptic words of a technological shaman and hope that this time will be as successful as the last. The thoughts had run a new chill through the chakat's spine, but it had luckily driven out hir guilt of hir promiscuous activities.

As shi returned hir focus back upon hir work, shi smiled softly to himself. It seemed that the majority of hir students were getting the point of the assignments. A huge weight coming off of the chakat's mind at that, as Education through Application is something people either understand or completely are lost on. As far as the chakat was concerned, old fashioned fact memorization was a waste of time, and it became more useful to be able to learn research and application. Shi put down hir PADD as shi thought about it, remembering that at times memorization could also be useful.

Shi shook hir head as hir train of thought had derailed into something extremely tangential and went back to work. Shi was at the home run stretch of hir work and shi didn't want to get sidetracked from something that would just take a half an hour of concentration.

Gildedtongue stepped out of hir quarters, stretching long as shi felt hir spines both pop in complaint. Shi chuckled to himself and proceeded towards the rear of the ship. Finally finished after putting hir work to the side time and again, shi was able to relax fully. The passing crew offered greetings to the wayward chakat and shi shyly waved back, still feeling self-conscious about himself. Shi wasn't doing anything too important, nothing that couldn't be done by computer, but it seems that people still learn better in person.

Shi peered into the cargo bay, one of the few placed that shi knew of on the ship. No one was around as far as shi could see as shi stepped onto the catwalk. Hir hearts still pounding as shi tried not to peer over the railing towards the stacks of ore containers below hir feet. From here shi could listen to the ship's engines groaning further aft, building the warp field around the ship as it slingshot through space.

Hir meditation was cut short as the mecha's cockpit opened up with a wheeze when the hermetic seal was broken. Gildy tried not to leap in fright as hir head snapped behind hir. The grinning foxtaur offered a friendly wave towards Gildedtongue, chuckling across the distance. "I'm sorry if I frightened you in our last encounter." Thallon chuckled, leaning over the vehicle's controls, gazing over the chakat. Gildedtongue rolled hir eyes as shi started to approach the male.

"Please. It was... well, It was nice, I just... you know, that time of the month and all," Gildedtongue felt hir ear heat up in blush before shi swallowed it down again. Shi sighed slightly, looking over the todd, recollecting hir time with his mate in hir quarters, biting hir lower lip. Hir heat cycle was halfway through and shi still felt randy, especially around the cocky male. "Thallon, look. Yesterday, well, yesterday Saldura and I, well, we..." Gildy continued to stammer, feeling hir ears grow as red as hir mane, "We had sex, and, well, yeah." shi finally blurted out, looking up into Thallon's face.

The foxtaur had a look of anger as he snarled, "That bitch! I can't believe hir!" he said, pounding his on top of the cockpit's console, making Gildedtongue back up, feeling the cold railing stop hir from backing up more. Thallon continued, "Doing exactly what I told hir to. I mean, some people can be really ungrateful."

Gildedtongue's mind found itself slamming hard against a wall as hir personal logic train was derailed. Shi coughed slightly, cocking hir head to one side, "Wh-what? You told hir to..." shi trailed off, not quite believing herself.

Thallon laughed and nodded, "Well, I had gotten you so flustered, I sent hir a message that you might have need for some relaxation." he chuckled to himself. His pinkish tail flagged and wagged behind him like a puppy's would. Gildedtongue had a flurry of emotions, relieved that he wasn't angry, embarrassed for falling for his ruse, and angry herself for being used like that.

"Now see here, Mr. Rosefur. Maybe I didn't want to do that. What sort of right did you have to set me up like that?" shi felt a snarl brew up but swallowed it down, hir tail wrapped rightly around the railing to help hir balance and to not go after the foxtaur.

"Jeez, I'm sorry," Thallon said, raising his hands in defense, "Just thought I'd help you out. You really aren't like a chakat." Gildedtongue frowned, then nodded at his observation, trying to relax herself from hir position, breathing softly.

"No, no I'm not. Look, I'm sorry." shi began, feeling hir ears blush once more, "But, well, yes. I really did enjoy it. Ah, thank you, Thallon." The chakat went back towards the cockpit, seeing the once again grinning fox wag his tail again. Shi sighed slightly, still feeling awkward about the whole thing, but glad that there wasn't any bad feelings going around.

"Well, I'm glad you did enjoy it. That was part of the point, now, wasn't it?" The foxtaur snickered and got up out of his seat, "Now, how about we go and get some dinner?" he asked, backing up half a step in the cramped cockpit before leaping out of the mecha towards the catwalk rather than the disembarking platform.

Thallon's forefoot caught the heavy seal around the cockpit, compromising his trajectory. His usually carefree face distorting in a yelp, seeing the railing coming towards his face. Gildedtongue couldn't move, frozen in confusion before seeing Thallon's face slam hard into the metal railing with a resounding clang, bending the metal downward. His body sent spinning the opposite direction, a pinkish spiral heading down towards the far away ground. Gildedtongue found his feet and dashed towards the railing, but as shi shoved his hand out, all shi caught was air. Shi was helpless in watching Thallon descend to the ground, making a small whimper as shi heard the foxtaur hit the ground with a wet snap sixty feet below.

The chakat muttered every single prayer shi knew as shi made his way down the metal staircase, tripping twice and was sent tumbling down to the closest landing. Time raced ahead and slowed down for the chakat at the same time, feeling that the foxtaur's life was slipping and his motion wasn't fast enough. Shi stumbled onto the ground floor and raced towards Thallon. He was sprawled all over the floor, a foreleg was bent in a perverse position from an unnatural joint. Shi saw both of his chests huffing air as shi felt a wave of relief finding him alive. Shi looked back up the stairs and then readdressed Thallon, seeing his spine looked normal. "Are you awake?" shi asked, hearing a pained grunt from the foxtaur. Shi slowly picked him up, grunting at the weight before moving him onto his back, careful of his foreleg. Urine dripped from his side from a puddle he created out of the pain, but for the most part his bodily fluids remained inside his body. Shi had only hoped that nothing inside was hurt. "Keep talking to me, Thallon." shi said in a panic. Thallon responded with a grunt and an unintelligible murmur.

Gildedtongue kept talking to Thallon, getting him to respond somewhat in his ascent of the staircase. Thallon's grey eyes were slightly out of focus from being concussed on the railing. Gildedtongue found wells of strength shi didn't know shi had when shi made his way to the top, continuing to carry the male into the ship's spine. Shi looked left and right, shouting at the nearest crew member, "Where's a God-damned doctor?"

The startled human snapped at attention at the chakat carrying the fainted one. He was in the process of repairing a floor light, but quickly decided this was more important. "Ah, follow me!" he said, getting up and lead Gildy bridgeward along the corridor.

Blood was pounding inside of Gildedtongue's ears, drowning everything out and just followed the person in front of him. They made their way three sections from the hold opening and the human lead him inside a large room, about the size of the galley or the holeroom. A short human of both Latin and Oriental heritage looked up from her PADD and gave an exasperated sigh.

"Get him on the table." she said with a tone sounding closer to someone having to clean a pet's mess than an emergency situation. "What happened?" she asked in the same bored tone. Gildedtongue slid Thallon onto the padded table, making him hiss in pain, both of her lungs were on fire as shi tried to find breath to speak.

"F-fell, from his robot," Gildedtongue stammered, "Hit his head hard on the railing and fell to the ground. His leg is broken but, I'm not sure what else. You've got to save him, doc!" shi said. Hours later shi'd realize how cliché that sounded but at the moment hir brain wasn't quite on the ball. The doctor nodded and sighed looking over the foxtaur, then turned to the chakat.

"That all? You still here? Get out, unless you think that you've got a degree in medicine!" she shooed out the chakat and the crew member. Gildedtongue looking slightly bewildered, and would have fought against the human for getting rid of hir had the doctor not seemed more an alpha than shi was.

The human gave half a chuckle, shrugging slightly, "Don't worry. Wu's a bit of an interesting person, but she'll get him fixed up for you." Gildedtongue gave an opened mouth slow nod, looking at him before he started to go back to his work.

The chakat was startled, feeling a hand rest on hir flank, making hir jump up. Shi quickly turned hir head to look at the person next to hir, sighing slightly in relief, "O-oh, it's you." shi said, looking at the stern look of Saldura as hir relief became dread.

"So, what did that idiot do to himself now?" shi asked, crossing hir arms before hir. Gildedtongue loosed a long breath before retelling the story to the badger. As hir words moved across the air, it didn't change the expression on hir face at all, rather made it darker. Saldura sighed slowly, shaking hir head, "Well, sounds like something he'd do. At least you were there or he'd probably still laid out on the floor now. I'm sorry that he put you through this."

Gildedtongue shook hir head, "No, no... it's fine, really. Just..." shi trailed off mid sentence, sitting down on hir haunches, as shi started to smell herself, reeking of sweat and the tod's own water. "Think I need a shower, and a really cold drink."

Saldura's face softened, nodding quietly, "Okay. How about you hit the showers, and come back to my room and I'll hook you up with something." The chakat nodded quietly before walking towards the communal showers. The day's events slowly starting to process in hir brain as hir mental cache had been stuffed to capacity, and a bit of deprogramming would be useful. The chakat disrobed when shi saw that the place was empty, sighing in luck of hitting the place between shift rushes. The water was warm and ran through hir fur, allowing hir to feel the grime and sweat run off of hir flesh towards the drain below.

"I hope he's doing okay," Gildedtongue said aloud in the empty room, enjoying the warm water start to soak into hir flesh. Powdered soap was scrubbed underneath hir

fur while hir palms and fingers worked it in. "If he wasn't trying to show off he wouldn't have gotten hurt," shi muttered. Hir mind continued down that line of thought, "Though, he wouldn't have shown off had I not been there. He'd also not have felt as such had I just got his joke earlier. Hell, he wouldn't have needed to joke if I was just chakat enough to have just enjoyed a casual fuck. Or I had been more of a person than just some craven animal in heat." shi muttered lightly to herself, feeling a few tears roll down hir cheek.

The chakat let out a long breath, feeling the guilt compound rather than wane. Stepping from the wet area to the heated dry room, shi towed off hir form for the next ten minutes, the large towel sponging off moisture efficiently ready to take the fluid and reprocess the grey water for new purposes. A new shirt and the chakat made hir way down the hall, pausing in front of Saldura's and Thallon's quarters.

Shi contemplated simply walking on to hir own room, not wanting to face the badger after what went on inside of hir head, but courtesy dictated that shi at least pay hir respects to the appointment. Hir eyes shut lightly before rapping hir knuckles over the metal door. A sharp hiss slipped between hir tongue and teeth as hir thin skin broke across an inlet edge of the door. The door slid open, the uniformed mustalid seeing the pained chakat sucking on hir fingers.

Saldura offered Gildedtongue in, offering the promised drink to Gildedtongue who first used it on hir knuckle. The chakat didn't say anything for several moments, looking blankly at the ground. Awkwardness was filtered into the cabin while both hermaphrodites sat in the quiet. Gildedtongue's eyes roamed over the room, looking pointedly more decorated and developed than hir own room, but not terribly so. Several posters of films and bands emblazoned half of the room, mostly action movies and various rock and pop bands, the eyes of one ferret singer sporting an enormous perm hairstyle seemed to follow Gildedtongue's eyes over towards the still somewhat spartan bed. Finally the chakat could not stand the deafening silence before finally speaking, "Look, I'm sorry for what happened."

Saldura lifted an eye-ridge, looking over the chakat, "What, did you throw him over the railing?" Gildedtongue shook hir head before taking a sip, finally, from the offered drink. Shi expected one of the sodas shi had been given, feeling the bitter beer run over hir tongue shi nearly spat it out, looking at the can shi was holding. The leonine felitaur held the fluid in hir mouth for a few moments, appreciating the beverage with a more conscious matter now, swallowing finally.

"No, no. I didn't do anything like that. I just, feel somehow responsible for the whole thing, though. Had I not been there he wouldn't have done anything like that, and I guess I wouldn't have been in there if I hadn't been with you, and..." shi trails off, seeing the bemused face on the badger before hir.

"Oh, please, don't let me stop you. I find Catholic Guilt so unbelievably fascinating." Saldura chuckled softly to himself, feeling his tiny tail flick across his buttocks. Gildedtongue swallowed a whimper behind another swig of beer, averting his eyes towards the metal floor. Sal let out a slow sigh, padding over next to Gildedtongue, resting a hand upon his shoulder, squeezing gently, "Look, Thallon did something stupid, and you were there to see it, that's not exactly your fault. Hell, were you not there, he'd probably be on the ground until I decided to check upon his location. The guy would have snapped his neck off had we been in proper gravity, he's lucky the ship is rated at only 0.6 Gs." Gildedtongue nodded quietly. "Furthermore," Saldura continued, "I guess it's my fault that you feel such about our sex. I guess I should have made sure you were mature enough for such a thing." Gildedtongue shot back a hurt and offensive glare to the younger biped.

"Okay, okay, poor choice of words" Saldura said, lifting his hands up in defence. "But true enough as is. I mean, most people these days are pretty cool about casual sex." Gildedtongue rolled his eyes, not at Saldura, but at himself, blowing something that should be trivial out of proportion like shi has. The chakat let out a four lunged sigh, closing his eyes slightly.

"I guess you're right, though. I don't know, I suppose I haven't had a lot of practice with the whole concept." Gildedtongue muttered.

"Well, considering your background, I wouldn't think so. But, I suppose now's a good enough time to learn." Saldura wiggled his eyeridges suggestively.

"Aren't you on shift now?" Gildedtongue shot back, getting a chuckle from Saldura. "But, really. I don't know, maybe that kind of thing might work out. Though, I have to admit, both you and Thallon are rather striking."

Saldura nodded, the white parts of his face reddening a bit with blush, "Well, thank you. I think you've done a bit for the big oaf and me as well." The badger looked up at the ceiling in quiet contemplation, "Well, we've got several more months together on the same boat, so, who knows, perhaps we'll enjoy something some time that's a little more than casual." The badger chuckled, sipping from his own drink, a bottle of water, before walking back out to the spine. "I suppose you can let yourself out when you'd like, but, you're right, I am on shift."

Gildedtongue nodded, watching Sal depart and bade his farewell as shi left. The chakat nursed his drink quietly, tempted to see how Thallon was, but, considering the doctor's demeanour, shi felt it smarter to wait after class was over tomorrow. More of the bitter fluid rolled along the rough chakat tongue down his throat.

Shi couldn't locate the waste disposal unit in the officers' room, and slipped the bottle into his shirt pocket, unsure about any dry rules on the ship, making his way back towards his own quarters to throw it away, figuring the only one that would get him into trouble was the very person who gave it to him, and thus punishment, if any,

would be light.

Gildedtongue's eyes glanced out into the starry scene once more, seeing the slow moving beads of light make their way from one end of the porthole to the other, taking twelve minutes, by the chakat's count in hir still slightly shell-shocked brain. "Several more months indeed." Gildedtongue muttered to himself before walking to hir bed, crawling in for a nap.

Chapter 4

"All right, class. I think that's enough lecture for the day," Gildedtongue said after looking at the chronometer on hir PADD. The various youths, eager to rejoin the freedom of between class time, made their way to the doorway in a feeding frenzy towards the door. Dominic, the boy shi met on the first day on the vessel remained behind, sitting on top of a table, feet swaying beneath. The chakat looked over at the human, stopping hir own packing, "Something troubling you, Dominic?" Shi asked, approaching the boy.

"No shir. Mom just has been mentioning that you've been at the med bay with Thallon a lot lately," the blonde boy asked with the blunt honesty children seem to have without years of learning how to approach matters in roundabout ways. Gildedtongue responded with a chuckle and a nod to that, causing Dominic to continue, "I thought that you were going to be leaving once we hit Chakona, so, why are you trying to get close to him?"

The chakat was slightly taken aback by that, but mulled over to give an answer, not finding any coming off hand. Shi sighed and shrugged, resuming hir packing, "Well, I guess that I still feel some responsibility over what happened, so, I'm doing my best to comfort him on my off time." Gildedtongue knew shi was trying to convince himself of this more than convince the boy, but shi wasn't doing a good job at either. "I guess I don't know what's going on, but, I suppose I'm just sailing where the wind is taking me."

Dominic frowned slightly and nodded, "Oh. Well, don't go breaking his heart too much," he said, shouldering his backpack and walks out of the classroom, leaving Gildedtongue to sit by himself. Initially shi felt a great deal of anger and rage towards hir pupil – who was he to judge what other people did on their own time, and who said that this was anything more than simply platonic relationships between adults?

Gildedtongue packed up hir bag fully and attached it to hir midsection, adjusting hir saddlebags for weight before leaving and locking the classroom, making hir way towards the medical bay. Since shi did promise Thallon shi'd visit him today, it would be rude to not show up. The other crewmembers seemed increasingly friendly to the

chakat as shi became less and less of a new stranger, and a more common sight inside the ship's spine.

Wu was looking over Thallon's foreleg, in a large splint and immobilized while he rested on his side. The doctor typed some things out onto her PADD before addressing the incoming chakat, "He's healing mostly fine. Had I the proper tools here, he'd be on his feet and walking around fine." She gave a light slap to Thallon's lower chest, making the large foxtaur flinch a bit and yelp out a 'hey!' Wu continued, "But, as it is, he'll be here until we hit Epsilon Thirty Fifty-six. The captain will not be pleased in hearing about the wait or the expense."

"Do you have to explain it over and over again each time someone comes inside?" Thallon asked, prepping his upper torso onto an elbow and nodded towards the incoming chakat, waving to hir. Gildedtongue took hir seat next to Thallon, outstretching hir hand to caress over his flanks.

"Just often enough to sink it into your head, you overgrown teenager," the Doctor said before retreating back to her office. The two taurs kept quiet in the silence for a few moments. Gildedtongue continued to blush to himself as Thallon shot hir a roguish glance, stretching out on his bed as carefully as he could.

"Mmmm, my saviour is here once again. So, what did you get for us this evening?" Thallon asked, propping his anthro torso on one elbow to move himself closer to the chakat. Gildedtongue sat close, blushing hotly before resting a hand upon the foxtaur's flank, feeling over the coarse, pinkish fur covering the majority of his body.

Gildedtongue sighed slightly, a small smile on her face as she looked into Thallon's stormy grey eyes, "Just a couple of videos. Small library of stuff you have on board."

The foxtaur nodded, reaching up to caress Gildedtongue's forearm, smiling back to hir, "Mmmm, that's all right, we'll pick up some more stuff on the station. Heh, I'm sure you won't be bored." Thallon laughed slightly, but that didn't last long as he looked into Gildedtongue's gloomy expression, "What's on your mind there?"

"Nothing!" shi retorted quickly, looking at the ground as hir hand went limp on his side, "And everything. Just, eh, Dominic said something right after school, about how I'm not going to be here after we reach my destination, and that it's unfair for me to string you along for something that might not last, and, I agree, he is correct."

The two stayed quiet until Thallon took Gildedtongue's hand, squeezing it and making hir lift hir head to look him in the eyes, and said, "You're one different woman, Gildedtongue. Believe me, I'll take whatever time I'm able to with you. I love you."

Gildedtongue blushed firmly at the words, then looked away, backing up from the foxtaur on the bed, trembling as shi held hir arms, "W-we've only just met, Thallon."

You're a great guy, and I like you, but..." shi sighs, rubbing hir arms to comfort himself, "I guess I'm not sure about that word just yet." shi mutters.

Gildedtongue's downtrodden disposition was infectious as Thallon frowned himself, his normally bright features getting sullen, "Ah, right. I'm, sorry for offending you," the foxtaur muttered.

The chakat wasn't sure what to do, biting hir lower lip as the two stood in awkward silence. Shi contemplated just bolting out of the door and to hir room, but that'd just make things worse, shi felt. Æons passed in the silence before Gildedtongue just cursed underneath hir breath, striding towards the infirmed vulpine centauroid, grabbing his head in hir hands and pressed hir lips firmly against his own.

The kiss was sloppy and split open Gildedtongue's lower lip on one of hir teeth, but the sudden rush of passion between the two overcame the lack of form and technique from the chakat's side of the kiss. Both listened to the monitor sound in a double-beat of both of Thallon's rapidly beating hearts. Their tongues invaded each other's mouths, sloppily dancing and wrestling with each other as their embrace tightened.

The kiss was stopped by the clearing of Dr. Wu's throat. Each of the centauroid's faces red with embarrassment. Gildedtongue saw a flash of black from Thallon's crotch but the foxtaur quickly covered himself with his blanket, laughing lightly. "M-maybe I should, ah, just leave the videos and... ah... come back some other time?" Gildedtongue's ears slowly cooled to their usual pink colouring.

"Sounds like a plan," Thallon nodded, coughing and licking at his lips with his purple tongue, getting some of Gildedtongue's yellowed muzzlefur out from his mouth. Gildedtongue watched Thallon's smiling face as shi hurriedly left the medical bay and made hir way back into hir quarters. Shi felt even lighter than the low gravity environment shi was in, not even noticing hir bleeding lip until shi tried to whistle and felt its sting.

Hir purring filled hir small quarters as shi immediately started upon hir grading. Most of the students were thankful for a more organic teacher, one who could be more flexible with their needs. Two of the children, Matthew and Chad, opted to remain with the computerized education, which suited Gildedtongue fine, as they were more interested in computer sciences, which was certainly not hir forté. Having only ten students was a luxury to the chakat as shi could focus on each of them considerably more. Shi hummed while checking the first paper, opting for dinner and tea once shi was done.

The chakat's chronometer chimed at dinnertime, and not a moment too soon as Gildedtongue shut down hir PADD and made hir way to the galley. More sandwiches and soups awaited hir and shi saw Saldura sitting in hir usual corner, with a wistful look in hir uncovered eye. The chakat made hir way over to the table, blushing slightly as shi intruded. "Mind if I sit here?"

Saldura blinked out of hir melancholy, addressing the chakat with a nod. "Not at all, please." The badger seemed happy to have company as the taur sat on the other side of the table. Saldura looked over the older herm, seeing the cut on the lip, but didn't say anything about it. "How was your class today?" shi started the small talk.

The two spoke with each other for well over an hour, letting their food get cold as they dined on conversation. Even with Gildedtongue's poor empathy, shi could tell that the badger's mood had been lifted considerably, counting to hir loneliness. "... So, I told Thallon 'That's not where it goes!'" Both herms laughing around the table, feeling better before noticing their meal. They ate in relative silence, quickly finishing their meal before making their way back into the spine.

"How have you been dealing with the lower gravity? Lots of people get very ill in these sorts of environments, but seems like you've got your space-legs on you." Saldura said, looking over the walking gait of hir companion.

"Well enough, I think. Still wake up with headaches sometimes, but, not as bad as that first day." Gildedtongue chuckled, rubbing hir head in gesture of the earlier incident. They stopped at the door to the badger's quarters, remaining silent for a few moments. "Ah, thanks for the seat at dinner."

Saldura nodded back. "No problem. Don't be afraid to join me anytime, Wanderer." The chakat nearly forgot hir incognito name, but quickly nodded in response. The security chief thought for a moment, continuing, "And, I want to thank you, for keeping Thallon company. I guess my job tends to keep me busy all the time, and I'm glad he doesn't think he's alone."

Gildedtongue nodded, reaching to give Saldura a hug before they bade each other a good night. Gildy was certainly glad that neither seemed to mind hir presence in their relationship, and seemed very supportive. The whole thing felt new and surreal to the chakat. Shi supposed if shi was more normal this would be old hat, but in hir case, things still surprised hir.

Shucking off hir top, Gildedtongue quickly retreated to hir bed, getting ready for a new day tomorrow. The ship was scheduled to dock next week at the station, and hopefully Thallon would be made all better, and Gildedtongue could do a bit of exploration.

Gildedtongue was considering various assignments for hir students during the docking when shi heard an unfamiliar ringing. Hir door was making a quiet tone, making the chakat get out of bed, pulling a shirt over hir anthro half before opening the door.

Saldura was on the other side in what Gildedtongue figured was hir casual wear, holding one arm and looking at the ground. The chakat was initially confused about what was happening, until Saldura muttered, "Can I sleep with you tonight?"

Gildedtongue nodded, ushering hir friend into hir room. "I guess I'm just too used to sleeping with Thallon, these last few weeks have been..." Saldura started, but was cut off by a hug from Gildedtongue. The chakat had no clue what shi was doing, but decided to play it by ear. Shi felt the badger's strong arms gripping hir body when shi returned the hug. Some lonely tears dropping on the chakat's shoulder as the two stood in their silent embrace. Neither knew how long it took before they shed their clothing and made their way into bed, falling asleep in each other's arms.

Gildedtongue woke up groggily, seeing the back of Saldura, up and putting on hir uniform already. The large teacher stretched as much as shi could, using one of the bedsheets to hide hir erection, licking the off taste in hir mouth. Saldura sat on the side of the bed reaching to cup Gildedtongue's cheek and pull the chakat into a kiss. "Good morning," the badger whispered.

Gildy could only grumble something intelligible in response. Still waking up. Saldura giggled uncharacteristically; giving a second kiss upon the chakat's forehead, "Well, just wanted to thank you, Gildy. I needed that last night."

The chakat nodded dumbly, blinking the sleep from hir eyes as shi propped himself up on hir elbows to address hir friend better. Enough saliva gathered in hir mouth to let hir speak, "It's no problem, chief Holbock. It was a pleasure to share the evening with you."

Saldura nodded, frowning slightly as shi ran hir fingers through Gildedtongue's red mane, looking down into hir large eyes. "Please, call me Sal, or Sally, no need for such divides between us."

Gildedtongue nodded, wrapping hir arms around Saldura to give hir a firm hug. "Anyway. I need to go." Saldura continued, "There's no rest for the wicked, as they say, and I need to be in uniform and on the bridge to report soon." Shi nuzzled the chakat before walking over to the door.

"Sally?" Gildedtongue called after hir, catching hir before the door. The badger looked over hir shoulder at the leonine taur, cocking hir head. "Would you like to stay with me tonight as well?"

Saldura's black and white face warmed at the offer, "I would be delighted. I'll see you after shift, shir Wanderer." And with that, shi left.

Gildedtongue collapsed back on hir bed, staring at the ceiling for a few minutes as hir brain tried to negotiate with hir body that it was time to get up. Willpower finally overcame sloth as shi went to get herself ready for the day. The events of yesterday running through the chakat's mind as shi gathered hir outfit and made hir way to the communal showers.

Several other people were washing themselves off, causing the chakat to blush slightly to himself, keeping his eyes on the ground. Two males, a human and a tiger morph were sharing a discussion in the middle of the room, and it didn't take a mind reader to notice that they were interested in each other. Gildedtongue sighed, feeling mixed, as usual, happy to see others enjoying each other's company, and still angry with himself for feeling like a pervert about it. Shi took in a deep breath and shucked his shirt and clothing into a nearby storage case, making his way quickly to a corner spout, covering his breasts with his hands and shampoo.

Soon the warm water cascaded over and through his fur, letting Gildedtongue purr in relief. Shi hadn't needed to bathe as much in the controlled environment of the *Purgatorio* but it was relaxing to get rid of the musks accumulating on his body. As shi washed, shi continued to think.

Though they didn't get physically intimate, Gildedtongue had to admit that last night was one of the most pleasant evenings shi had had for a long time. Shi smiled to himself, running the shampoo through his face fur, remembering just how Sally felt in his arms, or how shi smelled. As shi ran his fingers through his mane, a shiver of contentment ran through his body, happy that shi had actually made someone else feel good for a change. Shi knew that his friends liked having him around, but it felt good to actually help someone out.

Gildedtongue started to purr as shi finished up his cleaning, making his way to the drying chambers, this time less concerned with covering himself. The warm jets of air rushed through his fur and over his flesh. His eyes shut to shield them from the warm buffets over his body, but shi heard someone clear their throat behind him as the air jets slowly shut off. Gildedtongue reached for a towel, turning behind him and saw the human from earlier, waiting for his turn. Shi blushed, not sure what to do, but didn't move when he went into the chamber.

"Gilbert Westin, at your service," he said as the dryer turned back on. Gildedtongue nodded, responding with his false name. The human nodded and smiled, "Pleasure is all mine. If I may, please, might I help dry you off, shir Wanderer? I must say, that is one long and gorgeous tail. Mind terribly if I dry it off for you?"

Gildedtongue felt a bit strange at the offer, but not wanting to blow his cover as a "perfectly normal chakat," decided to allow it. Gilbert worked on the tail as the chakat worked on drying off his chest and flanks, trying to not act as nervous as shi felt. Luckily, his suspicions came to nothing as the dryer shut down again and both were ready to go back to their shifts. Gildedtongue went to his locker and pulled his outfit, waving good-bye to the human before leaving.

'I'm overanalysing everyone's motives,' Gildedtongue thought to himself as shi made his way back to his quarters. "Even my own's and Thallon's," shi said aloud, thinking about last afternoon. Another sigh as shi gathered some books and his PADD, making

a mental note to make things right after lessons that day.

"I'm very happy with everyone's progress. All of your work seems to be in top shape and you seem to be getting the material, and thus," Gildedtongue said, addressing his class, "Come docking with the station, you all will get the full two weeks off. Consider it an earned vacation." The class seemed to enjoy that, giving small cheers to their teacher. "However, that won't be until after we've made dock, so, Clifton, I expect a paper on..." the chakat continued, dealing out the latest line of homework to his students, which was met with less jubilation than his previous announcement. After sorting everyone out, he finally dismissed the class, as his students grudgingly made their way out of the room, Gildedtongue called out, "Oh, and Dominic? Please see me for just a moment."

The blonde child gawked slightly, blinking to himself, not seeing how he was in trouble. He swallowed firmly, watching as his friends and the other students piled out of the classroom. Soon, both of them were alone much like the last time. "I do something wrong, shir Wanderer?"

Gildedtongue shook his head, sighing slightly, "No, Dominic, you haven't. I just wanted to tell you that, yes, I'm not going to be here forever, and yet, I wouldn't mind having a bit of a relationship with Thallon and Saldura." The boy nodded quietly at that, looking disparagingly at the chakat. Gildedtongue coughed and continued, "Look, I don't want to hurt either of them either, but, there certainly seems to be some sort of... I dunno." Gildedtongue sighed slightly. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure why I asked you to stay; guess I'm just talking to myself and need vindication."

Dominic looked blankly at Gildedtongue, gathering his things as it seemed he was not in trouble, and made his way to the door, taking one last look at Gildedtongue before leaving.

Gildy sighed slightly, seeing how bizarre that conversation was in hindsight, but it at least made him feel better, which had to amount to something. The chakat put his saddlebags back on and made his way to the medical bay once again.

Dr. Wu was off that day, and her assistant merely minded the singular patient, making sure his meds were administered properly and that nothing serious would happen. Gildedtongue nodded a hello to the nurse, and then padded quietly to the napping foxtaur, sitting at his side and resting his hand on his side. Thallon roused slowly, blinking his grey eyes awake, then looked into Gildedtongue's concerned face. His dark, purplish tongue ran over his mouth dryly, trying to summon some moisture before he spoke, "Hey there, Wanderer. Surprised to see you here, actually, considering our previous discussions."

Gildedtongue nodded, feeling his ears burn a little in blush. His tailtip flicking behind

hir as shi continued to touch and feel over Thallon's body. The foxtaur stretched and smiled at the interaction, feeling considerably better, nestling in his bed. Gildedtongue coughed a bit. "Look, I want to talk about what was said yesterday," the chakat muttered under hir breath, but Thallon was close and attentive enough to pick up what shi was saying. "About you, and me, and, well, that big emotion that's summed up in four letters." Thallon nodded and leaned closer, looking into Gildedtongue's down-turned face.

"I'm glad that you feel that way, since I do too," Thallon whispered coyly, his steel grey eyes staring deep into Gildedtongue's own. The chakat's hearts seemed to have skipped several beats while shi allowed himself to be seduced by the infirmed willingly and knowingly. They were both glad that the doctor was not present when they met in another kiss, as passionate and as needy as the first. Both taurs touched and groped as much as they could with each other, letting their needs spill into the meeting of each other's lips, acting like teenagers just discovering the simple joys that can come about it.

Neither were sure how long it took before they came up for air, but their hands remained on each other's bodies, while Gildedtongue propped hir PADD on a swinging table, letting them view the video program loaded on the small screen together. The writing and the dialogue were forgettable, and the acting was horrific, but the company made the whole event feel exceptionally memorable.

Gildedtongue left Thallon to rest, and herself go to get some food. Saldura, as predictable as ever, was sitting at the table in the back. However, shi had another tray opposite of hir. The chakat blushed, going to the line, figuring shi had other company, but the badger herm had waved hir over. "C'mon, sit down." The large biped smiled.

The chakat did as shi was bidden, looking over the badger as shi sat down, hir tailtip had been flicking beside hir while shi curled it up so no one would trip over it. Gildedtongue speared a leafy part of her salad, talking towards the table. "I, ah, talked to Thallon earlier, as you probably guessed. Heh, ah, yesterday he told me that he loved me, took me a whole day before I mustered up the courage to respond in kind."

Saldura smirked, resting hir elbows on the table top, entwining hir fingers as shi lay hir head on hir hands. "That so? Now, you realize, Thallon is a bit of a... two for one deal. Although, I don't think you'd be that adverse to such a situation."

Gildedtongue blushed a bit more, nodding to himself. "Yeah, I know, I know. Seems like a good deal to me, though." Shi chuckled quietly, lifting hir eyes to look over the striped face of the badger before hir. They continued to eat in relative silence, as Gildedtongue's tail snaked underneath the table to wrap around Saldura's ankle. The badger smiled wider in the meal, watching the chakat come out of hir shell just a little

bit more. "Though, I guess my stop is still Chakona."

"Yeah, we know, we know. Love is forever fleeting, isn't it?" Saldura sighed, moving to sip his drink as she leaned back in his chair. Both were quickly finished and made their way to the spine. Gildedtongue didn't make it to his room, being pulled into Saldura's chambers, where the two quickly became undressed and made love, now as mates.

The two weeks moved in a blur for Gildedtongue, between class, homework, minding Thallon, and spending time with Saldura. Soon the ship would be docking with the space station, and Thallon would be mended to the best of health. The thought of that drove a shiver through Gildedtongue's spines. She was comfortable dealing with one mate at a time, but she was soon going to learn what it would be like with both of them at the same time.

Chapter 5

"We'll be commencing docking procedures in three hours. All hands, to your stations. Repeat, all hands to your stations," the intercom blared.

Gildedtongue's eyes fluttered, blinking the sleep from his eyes as she pulled his body up. The sound of an annoyed snore startled him as she froze; an eye slowly rolled in the dim light towards the badger sleeping next to him. It had been two weeks since they started sharing their quarters officially, or semi-officially. Gildedtongue still had his own room down the hall and used it for work often, but the bed had been gathering dust there.

Gildedtongue watched Saldura sleep, the biped's chest rising and falling under the sheets. His face was soft, at peace for the moment, not a worry in the world. The chakat settled back into the bed, looking over his new lover's face, seeing how the stripes on his muzzle meshed, and the flaring of his nostrils among his quiet snores. The chakat's eyes rounded up to the closed lids of Saldura. The fur around the eye moved wild, exposing the open augmentation ports on the badger's face. Gildy turned his head, trying not to look too closely at the openings for fear of getting sick. There were less visible and more streamlined and pretty types, but on Saldura's budget, she could only afford tech that dated back to the end of the Gene Wars. Gildedtongue lifted his hand to gently run through the badger's long hair, making his green eyes slowly open, "Nnnnnngmmph, Morning." Saldura muttered through his dry mouth.

Gildedtongue kissed his forehead. "Morning. Guess we're docking today," she purred, slipping out of the bed.

Saldura stretched under the covers, not looking like she was interested in getting up.

"Mmmmmph, no, docking was what we did last night..." shi smirked, knowing Gildedtongue was blushing, though shi could only see the back of hir head, "but, yes, the ship certainly is. That means I'll be busy with the captain all day, and I doubt I'll be back tonight." Saldura sat up from the covers, stretching once again, "Actually, you'll probably not see me much throughout the stay on the station, though I'll try to make some time for you."

Gildedtongue nodded, turning back to gently kiss Saldura on the snout before getting on hir shirt, "Well, hope things go smoothly for you, Sal. Guess that means I've got to make sure that Thallon doesn't get into mischief when we're there?" the chakat asked with a smirk.

The badger returned the smirk, reaching to scritch over Gildedtongue's covered shoulder. "That'd be the idea, Gildedtongue. And as you've learned, that will be quite the project indeed. Hope you feel up to it." Saldura chuckled, continuing to touch over Gildedtongue. The chakat nodded in acceptance, both of them staring into each other's eyes in silence.

"Well, guess I should let you get dressed and ready. I'd better do the same and, well, check up on the other fuzzball." Gildedtongue chuckled to himself. Saldura nodded and watched the chakat step out of hir room, sighing softly to himself, getting hir cleanest uniform out of a drawer and ready for hir workday.

Gildedtongue stopped for a light breakfast – a grain cereal in milk with a few fruits, as well as a large mug of breakfast blend. The food wasn't much but the hot caffeinated drink helped hir open hir eyes up just a hair's breadth wider. The cafeteria was mostly empty, missing the usual hustle and bustle of the crew chatting and getting their meals. Aside from the chakat, three humans, a wolf morph and a lemur morph all sat around a table – the various members of the kitchen staff, Gildedtongue recognised. They were sharing a meal and watching the lemur and a human in a heated game of Othello. The chakat's crunching of hir cereal meshed well with the sound of discs clacking loudly on the playing board and yelps of victory and growls of defeat.

Shi retreated back to hir room, taking a bottle of tea with hir. Most of the crew were in the engineering bay, the bridge, or the cargo bay, making the chakat feel unusually alone in the spine, increasing hir feeling of vertigo staring down the corridor. The same voice on the intercom called out, "We'll commence docking procedures in forty-five minutes."

The chakat stepped into hir quarters, halfway glad that shi didn't have anything to do at this time, letting the other members squirrel about doing things the teacher had only a passing knowledge of. Shi gathered up a fresh blouse, trying to look hir best for the new area. Lying on hir counter was a small, palm-sized cylinder. Gildedtongue didn't recall bringing any of hir credsticks on board the ship. Shi

plugged the device into his PADD, his eyes going wide at the contents, seeing several thousand credits on it.

Shi quickly unplugged the stick, clutching it in his hand. Something like this found in his room would certainly raise questions, and now his fingerprints were all over the thing. Shi swallowed dryly, trying to calm down. Shi had access to the room, as did Saldura, and Thallon. Perhaps a cleaner left it in his quarters? A quick look around showed that the clean, but untidy room was not professionally cleaned, nor would there be one for private quarters on a ship of a little over a hundred hands.

A cold sweat ran down his forehead; an electronic lock wouldn't be impossible to compromise, given the right talent. Perhaps it was planted to make him look bad. Shi exhaled, figuring he'd get to the bottom of this, stepping out of his room and into the spine once more. The armoury, holeroom, and security complex would be the best place to start, he figured. Worst case scenario is that he gave himself up for a crime he didn't commit.

"Docking procedures in thirty minutes," the friendly voice chimed once more throughout the ship. The voice was giving Gildedtongue a slight headache, recalling the last time that he heard her was when the ship was taking off, and he was concussed. The train of thought nearly made him miss his exit when he almost passed up the door.

Gildedtongue coughed into his fist, adjusting his blouse over his breasts, trying to make them look even with one another before he opened the door. The security detail was mostly seated, filing paper work and keeping their noses to their desks. Saldura wasn't anywhere to be seen, undoubtedly on the bridge at the moment. Shi made his way to the nearest officer, holding up the stick. "Sorry, I'd like to report a found credstick. It has quite a bit on it, so, I'm sure someone's looking for it."

The seated person, a Caucasian human in his late twenties, looked back up at Gildedtongue, then at the stick before opening a new file on his PADD. "Alright, where'd you find it, Shir?" he asked in an exasperated tone. The guy probably had a lot on his plate and time seemed to be running out for him. Shi tried his best to get things done as painlessly as possible.

"It was in my room, and I found it in there this morning after breakfast. It wasn't there when I left last night."

"I had figured that," the officer responded, sighing quietly, "Who else has access to your room?"

"Just myself, Shir Holbock, and Mr. Rosefur, as far as I know," Gildedtongue said. His annoyance was beginning to rise up before the human leaned back in his chair, letting out a small chuckle. "What's so funny?"

He shook his head, "Nothing. You're new on board, shir Wanderer. The day before we make contact with any station or planet is payday. I figured you knew about it, but..." he trailed off and shrugged. The ears on his head flattened and his body was crestfallen, looking much like a kitten found making mischief. "I take it that explains it?"

"Except how it got there, yes, that would do it." Shi nodded, then reflected, "Still, don't recall anyone mentioning payment." The officer shrugged before getting back to his paperwork. The chakat walked out into the corridor once again, a large weight off of his shoulders that allowed him to start whistling to himself.

Making his way back to the medical bay, the intercom chimed out, "Docking with Epsilon 3056 in five, four...." Gildedtongue tried to not panic, looking around him before shi saw a pipe outcropping along the wall of the spine. Grabbing a hold, shi put his weight against it, hearing, "Two, one. We've made docking. Normalizing ship's life support with the station complete. Have a nice day."

Muttering a "thank you", Gildy let go of the pipe. The docking being much less hazardous than the lift off made sense since shi was simply going from space to space. The chakat started to walk again, quickly falling on his four feet and tumbling to the ground. Blushing sheepishly, shi checked around him for anyone who might have seen that. His footfalls came down heavier while shi made his way down the corridor.

A few technicians walked out of engineering on the other end of the corridor, finished with their docking and leaving the crew on deck to perform maintenance and repairs. The ship never seemed to sleep, even in safe harbour. Heavy doors of the *Purgatorio's* bay doors echoed throughout the whole ship as they yawned open. Machines started up and readied the transfer of goods to the station.

Gildedtongue walked into the medical bay. Eight medics were taking final stock of their inventory while Dr. Wu and one other were tending to Thallon, slipping him from his bed to a gurney. "Remember, this is coming out of your pay cheque, you dumb fox." Wu always seemed to have perfect bedside manners. "What I'd do for even a quarter of the equipment I had back at the University." She sighed and rolled her eyes, nodding over to the oncoming chakat. "Suppose you're here with lover-boy, eh? Well, come on. Help me push this and you can see him get stitched up."

A shy wave was shared between the chakat and the foxtaur. The roguish creature made a few kissing faces to both the doctor and his mate as Gildedtongue grabbed hold of the rolling bed. Wu lead Gildedtongue as shi pushed the floating bed to a lift in the back of the bay. "This would have been useful earlier." Gildedtongue smirked to himself as they made their way to the bottom of the cargo bay.

Wu didn't say anything for a few moments, her brain running through a number of comebacks before resorting simply to: "Well, I just figured that you needed the

exercise."

Both centauroids groaned, rolled their eyes and offered their boos to the doctor. "Hey, you can't expect all of them to be winners." They shrugged slightly, exited the lift and ventured into the enormous bay of the station. At least seven more *Purgatorios* could fit inside the enormous structure and still leave room for people to work.

Epsilon 3056 was one of thousands of communication and deep space research stations around explored space. If a direct call was to be sent from Terra to another planet, it would be beamed and relayed from station to station, many thousands of times faster than the speed of light. The process, while quick and efficient, had considerable expenses to it. The power to send packets of data that fast put a heavy drain on the station's power supply, so they were usually saved for a particular hour of the day, save for Federation official purposes. The stations themselves becoming small colonies and cities on their own, scientists needing their families, and their families needing something more to do.

An ambulance was waiting for Thallon, its rear hatch opened up and the paramedics quickly looked over the downed foxtaur. Wu handed them a PADD that one nodded at and signed off on. "So, who here is riding with us?" asked a young feline morph female while Thallon was being loaded into the vehicle.

Wu sighed a bit, "If my services aren't needed there, I'd much rather go back to my own work. Take hir along with you though." Wu smiled slightly. "Shi'll be good for a holding hand."

The medic nodded to the doctor, pointing Gildedtongue into the back of the ambulance. Shi turned to wave back to Wu, but she was already making her way towards the ship.

"Don't worry. She's not all bad." Thallon chuckled, watching Gildedtongue climb into the vehicle and the paramedics closing the door behind hir. Shi reached to grab hold of Thallon's black furred hand, squeezing lightly. "Ugh, all this fuss over a broken leg. I swear, you're treating me like a cub."

The one holding Thallon's medical history turned back to the foxtaur, "All this fuss over a *shattered* leg. You're a lucky son-of-a-vix, Mr. Rosefur. Even considering the weaker gravity, that was quite the drop." Thallon groaned and shrugged slightly, looking back at his mate who just gave a bit of a shrug. It was in the past, no need to continue punishing the tod for anything.

It wasn't long until they made it to the hospital and Gildedtongue was asked to leave to the lobby. Thallon smiled, his roguish confidence letting Gildedtongue calm down a bit more as he waved playfully to hir. Shi looked around at the signs in the back of the medical building before walking towards the front entrance.

The station wasn't like something from a science fiction novel – no huge transparent domes or views into the nothingness of space. The walls had holographic clouds and skies emblazoned, but a careful and focused eye could see the metal behind the illusion. A huge tower ran through the centre of the living area, leading up towards the observatory and down to the communications array. The whole system not only did its job, but also kept enough social health for the scientists and technicians to keep sane out in the black of deep space.

The front doors slid open for the chakat as shi stepped inside. The lobby held a sterile smell befitting the function of the building. Several plastic plants broke up the beige walls and a receptionist sat behind the cut window on the opposite wall, a chakat, younger than Gildedtongue, with a bored look in hir eyes as shi was going through something on the computer. Shi was a Maine Coon patterned chakat, and lifted an eyebrow seeing the incoming stranger. "Well, hello, haven't seen you around here before."

The lobby was dead, a testimony of the general health of the station. Gildedtongue nodded hir head, "Ah, yes. Our ship just docked about half an hour ago. We're here to drop off some supplies and head out again."

The Maine Coon's face fell slightly, "Mmmm, a shame, here I was hoping to get to see more of you. Ah, not professionally, of course." Shi shook hir head. "I'm sorry, can I help you?"

"Not really. I came in with the foxtaur; he's being treated for a shattered foreleg in back," Gildedtongue said, hir eyes darting around the walls of the lobby, seeing several paintings hung up, looking as bland as the walls around them. Obviously a neutral air was being pumped into the space.

"Mmmmm, I see. I suppose he shouldn't be blamed too much, such an early prototype model," the chakat said, typing into hir computer once again, looking up someone, then nodded. "Yes, he's been put in the medbay right now, I'm sure he'll be right as rain soon." Shi leaned over the counter, smiling up at Gildedtongue, "So, what's your name?"

"Chakat Wanderer, child of Ebonyheart and Trueair," Gildedtongue said, offering hir hand through the portal in the wall. The other chakat looked at the hand then shook hir head, stepping out from hir desk, and out the door to the side where shi went over to wrap Gildedtongue in a hug.

"I'm Chakat Platinumsong, daughter of Harvestsun and Twilight," shi returned the greeting, hir arms not leaving surrounding Gildedtongue. The leonine chakat's pulses both picked up, feeling hir anxiety rise with hir discomfort of some stranger hugging hir like that. Hir personal space getting encroached on more as shi felt *something* start to poke and prod hir discomfort, a numbing agent digging right into hir soul. "It's okay, Wanderer, I'm a class 3 empath. I know you're worried about your friend, let me

help you."

Hands gripped Platinumsong's shoulders as shi gave hir a firm push away; Gildedtongue's eyes opened wide in hir astonishment. The other chakat looking just as confused at the disengagement. "Ah, look, I think I had better go. Um, yeah. When do you think I'll be able to see Thallon?"

The nurse blinked again, then went to look over hir desk at hir computer, "Ah, well, probably three hours or so," shi said, turning back around to look at Gildedtongue, "You don't have to leave you...?" shi trailed off. By the time shi turned around, Gildedtongue was already stepping out of the hospital and into the station proper.

The general air had a pleasantly natural musk to it, unlike the sterile atmosphere of the hospital; Gildedtongue could feel the other occupants of the station with each breath shi took. It was apparently early morning for someone as shi smelled the frying of bacon and eggs through one open kitchen window, and late night for someone else as the rich odour of a pot roast being baked came from another home. Was one not already aware that one was in space, one could easily find the station's world its own little Earth.

As shi smelled the foodstuffs, Gildedtongue noticed hir breathing getting faster and hir hearts' rates increasing. Shi knew shi was out of shape, but shi managed to walk the length of the *Purgatorio*'s spine three times a day without much issue. Shi passed a small café and chalked up hir fatigue to a lack of eating, having only had a small breakfast.

The ceiling, walls, and floor were all an unfinished wood, giving the place a highly rustic feeling to it. Shi wasn't sure if it was real or not, but, in a world of replicators, what does define real? A sign inside the door told hir to seat hirself as shi made hir way to a small table, moving a chair to one side. The menu doubled as a place mat, laminated and mostly clean, an exceptionally tough gravy stain covered some of the dinner items, and hir claw wasn't enough to clean it off.

"Hello, stranger, welcome to the Mesa Verde Café! Can I start you off with a drink?" She was a human, about sixteen, with a prize-winning smile and an eagerness to please. Gildedtongue felt a little out of place, usually seeing young people not in any particular hurry to help hir out. Then again, shi was in some place new, not the Kingdom. Shi should calm down. Maybe shi shouldn't have been so off put by Platinumsong.

"Ah, yes, please. Um, what's the tea flavoured with?"

"Well, today we've got mango passionfruit flavoured tea," she offered helpfully.

"Okay, I think I'll have a cola, then, thank you." Gildedtongue smiled back as she took down hir order.

"Right, I'll be right back with that and give you some time to look over our menu." She walked out with a slight bounce to her step as Gildedtongue mulled over his options. Out of habit, she began to "right hand order," looking over the prices of the options, the most expensive option costing only nine credits, she let out a small breath, figuring she had more than enough money to live comfortably during the docking. After deciding, she leaned back to look over the place.

A small family of four raccoons was in one corner, talking and laughing with each other, or, at least she assumed they were a family. Two male raccoons were sitting next to each other, contently nestled against one another while two young children sat opposite of them, talking about something that happened today. It was not the first time she had seen a same-sex couple, but she would have to admit being slightly surprised to see a full family. She decided not to consider the logistics of the arrangement as she continued to look around.

A stand-up piano sat in the corner unused, a computer screen atop of it was turned off, and on the raised stage, a group of Caitians was singing and playing foreign instruments, their song in their alien Cait tongue. She could hear the sadness in their song without understanding a word of it. She made a note, seeing a sign advertising a collection of their music to pick up a copy. Several pictures, aged purposefully of the construction of both the station and of the dining establishment.

"Made up your mind?" the waitress asked, setting down the soft drink in front of the chakat, condensation already running down the sides, making a ring on the wooden table.

"Ah, yes, I think I have. I'll have the Big Black Frontier burger, well done, and with the steak fries," Gildedtongue responded as she wrote it down on her notepad again, repeating the last three words. "Thank you very much," the chakat added, and she gave another grin before stepping out again.

She drank in the relative quiet, feeling lost within his theatrical role. A middle-aged teacher from the very apex of the Federation's asshole, trying to pass off as an adventurous space-farer. That was not going to fly for very much longer, but no one had called him on it. His mind wandered to the other chakat she met. She certainly seemed pretty enough, but she seemed a bit off-putting in personality. Then again, it could just be that she was new and she was overexcited about meeting someone. She would more than likely meet up with him again to see Thallon.

She felt bad for not feeling too concerned about Thallon's current hospitalisation, but since he had been on a medical bed for so long, she could barely remember his bouncy, free motion self from earlier. She hoped that he was doing all right, though he certainly was in good enough hands.

The sandwich was delivered hot with the potatoes, another smile was offered to the chakat and she returned it, trying to calm down. People certainly were friendly out

here. Shi ate the large meal quietly, letting the half-pound of beef roll across hir tongue. The spices and the sauces certainly helped the taste, but the meat certainly was replicated, having the sameness taste of foods coming out of that technology. A bad apple might ruin the bunch, but it at least made the finer apples taste all the sweeter.

The waitress, whose name was Carole, checked in twice during the meal, asking how everything was, and the second time, Gildedtongue requested hir cheque. Carole sat down the P.A.D.D. before Gildy, who inserted hir credstick into the item, adding a generous tip.

Carole looked it over, blinking slightly, "Um, you didn't have to do that, shir, but, ah, thanks."

Gildedtongue blushed at the faux pas, but since the moment passed, shi wasn't about to back-pedal now. Shi went over to the band, looking at their display, paying for one of their albums. A Caitian gave a low bow in the middle of his performance before resuming. Gildedtongue tucked it away before returning to the streets with a full belly, and hir brain better sorted out.

The chakat was rather lost. Shi peered down the footpaths, seeing several people merely milling about, but no sign of the hospital. Shi mentally swore to himself, had shi not been so flustered, shi wouldn't have been moving so headstrong. A cough rallied hir courage to go ask one of the locals for directions.

"Oh? Um, just two blocks down that way, take a left, and straight three blocks, you can't miss it. I hope that's right. Tail, um, high," the male German Shepherd morph pointed. His confusion and lack of confidence didn't quite make Gildedtongue too trusting of the pathway, but it was better than what shi had. Shi checked hir chin and shirt, perhaps some red food stain might have set him off, but shi was clean.

The hospital was in view when Gildy saw one of the cabs whizzing around, carting three people, a quick reminder that shi could have had someone else take hir here. When shi approached the door, hir breathing was slightly laboured and hir pulse was pulsing in hir neck. Shi couldn't understand how shi became so out of shape. A human was seated in the receptionist station, allowing Gildedtongue to breathe a sigh in relief, not in the right mindset to deal with Platinumsong once again.

"Hello, I'm here concerning Thallon Rosefur, the foxtaur from the transport vessel *Purgatorio*." Gildedtongue started, smiling to the nurse.

"Mr. Rosefur? He should be in recovery right now, and probably good to leave before the evening's done." The nurse typed on the computer, "Room 314, just to your left from the lift, you can't miss it!"

After thanking the man, Gildedtongue quickly made hir way up the lift and to hir

mate's room. Thallon was again on a bed, but on his belly rather than on his side or backs. A nurse was holding onto his paw. "All right, Thallon, keep pushing, keep pushing. Great. Seems like the muscles haven't atrophied too much." Thallon caught sight of his mate, waving hello as Gildedtongue stepped inside. The nurse still focused on her patient. "Okay, moment of truth time. Grab a hold of the side of the bed and push yourself onto your three legs, then let's see how you can hold your weight."

Thallon did as he was instructed, slowly pressing down on his foot. He was wincing a little bit, but managed to hold off any yelps. After several minutes of changing the pressure, the nurse nodded in satisfaction. "You'll probably be walking with a limp, considering you paid for our cheapest services, but, you'll be completely mobile. Since you work in a low-G environment, I doubt you'll even notice it."

The foxtaur nodded and thanked the nurse, walking over to Gildedtongue. "Think you could ever love a gimp like me?" he asked cheekily, batting his grey eyes at the chakat. Gildedtongue could only snicker back at him, hugging his upper torso and gave him a shoulder to lean on.

"C'mon, Thallon. Let's blow this joint."

"My, my. The schoolmarm has the mouth on hir!" Thallon joked, leaning on Gildedtongue for support as they made their way out of the building. "Jeez, does it feel good to walk," he chuckled. "Granted, I could have probably hobbled, but Wu was having none of that."

They basked a moment in the artificial sun. A little extra heat and a little bit of UV radiation help the space-stuck individual keep both healthy and sane. A PPTV slowed down next to the two taurs, offering them a lift. Gildedtongue readily accepted, especially in Thallon's condition. "Where to?"

Gildedtongue shrugged, looking at Thallon. "Take us to the gardens. Should be looking nice." The vehicle started to speed away to its destination. Gildedtongue's hands moved to rub hir foreleg paws while seated.

"Ugh, I don't know what's wrong, but today I've just been exhausted and sore for some reason." Hir soles were showing calluses and wear that shi hadn't seen in weeks. Hir companion snickered.

"You're getting your grav legs back, Gi- Wanderer. Most stations, like this one, can afford and often keep at one-Gee. So like a seaman coming to port, you've got to relearn to walk again." Thallon chuckled and rubbed over Gildedtongue's shoulders and back slowly, "Give it a few landings and it'll get easier."

"I hope so, Thallon." shi muttered, resting against hir lover's side. His fingers ran through hir red mane, tickling the grey hairs prematurely peppering the mess of

locks, rewarded by the throaty purr coming from the chakat. Both muttered and whispered quiet assurances of their feelings, more interested in watching one another than the passing cityscape.

The ride was over far too quickly for the two as the cabbie parked before a large glass building. He leaned over the front seats, pointing towards the P.O.S. system. "That'll be 67 creds, folks. Hope you two have a good day."

The machine had a port for a Federation I.D. Scan, a credstick, and even slots for physical money. Gildedtongue paid off his bill and got out, going to open the door for Thallon and helped him out, looking back in to the driver, "Thank you so much. Have a good one!"

The chakat gave the foxtaur some room to walk on his own, but remained close in case he needed him. His limp was slight, but it didn't seem to slow him down much thanks to his three remaining good legs. The garden was an enormous greenhouse, filled with plants from nearby planets. Streaks of purple and gold ran through a green backdrop cut through by winding dirt paths. The amount of oxygen being pumped in the one room made one's head dizzy after growing accustomed to recycled atmosphere usually filtered and pumped into ships and stations.

The lovers held hands, walking through the botanical garden. Neither of them familiar with any of the species displayed, but were mostly enjoying time with one another than anything. Gildedtongue blushed, feeling Thallon's thumb run slow circles over the back of his hand, making him clench his all the tighter. "Can't say any of these are familiar." Thallon snickered, giving a light shrug as they walked.

"So, where are you from, Thallon? I'm guessing you're from Terra, considering your species and all." Gildedtongue chuckled, looking into the foxtaur's grey eyes.

"Oh, well, my village is located in the valley at the base of the Big Sheep Mountain Range. Not quite sharing it with the Wolftaur clans, but, certainly close enough to be neighbourly." Thallon chuckled a bit to himself, rubbing his repaired foreleg gently. "Heh, quite the irony that my mother also broke her leg when she met my father." The two stopped by a small alcove off the pathway.

"Mmmm, I see. Warning to your children, don't fall in love, or you'll end up with broken limbs." Gildedtongue chuckled a bit. Thallon joining in, slowly running his hand over Gildedtongue's shoulder, letting the chakat rest against his bigger frame.

"I guess so, yeah. Didn't really know my father, though, not that that's uncommon for any foxtaur, just the way things are." Thallon shrugged and smiled warmly. His fingers running along Gildedtongue's spine to the joining where his upper and lower one met up. This caused the leonine chakat to mewl slightly, pressing his body against his hand. "Heh, I found a good spot?" Gildedtongue could only blush and nod, cuddling closer to the male, his scent weak from his long periods of time in

hospital, shi kinda missed his musk.

"So, how did you find yourself out in space? I mean, thought most foxtaurs clung to their land and all?" Gildedtongue asked, cocking hir head to one side, continuing to stroke over Thallon's covered chest.

"Ah, yes, the Foxtaur's homesickness, the Territorial Attachment Syndrome. Heh, humans trying so desperately to retain control of our beings by messing with the wiring in our brains on a genetic level." The tone in Thallon's voice sounding more disappointed than venomous, and Gildedtongue himself couldn't help but agree in some respect, being denied certain emotions, and meant to act a certain way because two scientists decided to play God. Not that shi was a perfect chakat by any means. Gildedtongue always figured if shi met the Turners, they'd probably shake their heads and go back to the boards to see where they went wrong.

Thallon continued, "Anyway, no, I'm thankfully free of that," he snickered, "Rather, I think I've got the Wanderlust. I left the village when I was fifteen, and spent a lot of my time travelling the wilderness. My mother was a huntress, so I had learned plenty of survival skills. I found my way to a small city, bartering pelts and handcrafted goods for awhile, renting a small apartment, doing small jobs and still, I needed to move on. Spent a year going from city to city in the northern area of the G.N.A., when I finally got a job at a space port. Real hard work, but utterly rewarding seeing all sorts of people coming in and out from different planets and places. Learned to drive a lifter there and the *Purgatorio* offered me a job when they saw me. Travel, room and board, and payment..." Thallon mimicked being in deep thought, "Yeah, that was a no-brainer. Gets a bit boring en route to places, but otherwise I think I'm doing okay."

Gildedtongue leaned over to kiss Thallon's cheek, purring lowly to himself as shi listened to him, "Well, I'm certainly glad you found your happiness there. So, what's the deal with you and Saldura? How'd that come about?"

The two resumed walking through the garden, eyes wandering between the flowers and leaves, feeling the cobblestones beneath their feet. "Oh, I think you know how that came about. Shi takes a liking to someone... well, they're gonna know about it fast enough." Gildedtongue chuckled and nodded. "So, about a month after coming aboard the vessel, I kinda moved out of my room and into hers, and the rest is history. We've been together a good five years, and hope that there'll be more."

They made their way around the full circle of the garden, the quiet of the plants intercepted by the gurgling of Thallon's stomach. "Guess I haven't eaten yet. Should we head back to the ship?"

"Actually, I found a rather nice little place near the hospital. How about we stop there for dinner? Nothing too fancy, just a greasy spoon, but certainly tasty enough." Thallon nodded and smiled, petting Gildedtongue's shoulder. They flagged down

another cab and it drove them to the Mesa Verde Café.

The place was considerably busier than before, most tables were filled with occupants; the din of conversations filled the wooden building. Luckily one corner table near the piano was open and the two intercepted it, dodging patrons in their own tables and lethal hand-gestures. "So much for a quiet dinner." Gildedtongue blushed slightly.

"Bah, I love a good crowd." A young skunk female came to take their drinks, writing them down on her notepad. Thallon turned his head to look at the piano playing itself behind him, "Ah, miss? Can anyone use that?"

"Well, only people that know how, shugah," she responded with a wink, "An' it's five creds fer fifteen minutes, but, yeah." She gave another smile before walking off to get their drinks. Gildedtongue's foreleg paw reached out to stroke Thallon's good leg, the foxtaur churring happily, leaning closer to his companion.

Their drinks came shortly, two beers from the café's own microbrewery, cold and in bottles. Thallon ordered a double serving of their biggest burger, and Gildy, not to seem cheap or skimping, did the same. The beer's flavour was rich and tasted like how cedar wood smoke smelled, lingering on the tongue a few moments as if stealing an additional bow.

"They had some live entertainment here this afternoon. I bought one of their albums if you'd like a listen later." Gildedtongue started the small talk, his tail curled up around his rump to keep out of the wait-staff's and busser's ways. Thallon silently nodded, his grey eyes looking into the chakat's blue ones. Gildedtongue had to blush slightly, his gaze averting towards the table. "You're making me feel like some adolescent."

"Well, a bit of immaturity would do you good," the male snickered as the plates were placed down, a basket of chips, coleslaw, and crisps between the two diners. "This looks wonderful! Thank you..." Thallon's eyes darted to the skunk's chest and her name tag, "...Marge. A meal as lovely as yourself!"

She giggled and performed a playful curtsy before getting back to her job.

Gildedtongue snickered slightly. "Can charm the paint right off the wall, I see." Gildedtongue paused, muttering a silent prayer over the meal before doing a quick sign of the cross, picking up one of the large hot sandwiches.

"Certainly a benefit of being on a date with a chakat. You can get away with that sort of thing." Thallon said plainly before doing the same.

The small jab and realisation ground against Gildedtongue's ribs. He was right; she couldn't get jealous about it. She knew he wasn't seriously flirting, but the call to

simple scientific fact did cause a small hurt. Thallon's demeanour darkened slightly while Gildedtongue thought. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking."

Damning his empathetic leakage, Gildedtongue coughed into his fist, feeling like a kitten caught next to a broken vase. "It's okay, really. I guess I've got some things to learn about being a chakat myself. I guess it's never too late." Shi smiled, eating his meal quietly, mulling over something. "So, you would know these benefits first-hand?" shi asked curiously.

Thallon held up a finger while he chewed on a mouthful, swallowing it down with a swig of beer. "I've shared company with two chakats. You, and one back on Terra. Seashimmer was his name. It was a summer thing, we both knew it, and neither of us cared. I was a randy twenty-year-old, and his mate had to do a job off-world. I had rented the empty room, and as we talked one night that June in the parlour, the conversation took us to his bedchamber." Thallon laughed slightly, "Considering our location, I'll just say that shi made me his pet project, teaching me a lot of things I didn't know about myself."

That certainly made Gildedtongue one curious kitten, but the tod was right, it wasn't the right place for such conversation. Thallon patted his shirt and jacket, blushing to himself, "Ah, I'm going to sound like an idiot, but I don't have any money on me. Mind terribly if I borrow that stick for a moment?"

Gildedtongue nodded, pulling it out of his own pocket. Thallon blew off the lint before getting up from the table, walking right to the piano.

"Okay, computer, I want to impress this person, romantically. Give me a good playlist for a guy trying to make a nice gal feel at ease." Thallon clicked through some menus, grumbling to himself, "Look, I can't speak Cait, just give me something in Terranglo." The tod looked slightly defeated, "Something from the Twentieth Century? You've got to be kidding me? You want me to grunt and pound rocks together? Okay, okay." Thallon put the stick in, making the transaction. The café's speakers hummed with a low, seductive horn section. The notes for Thallon scrolling on the monitor as he played the piano part, and in a dark baritone voice he sang:

*You've got no time for me,
You've got big things to do.
Well my sweet chickadee,
I've got hot news for you!*

Thallon looked over his shoulder, grinning at the chakat, continuing to tickle the ivories, his own teeth glistening in a predatory smile.

*I've got your number and
I know you inside out,
You ain't no Eagle Scout,*

You're all at sea...

*Oh yes you'll brag a lot,
Wave your own flag a lot!
But you're unsure a lot,
You're a lot like me, oh...*

Shi couldn't help but blush, looking around at the other patrons. They were having a fun time watching the foxtaur serenade a show tune to his date, and despite his embarrassment, Gildy had to admit having a fun time himself.

*I've your number, and
What you're looking for, and
What you're looking for
Just suits me fine!*

*We'll break those rules a lot
We'll be damned fools a lot!*

Belting at the top of all four lungs, Thallon was eating up the attention, his tail wagging as if to put out a fire. Then he hunched over, singing lowly and conspiratorially, building up to a crescendo.

*But then why should we not,
How could we not
Combine, hey!*

*I've got your number, and
I've got that glow you've got,
I've got your number, and*

*Baby, you know...
You've got mine!*

Thallon left the keys, going to his table, pulling the chakat from his seat as the two started to dance. The machine picking up where the foxtaur stopped, horns trumpeting through the small café. Neither of them knew how to swing, nor were their bodies built for such dancing, but they let the music flow through their bodies. Sweat dropped down both centauroids' faces while they moved in the bright lights. A pre-programmed voice finished the song, repeating the last few verses, pitch perfect but without the soul Thallon gave the song. The trumpets wailing in their finale as Thallon pulled Gildedtongue into a deep kiss.

The patrons applauded their bit of entertainment. Thallon bowing low to them as Gildedtongue blushed, offering his audience a shy wave before shi and the foxtaur sat

down again. Thallon winced visibly, rubbing his leg, "God, I'm an idiot." he muttered.

Gildedtongue could only smirk at him, "Serves you right, trying to show off right after surgery." shi then offered a consoling rub on his shoulder, "Should we get out of here?" Thallon nodded and Gildedtongue signalled for hir cheque, and some packaging for their uneaten food.

Marge was quick to come by, placing the uneaten burgers and sides into boxes, smiling at the two, "After a performance like that, it's on the house. You both have a wonderful night, and come back any time!"

Gildedtongue blushed hard, accepting the boxes, and helped Thallon's arm over hir shoulders, carrying him out of the restaurant, smiling back at the grinning patrons.

"So..." Thallon smirked as they waited for another cab, "did my plan to show off and impress you work at all?" The male wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, making Gildedtongue laugh out loud.

"I think you'll find that out later this evening, you goof." Shi leaned to kiss his cheek. "Though, sure you can with your leg in pain like that?"

Another large grin came from the foxtaur as a vehicle slowed to a stop before them, a door opening up to let them inside. "I won't need that leg too much for that." Another chuckle rolled off his dark tongue before turning to the driver, "To the docks, my good madam. As close to the *Purgatorio* as you can!"

Gildedtongue got in through the other side before the cab whizzed through the streets to its destination.

Thallon needed some help getting up the long, winding stairs, opting to not use the medical lift and avoid the ire of the good doctor. Gildedtongue's chests and stomachs were all aflutter with butterflies, knowing where this was going, and knowing that shi really wanted it. The wayward glances from the foxtaur were calmer, but the fires were still present.

Gildedtongue's room was closer and the two slipped inside. The food placed on the dresser before Thallon moved in on the attack. Both centauroids kissed and suckled on each other's lips, their hands roaming each other's bodies, unable to leave them as if held magnetically. Gildy didn't know when hir top was removed, but soon Thallon's lips were on hir nipples, suckling hard, drinking up hir milkwater.

Hir lowered sensitivity couldn't let hir climax from the nursing, but it certainly brought hir deeper into hir arousal. Thallon gave a coy smile, lifting his head to kiss Gildedtongue deeply, letting hir taste hir own slightly bitter milkwater. Shi clutched onto his upper torso before he pulled away, climbing slowly onto hir backs. "I love you, Gildedtongue. You're a very beautiful and kind person. You've saved my life

asking for nothing, so let me give you my heart." Gildedtongue relaxed, feeling Thallon penetrate hir slowly.

Thallon's good leg had wrapped around hir forehips, keeping hir close while his mending one lay at hir side. His rear hips starting a firm, slow rhythm inside of hir, causing hir to mewl quietly. His lovemaking a wonderful balance between Dreamweaver's eagerness and Saldura's calculations. A black-furred hand massaging over the chakat's spinal join, petting hir onward towards hir bliss. Hir body kneading in its neediness.

Thallon's pace quickened, his breath ragged, wetly and warmly cascading over hir shoulder and breast while his phallus pistoned in hir sacredness. The thickness inside of hir causing hir moans and mewls to grow in intensity. "O-oh God, Thallon. Yes, Thallon!" shi shouted out in hir bliss. Thallon offered one final shove within his lover before howling in a bout of atavism. Shi felt the warm liquid silk start in hir belly and the heat rolling outwards through hir body, outwards to hir toes and fingers. Hir hymenal sphincter clutching behind a thick bulge inside of hir. Hir eyes opening up wide as shi felt it, clenching hir insides to feel around it some more. Something wrong on a foxtaur, shi had seen enough porn to know how they were shaped there. No, there was one word for this: *knot*.

The male's tongue was lolled out of his muzzle, panting hard in his exhaustion, having given his lover his all in one go. Gildedtongue's eyes were wide as shi turned hir head towards the male, panting hard, "Wh-what's that?" shi muttered uncomfortably, a bit confused as to what to do.

Thallon pulled his tongue back before giving a giggle in his euphoria. "S-something my father gave me. Lets me spend my afterglow close with my lovers."

"Y-you're a... ooooh, foxtaur, though. They don't have, nnngh, knots. Did you augment yourself?" Gildedtongue's mind was still swimming in the endorphins from hir climax, trying to figure out what had just happened. Thallon adjusted himself, grunting as he was tied fast, stroking along Gildedtongue's belly.

"Half true, love. I was born to be a foxtaur, I was raised a foxtaur, given a foxtaur name and a foxtaur life. My father, though, was a wolftaur, which would make me a folftaur, or a wolfox'taur would be more accurate, I guess." He smiled, nuzzling Gildedtongue's cheek, "Probably responsible for my lack of T.A.S., and my wanderlust. I still think of myself as a foxtaur, even if I guess I'm not."

Gildedtongue nodded quietly. "A-and you didn't know your father. I see. So... when did you know?"

Thallon chuckled, grunting as he felt himself get a bit looser. "Fifteen. Plenty of young hormones and Yolinda, my oldest friend and I were putting them to good use. Never saw another tod's cock, so I just thought it was normal. Heh, that vixen let out

a scream when I couldn't pull out, and damned if her dad was about to do me in, a freak fucking her little girl." Thallon finally pulled out, nuzzling Gildedtongue, "Though, still gives me a bit of a thrill, people not knowing how I'm built until it's too late," he whispered in Gildedtongue's ear, making the chakat shiver slightly.

"Well, that explains the lack of warning." Shi caressed hir lover's chest, giving him a kiss. So, *you're a lot like me* is pretty accurate, eh?" Thallon blushed and nodded as shi quoted the earlier song. "Just a couple of freaks. I'm feeling a bit more comfortable with that." Thallon nodded, kissing the chakat as both climbed into the bed, needing to cuddle close to stay on the mattress, not that either complained.

The next day Thallon was back at work, and even with a mending leg, he was performing admirably. Gildedtongue took some time to watch him work from up on the catwalk. Shi made hir way down the stairwell before leaving the docks, heading into the city proper once again. With the amount of cash shi had, shi was hoping to pick up some books, hoping that shi could find some physical tomes way out here in space. The cab driver took hir to an antique shop, the closest thing he could think of at the moment.

A bell rang as Gildedtongue made hir way inside. A weasel morph in an apron waved to the new customer. "Welcome to Gulliver's Relics. Anything I can help you find?" He looked eager to please, and Gildedtongue was certainly eager to pay. He led hir to the back; several hardcover and softcover books were stacked up, making the chakat purr loudly. *Kidnapped*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Trilogy* (all five books!), *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *The Three Musketeers*. Their 21st century selection was small, as paper tomes became more and more out of vogue, but shi did grab a copy of *The Horn of the End*, one of the last physically published books from the first half of the century. Recently with replicator technology had books become in style again, but still most new material was digital, much to the chagrin of bibliophiles.

Hir credstick lighter and hir saddlebags heavier, Gildedtongue made hir way through the streets of the space station. Shi could always hail a cab if shi was lost, so shi decided to take in the sights. The homes had enough variety to make hir feel like shi was getting somewhere. Some had a Santa Fe style, some Victorian, many were postmodern and 21st century designed. Hir mind was occupied elsewhere when a familiar voice rang out behind the chakat. "Ah, Wanderer! There you are! I'm sorry I didn't get to see you again after my shift!"

Gildedtongue turned around to see Platitudesong bounding towards hir. Gildy crossed hir arms defensively as the Maine Coon had hir arms open for a hug. Shi stopped a few feet short, cocking hir head to one side as Gildedtongue nodded in greeting, "Good morning, Platitudesong. I hope the day is greeting you well."

Shi blinked at the odd nature of the stranger, but shrugged, "I suppose so, thank you, Wandy. Been thinking about you a lot. So what were you up to when you left in such a hurry?" Shi looked concerned, and Gildedtongue knew shi had to start lightening up. Shi took a deep breath, trying to adjust hir demeanour.

"I was just distraught with my mate being hurt. I just needed time to myself to collect my thoughts," shi lied, not the best way to start a relationship, but it wasn't one shi was expecting to last anyway. "I'm sorry I pushed you away like that, Platinumsong."

"It's okay, but, you know, I'm a chakat, right? We're made to help each other out, you know. No one better than us!" shi said with glee.

Cocking hir head to one side, Gildedtongue said a slow, "Riiiiight. Anyway.... So, how are you doing? What brings you out and about?"

"Well, it's my day off, so I like to just walk around. My lifemate, Trinity, is working today." Shi stuck hir tongue out, then shrugged with arms and forelegs, "So, I'm on my own. What about you, Wandy?"

Gildedtongue couldn't really figure out how shi felt having hir name shortened so cavalier, since it wasn't hir name, so shi remained neutral. "Oh, me? Just went out for some book shopping. Gulliver's place had quite a selection."

"Huh, didn't know any chakat used such outdated things any more. PADDs are just so much easier to carry around and don't slash and burn trees or anything."

Gildedtongue rolled hir shoulders in a shrug, "I guess so, but they've yet to fabricate one that matches the smell and texture of an old tome." Shi chuckled slightly. "Besides, some people just like the outdated things, you know?"

"Oh, speaking of which, how's that foxtaur doing? Talon, was it?"

'I'm not sure how I was speaking of that,' Gildedtongue thought. "Thallon? He's doing better, thank you. In fact he's back at the port working already. You all did a great job fixing him up."

"Yeah, I guess the people there are okay, you know, considering." Platinumsong made a dismissive gesture under a bored look.

"Considering what?" Gildedtongue asked, hir curiosity piqued.

Platinumsong leaned closer to Gildedtongue, "Well, considering that they're, you know, *human*. I mean, you know how they are, their history and all. It's not their fault, though. They were made out of random happenstance, not through scientific logic and perfection as ourselves, or our skunktaur brethren."

Gildedtongue could tell that shi wasn't going to like this person. Shi had been taking the dogma about hir species right to heart and made it swell hir head. "Well, you know, Dr. Charles and Dr. Katherine Turner were very much human. Certainly have something to thank humanity for."

"Possibly, but not like humans thank the apes they evolved from. We're just... better, you know? Physically, mentally, perceptively, emotionally, some of us even have Talents. Oh how I would love to have one of those, especially telepathy." Platinumsong purred, smiling a bit wider. "Certainly would feel better if I could just read people's minds, knowing when they might turn on me in their jealousy."

"Sounds like it has happened to you often before." Gildedtongue sat down on hir haunches, seeing this conversation to be taking some time.

"Ugh, more times than I wish. Seems every other month there's some morph that's envious of our species, or some Humans Firster out there," shi muttered in disgust.

"Humans Firster?" Gildedtongue questioned. Platinumsong responded with a look of 'you've-got-to-be-kidding-me.' "I've been out in space for some time. I don't always get the bulletins."

"Well, on Terra, there's the Earth for Humanity movement, trying to drive off the morphs and the like off of that old polluted rock, and as far as I'm concerned, they can keep it. But, elsewhere there are still humans who think just because they made us, they're better than us and can do what they will to us."

'Unlike yourself who thinks you're better because you were made by the other people.'

"Anyway, even out in some nowhere station like here, there's... those kind that spring up." Platinumsong thought for a moment. Then asked, "Wandy? Where are you headed, anyway?"

"Oh, Chakona..." Gildedtongue let slip. Platinumsong's eyes went wide and hir purring increased tenfold as shi nearly pounced on the older chakat.

"Oh, take me with you! I'm sure you can convince your captain to let me on, unless you're the captain, I bet you are. Oh please! I need to get out of here."

Gildedtongue grunted in the tight embrace, trying to pull out of the younger centauroid's grip. "You said you've got a lifemate here, though. Wouldn't shi feel bad if you left?"

Platinumsong loosened hir grip, sighing slightly, "I guess shi would. Ugh, damn this! Why can't I have some happiness in the universe?"

Gildedtongue was amazed how the chakat's emotions were jumping around. Maybe

something was wrong with hir that shi wouldn't agree to. "Ah, look, I've... got to go. It's been nice talking to you, Platinumsong." Gildedtongue turned around when the other felitaur grabbed hir hand tightly.

"Please, stay with me some more, Wandy. Why don't we go back to my place? I can make you some lunch, and maybe we'll go back to my room..." shi trailed off and licked Gildedtongue's cheek, hir hand reaching to grab hold of one of the chakat's lopsided breasts.

"Thank you but no. Look, I really ought to go, Platinumsong. Good day!" Shi tugged at hir hand, feeling the grip from the younger chakat tightening even more. Gildedtongue wrenched hir hand free and started hir rapid retreat. It didn't take a "Class 3 Empath" to feel, or even hear the crying behind the chakat as the Maine Coon didn't get hir way. Gildedtongue trekked four blocks before hailing a cab back to the docks. Hir hands were trembling, feeling the adrenaline running out of hir system on the ride over. Shi slowed hir breathing slightly to try and relax. A payment and a tip to the driver was hir silent farewell as shi made hir way to the cargo bay of the spaceship, and up its stairwell to the spine.

Saldura was walking towards hir quarters, looking exhausted when shi saw the chakat, offering hir a weak smile, "Hey, love. You look like you've had a day already. Want to come in?"

Gildedtongue nodded, following Sallie into hir quarters. Neither of them spoke as they shed their clothing and crawled into bed together, getting a nap to unwind. Neither moved as Thallon came into the room, joining them in the cuddling pile.

Chapter 6

Gildedtongue's hands trembled. Their grip over the carbine caused the weapon to shake with hir own convulsions. Hir eyes were glued on the man on the other side of the room. Empathic echoes assaulted hir meagre senses, a sharp pain in hir forehead spread across hir skull and face, shooting to the back of hir head. Hir hearts both slamming inside of hir chests as air seemed to escape hir muzzle, leaving hir to hyperventilate futilely.

He used to have a face, but a ferrous slug magnetically catapulted into his skull caved it in to a pocket of gore. He fell to his knees, then collapsed on the floor of the classroom. The coil-gun carbine clattered on the floor. Blood pounded in Gildedtongue's head as shi felt the bile rise up in hir throat, bending forward to vomit up the evil in hir body.

Yet the searing evil remained within hir.

–One day earlier.–

A week in open space and Gildedtongue felt his legs coming back to him. His students thankful for their short vacation, but their noses were back in their studies, thanks to the new material Gildedtongue picked up from their shore leave. "... and everyone enjoy your two days off. I expect your papers when we reconvene. Class is dismissed."

Gildedtongue smiled at his students, lifting his head up to see his mate, Saldura, standing in the back of the class. The badger waited patiently in the back of the classroom, smiling to the leaving children as Gildedtongue addressed some questions from a few of his students privately. Finally the teacher was free, and Saldura approached him, starting his greeting with an unprofessional kiss. "How are you doing, love?"

"Honestly, better than I've ever been," the leonine chakat smiled, "I've got kids that seem to want to learn and enjoy doing it, I've been spending my nights with two wonderful people, and been getting to fill my belly with more and tastier foods than ever." A loud purr came from the teacher as she stroked over the biped's shoulder. Saldura leaned into the affection, giving a concerned smile. "Something's troubling you?"

"Not particularly," the badger shrugged, wrapping an arm around Gildedtongue's shoulder, "But, we're heading out of prime Stellar Federation space and closer into the frontier. Shouldn't be too bad, considering we're empty of most cargo at the moment but, be it as it may, we're in more dangerous places." Saldura led Gildedtongue to a locked wall panel cabinet. "Put your hand on the bio lock. I've added your data to this storage box, as well as the ones in your room and mine."

Gildedtongue did as asked and the panel slid up, showing a rack holding three small rifles, and several magazines. Saldura pulled the top one off of the rack, "This is a coil-gun carbine. We don't have the funds to get enough phaser licences to outfit the whole ship, but these babies are inexpensive enough, and do the job right."

Gildedtongue's heart sank, understanding what was going on as his mate showed him how to operate the weapon, handing it to him to do the same.

"On the bright side, most pirates won't immediately shoot to kill. The frontier slave ring is pretty strong even today, so they won't simply blast the ship into slag. Rather, they'll be focusing on boarding parties to storm the ship, take out the resistance, and commandeer the vessel to bring it back to whoever'll give them the most coin," Saldura explained. "You're the last defence for these kids, and I am expecting you to do your job in protecting them. Any pirate or slaver goes through that door, I don't want you to second guess. They'll kill you, and those kids will meet a fate worse than they had on that derelict ship."

The weapon grunted slightly as Gildedtongue's grip on the barrel and grip tightened, "And how do I know if the person stepping inside is someone friendly?" Shi relaxed hir grip, feeling the texture of the weapon leave an imprint on hir paw pads. Saldura's strong arm embraced the chakat's shoulders, giving a supportive smile.

"Well, we'll knock five times and give a password, 'Beatrice Brings Joy.'" Gildedtongue gave a small smirk at Saldura, who rolled hir eyes, "Matilda really liked *The Divine Comedy*."

Gildedtongue laughed and nodded. "I think I can tell. It certainly wasn't too interesting to me. Barely any character development." Shi looked at the weapon a bit more, feeling sombre once again. "I guess I'd better train on my off time at the shooting range."

"With any luck, you won't need to worry about actually using it, but yes, best to err on the side of caution." Saldura gave hir lover a kiss on the cheek as the chakat let out a soft purr, hir tail flicking more behind hir. "I'm off shift in two hours and I know Thallon's slacking off; coming to our quarters tonight?"

"Well, all right," the chakat smiled, kissing the badger's cheek lightly. "But, I'll be in my room grading homework. Last time you guys kept me up and aroused, I couldn't get any work done!"

Saldura responded with an impish cackle before returning the kiss, walking out of the class room.

"A fine mess you made for yourself, Josh," Gildedtongue muttered under hir own breath as shi tidied the room, adjusting the tables and chairs for next session. "Horny foxes and badgers, space pirates, guns, a stranger under a false name. Sounds like a movie that Sal would like to watch." Shi laughed, hir mate's taste in cinema sure was different; it seemed the more God-awful it was, the more shi was entertained.

Shi returned the weapon to the charging rack when shi was finished, making sure to unload the weapon, opening the breech like shi was shown earlier, extracting the projectile. The metal cylinder was thinner than hir small finger, and about as long. A hole bored through the middle with indentations around the inside. Shi knew enough physics (Or, rather, played enough games) to figure out these were meant to let the projectile expand and flatten like a pancake. The notion made hir tremble as shi placed it in the cabinet and locked it, saying a short prayer that shi'd never have to open it, but agreeing with Saldura, tomorrow shi'd go and train. Shi left the classroom, locking it behind hir.

Getting halfway done with hir grading, Gildedtongue started taking notes on next session's talking points and assignments. Shi longed for the days where shi could set up a curriculum and a syllabus and schedule before the year started, but the impromptu teaching style had a certain appeal to it, despite the difficulty. Passages

from hir books were highlighted into hir PADD and key vocabulary and definitions were set up. *Kidnapped* proved to be a much easier text to connect to various modern subjects than *Le Mort* but shi knew the subject material was something shi'd have to tread carefully on. Stories about pirates were more relevant today than shi'd care for.

The door chimed behind the chakat, alerting hir to hide hir notes and the papers, lest a crafty student discover more than they were intended. Rather than one of hir students, Thallon stood at the door when Gildedtongue opened it.

"Teacher, can I have some help on my sex ed homework?" the foxtaur grinned wide, his bushy tail wagging rapidly behind him. Gildy rolled hir eyes and pulled him inside.

"You know I'm trying to work here," shi said, not sounding too angry, however. Shi turned hir back to him and went back to hir documents, resuming trying to work, or at least look like shi was. Thallon stepped up behind hir, wrapping his forelegs and arms around hir back, resting his chin on hir head, easy for the other 'taur with a foot advantage above hir. He cackled playfully, loosing a few yaps as he massaged hir shoulders. Gildy started to purr, chuckling slightly, "I'm not going to be getting any work done here any time soon, am I?"

"Probably not." Hir lover grinned naughtily, nibbling slowly along hir shoulder and neck, making hir fur ruffle and rise underneath hir clothing. His hands worked on that joining of hir torsos, learning what that did to hir, driving hir wild. One of Thallon's hands had found its way underneath hir blouse, cupping hir larger breast when there was another knock on the door. "Figures..."

Gildy shot hir mate a raspberry, adjusting hir clothing and doing a quick sheath check on himself and Thallon, making sure neither of them were doing any peeking. Dominic stood on the other side of the door, looking at the chakat when shi finally opened up hir door. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" he asked, looking at the two inside of the quarters.

"No, no, of course not. Please, come in, Dominic. What seems to be the problem?" the chakat asked the sandy-haired boy. He glanced between the two centauroids, and eventually Thallon gave a small blush, excusing himself and leaving the teacher and student alone.

Dominic sat down on one of the chairs in Gildedtongue's quarters, silent for a moment as he collected his thoughts. Gildedtongue's empathic strength wasn't enough to get a sense of what was troubling the human, so shi simply waited for him to start talking. After what felt like an eternity, Dominic took a deep breath, "Well, it's not about school, really, just something that's been bugging me lately, for a while, really."

Gildedtongue nodded, crossing hir arms over hir anthro belly, hir dark blue eyes taking in the boy's sheepish look.

"I guess, I don't know, you don't seem to be stupid, but, ah, how do you buy it? The whole God thing? The magic and miracles, dying and coming back to life? Just seems weird to me anyone who'd be educated would believe in any of that, sorry."

The question did catch Gildedtongue off guard as shi closed hir eyes to process everything. "Well, for starters, you do know my background, my growing up and being educated in the Holy Kingdom, certainly would have an impact on my beliefs and faiths. And, I admit, my current situation and recent events really have made me question my faith heavily." Shi shrugged slightly with hir fore-hips.

"Well, that is part of the point. I mean, I've read some of the things going on there, and all of that are in the name of what most call a peaceful religion. How can you be with such hypocrites?" Dominic asked a bit more pointedly.

A smile started to form on Gildedtongue's muzzle, accepting the irony the child had pointed out. "I really can't speak for all the people of the Holy Kingdom, or Christians, or everyone of faith. I'm going to make a guess and say you're atheistic?" Dominic nodded. The chakat thought for a moment, "Well, myself, I view it like this; take away God, take away the magic and all that, and what do you have remaining? The Old Testament is a set of rules about how to organize a society in Middle Eastern civilized humanity, and the New Testament is about how people ought to treat each other, with a clause stating that much of the Old Testament need not apply any more. Though, eating Kosher is relatively healthy, tried it for about a year until it got too expensive..." shi saw the glazed look over Dominic's face, and coughed, getting back on track.

"But, right, why? I guess the easy thing to say is 'why not?' but, I think you deserve a better answer than that." Hir student nodded, hoping that the chakat would get to the point. Gildedtongue looked out into the stars quietly, "I guess in the end I'd like to think that there's something more out there. I mean yes, we're learning all sorts of new things every day, discovering the way the universe is put together but, I dunno, I guess some romantic part in me says that there's still something out there inexplicable. I guess that inexplicable nature of the universe is what I consider "God" if that makes any sense."

By this time, though, Gildedtongue found that shi was talking to hirself. Dominic had long mentally left the ongoing prattling and lecturing and was offering a look of bored disinterest. "Um, I guess that's it. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?" Dominic shook his head, getting up.

"Ah, no, that's okay. I'm not really sure why I asked. Just, curious and all. Um, I guess I'll see you the day after tomorrow. I've got some homework to do... as you know, you assigned it." He waved out and Gildedtongue bade him farewell. Checking the clock a whole hour went by and shi had barely anything done.

"Right, to the books..." shi muttered, cracking hir knuckles before getting back to

work.

Having met hir personal quota for the day, the leonine chakat stepped out of hir quarters and office back into the spine of the ship. Hir clock reading 2130 and hir stomachs rumbled an agreement to the time. Making hir way back to the galley, Gildy felt far more at ease, finding a rhythm and beat again to hir life, enjoying the bit of order after the amount of chaos shi endured earlier. A momentary concern of falling into a rut passed through the chakat's head, but shi then remembered that shi wasn't going to be here too much longer. Shi would move on from the *Purgatorio*, and hir class here, and Thallon and Saldura. Hir hearts sank as shi made hir way into the room, getting that time slot's offered meal. Shi didn't really look over it, the melancholy taking over.

"That's a long face that would challenge a quange. What's wrong, love?" Thallon had made his way behind Gildedtongue, tracing his fingers over hir lower spine, making it curl upwards instinctively.

The middle-aged herm blushed hotly, turning to hir lover. "Oh, it's nothing. Just a bit of the whole temporary nature of this situation is getting to me is all."

"Yeah, gets to me a little too..." Thallon muttered, helping Gildedtongue to a table as he stole a bit of fruit from hir tray. The hybrid foxtaur was quiet with the chakat for many moments, letting the murmur of the crowd behind and around them fill in the blanks. Thallon finally spoke after coughing into his fist, "You know, you, ah, don't have to, you know..." he fumbled with his words, not sure if he should say what was on his mind, though the thought seemed to also be rattling in hir head as well.

"I know. Believe me, I've thought about staying here. I guess I'm a little scared, to be honest. I mean, it's been ages since I last set foot on some real ground, and God knows some days I get absolutely claustrophobic and full of cabin fever, getting stuffed in here. Not to mention that rather gnawing fact of absolutely ensured death awaiting just scant centimetres on the other side of these walls. Kinda chilling, really."

"It's not absolutely ensured, there's a two to the power of two hundred and sixty thousand, one hundred and ninety-nine to one chance you'll be saved before complete asphyxiation." Gildedtongue gave a bit of an astonished look to the huge centauroid. Thallon laughed and blushed hotly, "Fine, fine, I read over that book of yours when you weren't going through it."

Gildedtongue's mood soared as shi giggled, pulling Thallon down to kiss him deeply on the lips, much to a few cheers in the galley, "Anyone wanting to quote Mr. Adams to me has got to be quite the smart, sexy, wonderful guy I know he is." Thallon blushed hotly once again, giving a coy smile and returned the kiss. They resumed

eating, Saldura joining them shortly after as the three lovers made their way back to the badger's quarters. Thallon kissing Gildy in full force while Sal was getting out of hir uniform.

Gildy made love with Thallon, climbing on his backs this time as Saldura watched with deep interest, working on himself. None of them made it to the bed, Thallon and Gildy passing out on the floor and Saldura climbing between the both, enjoying the warm bed of lovers.

It was 0800 when Gildy blinked hir eyes open. Hir head pounding from oversleeping as shi looked around the empty room. Neither Thallon nor Saldura were there, probably already starting their days as the chakat grabbed a spare top shi had hidden away in the badger's room, stepping out into the spine.

Looking around, the change of shifts was apparent. People milling around the long hall, as well as walking towards their quarters and towards their jobs, the galley, anywhere else they might want to go. Shi spied Saldura, wearing a simple tank top and shorts, forgoing the usual *Purgatorio* uniform, telling Gildedtongue it was hir day off. Shi was talking with a tall white rat morph. The rat wore a bright orange jumpsuit, face and clothing having black and brown splotches of grease all over, a not so subtle hint about the rat's profession in engineering. The red eyed rat leaned over, kissing Saldura straight on the lips, and the badger returned the kiss with earnest. Jealousy was alien and unavailable to Gildedtongue, but curiosity, well, that was something the chakat had in spades.

Making hir way to the two, the rat was heading towards the rear of the ship, towards engineering, and Saldura turned to walk the other way, finding Gildedtongue. "Oh, good morning sleepyhead. My word, when you really want to sleep in, there's nothing to wake you up, is there?" Saldura laughed, giving the chakat a tight hug, bending down to kiss hir lips.

"Mmmmmph, I guess not. Though, who was that? I don't recall you mentioning anyone else but Thallon before as your lover." Gildedtongue asked, getting straight to the point.

Saldura blushed, wrapping hir arm around Gildy's shoulders as they started to walk, going with a flow of the river of flesh than trying to stand firm. "Well, I guess it's because I can't really say I'm in love with hir, per se," Sally started, Gildedtongue picking up the pronoun, adding another new bit of information about the rat. "That was Susan, and I guess the closest you could call our relationship is, I guess, friends with benefits, though, shi'd just call us 'fuckbuddies.'" Sal laughed and thought to himself. "I dunno, shi's nice and all, and once in awhile it's very nice to have sex with someone about your size, but..." Saldura trailed off, "I guess we're just friends, just, rather close friends."

Gildedtongue nodded a bit, "So, in chakat terminology, Companions?" Saldura nodded, giving a bit of a shrug. After a quick breakfast, Saldura ushered Gildedtongue into the holeroom once again. There wasn't anyone else there that day, save for the quartermaster.

"Has the room been set up for today's bit of training?" Saldura asked Gordon. The old man nodded his head, and Saldura looked back at the chakat, "Okay, in there is a simulation of your class room. We're going to go through a drill to see how you handle a boarding crisis. Remember what I taught you yesterday?" Gildedtongue nodded softly. "All right, Wanderer. I want you to go in there and make me proud." Shi nodded and gave his lover a salute before stepping in.

The room looked just like his own, and several images of his students all were seated in their chairs, and if shi wasn't looking at them too closely, shi wouldn't see the flickering refreshing of the holograms as shi moved in. They all stared at him with lifeless eyes as the chakat felt a bit awkward, moving from foot to foot waiting for the drill to start. Soon in the room the intercom blared, "Alert! Alert! Hostile ship encountered. All available hands to their stations. Alert! Alert!" The holographic children immediately got up and went to the back of the room, behind Gildedtongue as the chakat reached for a panel. The cabinet wasn't holographic, and quickly the door opened, revealing, like Gildedtongue saw earlier, a weapons rack. Shi grabbed the top carbine and the magazine, inserting it like shi was shown and brought it to his shoulder, waiting.

"Alert! Alert! Enemy ship has started to board! All hands prepare to drive them off! Alert! Alert!" The loudspeaker was hurting his sensitive ears as shi waited. Even though this was just a test, his heart was forcing itself up into his throat, wanting to make a good impression for Saldura, but also to tell himself that shi was able to protect people, not just always run away. There was a knock on the door, then a pounding before it opened. The pirate was huge, wearing heavy armour, though his face was exposed behind a plate of transparisteel. The chakat loosed some volleys as the holographic hollow points smacked ineffectually on the armour. The pirate turned, lifting up his pistol and then the whole room turned red save for himself and the cabinet to his right.

"Sorry, Wanderer, you've died," Saldura said over the intercom, "Try aiming for the face and any weak points you can see. Sadly, our ordinance isn't exactly the greatest, so we gotta work extra hard with what we have." Gildedtongue nodded as the drill started all over once shi replaced the cabinet's contents. Over and over they ran it, and each time ending the same. His accuracy was just not quite there.

It was the tenth run-through as the pirate came in again. Gildedtongue fired one shot to the pirate's cheek, blasting open his armoured helmet. Shi took the opportunity to fire again, hitting him square in the face. The hologram gave a gurgle as he slumped. Gildedtongue doing the same, dropping his weapon as shi felt his small breakfast and

mostly stomach acid push out of hir mouth. Hir whole body feeling wretched and unclean as shi spasmed. The feeling of death and pain dancing along hir backs as shi held himself. The door opened again and the feeling was gone, Saldura walking inside.

Tears were rolling down the chakat's cheek as shi slowly lifted hir head, trembling even more. "W-what... what was that? That wasn't real, but..."

Saldura wiped the chakat's mouth, slowly lifting hir up. The strong biped getting hir up with ease as shi lead hir into the back room of the ship's stock.

"Considering we're a freelance transport, we often go between Stellar Federation space, and League of Non-Aligned Worlds space. Anyway, in the LNAW areas, there are some technologies that are... well, not quite banned, but not exactly smiled upon in Stellar Federation territory." Saldura patted what looked like a large oil drum with some electronic outputs on the side. "This is a C-Class Empath Emitter, the most powerful artificial psionic device available to civilians, A and B classes are restricted, obviously."

Gildedtongue nodded, looking over the device as shi reached to touch it with a trembling hand, scared that it might bite or affect hir once again. Saldura continued, "Originally designed for scientific purposes for non-Talented people to experience and communicate and regulate better with people of Talent, in the LNAW, many of these are used for purely... entertainment purposes. Think of it like the old Smell-O-Vision for your sixth sense. Anyway, only an Empathic device was ever designed since telepathy requires more of a living brain to operate. Heh! There is a brain in here though, just a hypothalamus, and with the right electrical pulses, can create the emotions needed, then they're amplified through... well, I don't know, tech stuff."

"Why didn't you warn me about this?" the chakat asked the obvious question, knowing the how, but the why still burning in hir head.

Saldura sighed, kissing the chakat's cheek. "Because I'm not sure you'd have agreed to do this if you knew? Empathy is one major deterrent for chakats in active military positions. There is a necessary distance one should have if you have to take someone's life, as you can see. Trust me, I'm certainly not going to tell you that we have to continue. We can stop now if you'd like."

Gildedtongue closed hir eyes, inhaling deeply as shi thought for a moment, finally saying to Saldura, "Run it again."

Days went by on their journey, and Gildedtongue continued to train himself in that horrible drill, learning to ignore hir empathic responses as well as getting better with hir own skills with the longarm. Class went by smoothly and hir relationship with hir lovers grew more and more, as did hir feeling of fleeing. Perhaps they could be

persuaded in staying with hir on Chakona, or maybe shi'd be able to wait for them on their trips near the planet. Shi spent ages alone, surely a few years between visits wouldn't be terrible?

Gildedtongue's daydreaming was brought to an abrupt end when Grawl, the nickname of a young wolftaur, came up to ask hir a question mid class. Shi opened up hir mouth to respond when the speakers started sounding an alarm. "Alarm! Alarm! Hostile ship encountered! All available hands to their stations! Alarm! Alarm!" Gildedtongue immediately told hir students to overturn their desks and come back to hir side, getting a weapon for himself.

Dominic's hand came to pick one up as well and the chakat shot him a glare, "Just keep your head down. I'd rather you live." The human gave a defiant look, but begrudgingly took hir advice, huddling in the corner out of sight of the door. Gildedtongue armed hir weapon; no hologram, this was a real event. Hir hearts pounding as sweat formed along the band of glands along hir forehead. Hir dull blue eyes focused forward. Shi focused and waited.

Nothing happened for moments, dragging on like their own little eternities before the whole ship shook. The lights went dim before the red emergency lights turned on. No other alarms came through; more than likely Engineering was hit. Gildedtongue thought a silent prayer to Susan, a person shi had never met and arguably a competitor to Saldura's heart, but still, hoped for hir safety.

Gildedtongue started to whisper to himself in a chant, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for His Name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; For you are with me; Your rod and Your staff – they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, You anoint my head with oil; My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord My whole life long." Shi repeated the 23rd Psalm over and over again, feeling the meditation relax hir. Whether through Divine providence or simple distraction, the chakat felt himself focused as shi chanted. Several other students joining in, a few with their own prayers. Dominic kept quiet, comforting a crying feline, Matthew. Apparently there are still plenty of atheists in foxholes.

Gildedtongue listened for the door, hearing blasts and exchanges of weapons fire on the other side of it, hoping that hir side was winning. The heavy door finally ringing out in a knock, nearly making all the occupants jump out of their skin in frightened surprise. Once, twice, three times. The chakat's hearts beat in alternating motions, pushing as much oxygen into hir muscles as they could, ringing in hir ears as hir large lungs held their breath. The door started to open and a head peeked inside. Gildedtongue's weapon slammed against hir shoulder as shi opened fire. The helmetless head suddenly slammed against the opposite wall, causing the children to

gasp in fright. Gildedtongue felt the fear, pain and death coursing through his veins, but what shi didn't feel was regret. Shi pulled the corpse into the room, closing the door, not wanting anyone else outside to see the carnage and investigate.

They stood frozen in the room for well over an hour. Gildedtongue swallowed countless dry mouths as shi stood guard, sitting on a knife's edge. Another knock was heard at the door. Once, twice, thrice, four times, and five. The familiar sound of Saldura's voice came through the door, "Beatrice brings joy", before it opened up. Gildedtongue finally let the weapon down from his shoulder, exhaling a long breath. Shi giggled in response to all the adrenaline leaving his body, sobbing at the same time. Saldura was dressed in full armour, heavy, rounded plates of specialized metals and ceramics covering and concealing his form, but shi went over to hug the chakat, trying to offer him some comfort. Shi turned to see the fallen pirate, giving a small nod. "I'm sorry."

Gildedtongue shook his head, averting his gaze from the body. "It's okay. It was either him... or these." Shi gestured to the children. "What happened?"

The badger sighed, explaining that they were caught in a grav mine field. An explosive hit their engineering decks, and knocked out most of the power. They boarded from the top of the spine, and invaded. Twenty security officers were injured in the firefight; three lost their lives. The pirate ship gave up and flew off, apparently as unarmed as the *Purgatorio*.

"And Engineering? How many casualties there?" Gildedtongue asked, concerned, hoping that Saldura's friend made it.

"I don't know, I'm sorry. I'm still getting reports." Saldura said, tapping his monocle computer output. "I know Thallon's okay, though. Damned cowboy took down four in the cargo hold with a wrench."

Gildedtongue let out a sigh of relief, momentarily forgetting Thallon, but happy he was safe. Saldura was looking off into space, scanning his computer for a moment before giving a nod, "Chief engineer William Bennett died in the exposition, but that's all. I guess that means Technician Susan Labs is safe." Saldura smiled, "You were worried about him for me?"

Gildedtongue nodded a bit, feeling a little shy, "I'm sorry about everyone else though."

Saldura hugged Gildedtongue again, "Four deaths is a tragic thing, but it could be worse. A lot worse. I'm just happy there weren't more. You look like shit, though, Wanderer. I think you need to get some rest."

"Please – language before such impressionable youths?" Gildedtongue loosed a joke in the morbid situation, everything getting too much for him. Shi turned to the

students, "But, yes, just forget about class today."

They weren't in the mood to celebrate as they nodded to Gildedtongue. Shi made his way to them, moving around the overturned tables and desks to hug the ones needing it. Sal made a silent exit, going to address the rest of the ship.

Time seemed to have no meaning the rest of that day, the force field on the spine quickly being replaced by repairing panels to the layers of hull. Gildedtongue finally making it back to Saldura's room while Thallon was there, shadowboxing and moving around. The chakat offered him a small smile and the two embraced, turning to kiss each other.

"Hey, babe. I'm glad to see you," he whispered, stroking his fingers through his silver-streaked red mane.

"As I you," Shi responded, stroking his chest, letting out a long sigh, "Does this happen a lot?"

"Not really. This is actually the first time I've been in a boarding." Thallon tried to comfort him, stroking along his sides and back.

"Guess I was born under a bad sign, then, eh?" Gildedtongue asked, cocking his head to one side.

Thallon let out a small yapping laugh, licking over his cheek with his purple tongue.

"Maybe, though you're one tough enough bitch to get through it, obviously." The wolf/foxtaur cuddled with his lover and mate as they closed their eyes, enjoying one another's presence. The main lights finally came back on, causing both to cover their eyes at the sudden brightness. "Well, guess they've got most of the power back on line, we'll be smooth sailing in no time flat!" The big centauroid grinned.

Saldura came in through the door looking exhausted, stripping out of his uniform and collapsing on the bed in his undergarments. The chakat reached to touch the badger, seeing some bruises and light cuts from the mêlée, but nothing needing medical attention. The badger stared at the ceiling, letting out a low sigh. "Well, good news is that we've got the engine operating as best as it can go right now. We're now moving at five million metres per second at this moment towards the nearest space station to get repaired."

Gildedtongue frowned slightly, cocking his head, "And the bad news?"

The badger inhaled deeply, 'How the enemy ship landed knocked out our long-range communication rigging, and at our current rate of speed, it's going to take five years to get from here to Omega 56-74. Hope you packed a lunch – it's going to be one

long, long trip."

Gildedtongue felt a little nauseous. Shi got hir wish, like in most stories about wishes. Shi now had more time to stay with hir new mates. Thallon rested his hand on hir shoulder as Gildedtongue spoke again, "What about Jadestripe and everyone expecting me?"

Saldura sighed, "Well, when we don't arrive at our scheduled areas, we'll be marked absent, and after the first year or so, all marked dead-at-sea, so to speak. Heh, lucky you, Gildy, you've died twice now. Your Federation Record is going to be interesting for a civilian."

"What about passing ships, Sal? Isn't this a pretty common spacing route?" Thallon asked, cocking his head.

Saldura chuckled, "Very common, and undoubtedly there are ships passing around us right now, but they're also going hundreds of light-years a day, in other words... too fast to even notice us. We'd probably pop up on their scanners as some bit of debris to avoid and the automated systems will adjust their course around us. The short range communications wouldn't get picked up as they whizzed past."

Dead again. The notion ran a new trembling terror down hir spine as shi excused himself. Shi needed some room, some air, and the only place shi could find it right now was in the cargo room, leaving hir lovers for the moment. Looking down there were fifty black bags organised on the floor. The chakat making hir way down to them, nodding to himself. They were body bags of the fallen, both members of the ship and members of the pirates.

Trying to take hir mind off of the situation, shi took out Frank's cross and started to bless each body, giving them Last Rites. Shi wasn't ordained, but out here it was as close as their souls would get. A familiar voice spoke behind Gildedtongue. "You know, being dead isn't all that bad, really." Creekstripe smiled, crossing hir arms before himself. Gildedtongue turned to look at hir sire.

"You're not real! You're a dream!" shi shouted at hir, snarling openly. Creekstripe nodded to hir outburst.

"Maybe. Though, you're awake now, aren't you?" The chakat whimpered, looking around, knowing shi was right. Creekstripe walked around the bodies carefully, looking over them, stopping at one about three fourths of the way down. "Ah, this one is yours, right?"

Gildedtongue snarled at the phantom, "He's not mine... I don't own anyone!"

"True, but you did take his life, didn't you? Sure, he was a pirate, but he was also a man. As a bit of inside knowledge from beyond... he had a beautiful wife, a jaguar

morph and they were compatible enough to make three lovely, gorgeous children together. Oh, they didn't know about Daddy's job, but now, well, guess they won't ever see him again. Well, was his life or yours, right?"

"Shut up!" Gildy roared, focusing hir eyes at hir dead father, finding hir gone. Shi was alone again, surrounded by the dead, and shi wept.

Chapter 7

The *Purgatorio* is a decommissioned H345-V Star Transport, a relic from the Gene Wars. During the end of the war, the H345 series was the fastest, and largest carrier available, coming in two varieties, T, or troop transport, or V, vehicle transport. Due to the large cargo capacity, the H345-V became immensely popular for private shipping companies once they were decommissioned after the war. Its ability to go groundside on planets or asteroids was a major selling factor for ore traders to load up on or near site, and able to offload easily as well. T transports were initially popular for moving large groups of people after the war, however as more posh and luxurious cruisers came into vogue, the military barracks and utterly honeycomb nature of the H345-Ts were largely abandoned.

Measuring at 550 metres in length and 80 metres in diameter, the cylindrical transports were often nicknamed "Space Vibrators" by the soldiers that travelled in them, and awaited their arrival. The V-class could be manned by a skeleton crew of 240 hands, and optimum service was at a full thousand. With a full crew load, the H345-Vs could carry and support comfortably up to 1550 personnel comfortably for three years, while transporting a full battalion of Battlemechs, tanks, hover craft, or mobile buildings and enough fuel to run them.

The *Purgatorio* herself was decommissioned when the Colonial Militia on Valkkon VI received a modern transport carrier, and was sold to retiring Major Matilda Jefferson for a reduced fee. It took her seven years to pay out the debt, but now Captain Jefferson runs her own transportation company, with 850 employees underneath her. Due to the modifications to make the ship suited for civilian space travel, the phaser banks and hard points were removed, and the military grade warp drive and communications array were replaced with civilian marketed parts.

Other modifications were installed. The ship contains over 300 "Smuggler's Holds" which can carry over three tonnes of goods combined. While the concealed compartments themselves are not illegal (in fact, even the Stellar Federation recommends highly sensitive and important items concealed in case of attack) the Stellar Federation demands that any and all such compartments be documented and presented at any time when requested by an official.

The Holo Room, originally used for briefings and debriefings having been made for both training and entertainment purposes. While not as powerful as a modern Holodeck with its replicative properties, the Holo Room can project fully 3D, moving images through floor emitters, however remaining intangible. The Holo Room is adjacent to both the ship's Armoury as well as the ship's Security offices. Due to strict regulations both per planet and in space on Phaser technology, the *Purgatorio* outfits their personnel with electromagnetic coilgun weapons, the Fabrique Nationale's EMAL carbine. The ship has licenses to arm itself with 600 chemical-less physical projectile weapons, and no license for ship mounted weapons. Most pirates forgo ship-mounted weapons due to their illegality and their prominent display on their ships make it difficult for them to get to planets to offload their ill-gotten goods. There's also the issue of firing a weapon going the speed of light against targets going faster than the speed of light, outrunning the projectile easily.

Two replicators are available for use on the ship, the main replicator, used primarily for issuing food, clothing, tools, materials, and other such for the crew, and a back up replicator housed in the medical bay, producing minor medicines and other healing measures. Due to the ship not being registered as a mobile medical station, patterns of many modern drugs and treatments have not been uploaded to the replicator database.

The ship's hold currently houses several hundred tonnes of coal, magnesium ore, iron ore, oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, sodium chloride, potassium bromide, and iodine. Half of its cargo had been sold off at the last station, and the rest will be dropped at the next one before heading to a planet or asteroid to restock. With the technology of replication it has allowed for deep space stations to subsist for great lengths of time, but with refuelling and with population changes and visitors the amount people intake versus the amount people leave requires more and more material to be issued around.

Such banal factoids were the only thing keeping Gildedtongue's mind running. The ship had been moving slowly for the past six months. Ideally, they should have reached their destination within a week, and by now, Gildedtongue would have only a month remaining on his journey to Chakona.

The air in the ship was dead. It was filtered and reprocessed so everyone could breathe easy, but it tasted and smelled sterile, reminding the chakat of the hospital. Ionized, cleaned, the carbon ripped from the CO₂ and used for the replicator, re-oxygenating the air. Perfect to keep people healthy, but extracting the essence of the people from the air just made it feel off.

It certainly wasn't just affecting the chakat. The students sat listlessly through the lesson. At the start of the trip there was a lot more interactivity, now eyes stared at him almost blankly. The number of eyes there had also shrunk, many children recalling their time on the derelict, and Gildedtongue had to ask a number of parents to get and comfort their screaming and cowering children.

"You know, a real chakat would be able to help those children," a growingly familiar voice said to Gildedtongue from the corner of the room. Shi tried to ignore the spirit walking around the room. No one else seemed to notice Creekstripe, so Gildy did his best not to as well. "A real work of art here. A chakat unable to simply offer emotional comfort to distressed children. I'm sure the Stellar Federation would be so proud of you." But it had been getting harder every day.

"This is stupid!" Dominic outburst, the sandy haired boy standing bolt upright from his desk. "We should be learning things that actually matter, like how to fix the engine, or learn how to fight! Talking about relationships and politics of fictional worlds doesn't matter!" He pounded on the desk.

Gildedtongue growled lightly, "Dominic, go sit in the corner, *now*. And count to fifty in Ratarsk, base ten." Shi sighed, down to making old-fashioned punishments to keep order. The room felt more like his classroom back on Terra by the day.

"Gun, Rralt, Felta, Domo, Excol, Kolv, Venta, Venta ut Gun, Venta ut Rralt, Holdon..." Dominic muttered in the tongue of the Caitians as he walked towards the corner, dragging his feet behind him.

"Oh, wonderful method, I'm really sure you've answered his question and got him to pay more attention to the material, Gildy," Creekstripe clapped slowly, looking at his daughter, "Really, job well done."

Gildedtongue's hearts both started to pound faster as shi looked back down at his PADD, his palm pad starting to soak the electronic with his sweat. Eyes trying to focus on the text in front of him, Gildy attempted to read more of his notes, "Now, we can draw parallels between the post war Terra and the Caitian *Tale of the Eight Tribes*. The fall of Mookdor..."

"Fucking reaching for it now, eh, Gildy? Really? I mean, I know history repeats, but a seventeen century old story connected to the recent Gene War?" Creekstripe scoffed, crossing his arms before his breasts.

"The fall of Mookdor," Gildedtongue faltered, repeating himself. His teeth starting to clench as his upper chest was burning, "created a power vacuum that caused the Eight Tribes to vie for power. Much like the strong seats of power were destroyed after the Gene..."

"Except that the end of that story is that all the tribes destroyed each other in civil war. Do you even read the shit you teach, kitten?" The spectre walked over to the window, looking into the passing space, "Not that you even care, really. I mean, you were supposed to teach these kids for nine months and never see them again, right? Well, guess you'll get tenure after the next four and a half years, eh? Heh."

"Shir Wanderer?" a young vixen morph called, looking at Gildedtongue staring at the

window, pausing in hir speech, "Are you okay?"

Chuckling, Creekstripe turned around, hir blank eyes grinning at the leonine chakat, "Heh, are you okay? I mean, you and I know that you really aren't. But, doesn't matter really, does it? Hell, you're just waiting for your teaching responsibilities to be over so you can fuck them. Fuck them hard like Dreamweaver, right?"

"Shut up!" Gildedtongue snarled, feeling hir claws dig into the plastic casing of the PADD, hir tail starting to lash behind hir.

"That Dominic kid is the one you want, don't you? You want to run your fingers through his hair as he sucks on your cock, right? Repayment for your teaching, right?"

Gildy was hyperventallating, hir dull blue eyes glared at hir sire. The blood pumping through hir ears deafened any mutters of discomfort coming from hir class, "Shut the FUCK up, Goddamn it!"

"Uttering the Lord's name in vain. You're as terrible a Christian as you are a Chakat. You really are a useless waste of fle-"

Creekstripe's words were cut short as shi disappeared. Gildedtongue had hurled hir datapad at the window, the electronic exploding in thousands of pieces as the transparent material dented and cracked from the impact. The children were screaming, sprinting out of the classroom as fast as their legs could carry them, leaving Gildedtongue fuming at the front of the classroom, hir nostrils flaring like a bull ready for a charge.

All the chakat could see was a red wash before hir. Several dark figured bursting in from the door, looking around before running to hir. Gildedtongue ran hir fist at the first one, knocking it aside easily, but quickly one of the devil's companions jammed its spear into hir side. A surge of electricity went through hir body as shi batted the other one aside easily, snarling ferally. More of these daemons descended upon hir, wielding their weapons and attacked hir over and over.

Shi didn't know if this was a dream or real, but fought back anyway. Hir claws broken against their stone flesh, feeling the warm blood running through hir fingers. Three managed to jump hir, jabbing hir again and again with their weapons as shi felt hir breath being taken from hir. Hir eyes darkening as the room became momentarily clearer, seeing the *Purgatorio* security team surrounding hir. Saldura on the floor, slumped against the wall where the first devil shi attacked clattered to. Gildedtongue's confusion quieted as everything went dark.

"I'd say that's the end of this experiment," one voice muttered. Gildedtongue's head

throbbing as hir eyes refused to open. Shi tried to move to get in a comfortable position, finding himself well secured to whatever shi was laying on.

"That's for the Federation to determine and you know it. Besides, it's not like we can really do anything out here," said another voice, a commanding tone in its femininity.

The first voice snarled, "Fuck the Federation! It's proven that it cares about Utilitarianism, even at the expense of one of its own! I mean, what do you think hir sister will say when we deliver a psychotic on hir doorstep?"

"The risks in the experiment were written out in the contract..."

The first voice cut off the second, "As if anyone can actually read one of those fucking things. I didn't like this one bit!"

"You were quick to sign in on this when they told you they'd give your license to practice medicine back," muttered a pained third voice. Gildedtongue recognizing it easily as Saldura's.

"Yeah, well... guess we've all got our thirty pieces of silver. That right, Thirtysilver?" said the first voice again, now with a chuckle.

"Getting the ship and crew cleared of its previous misgivings was a fiscally responsible choice," chimed in a fourth voice, most likely the Caitian accountant, Thirtysilver. "But had I known this would have happened I certainly wouldn't have agreed to this."

"Agree or not, this is what we're currently dealing with," the second voice said again as Gildedtongue slowly opened up hir eyes, seeing Dr. Wu, Captain Jefferson, Saldura, and Thirtysilver talking to each other above a table nearby. Saldura nursing a bag of ice against hir cheek where Gildedtongue had punched hir off guard. The chakat wheezed hoarsely, hir mouth dry as shi wiggled in hir restraints.

Saldura was the first to hear the waking chakat, walking over to hir immediately, taking hir hand. "Talk to me, Gildy. Are you all right? How are you feeling?" Despite the swollen cheek and eye on the left side of hir face, hir expression was worried and sympathetic, stroking hir hand.

The leonine chakat tried to talk, coughing and hacking before Wu came with a glass of water, pouring gently into hir mouth. The chakat was strapped on hir backs on a specially made structure, a high bump in the off-set middle keeping hir backs both aligned, meaning shi was looking around slightly upside down. After some splashes, shi managed to swirl enough water in hir mouth to get hir to speak easily, "Feel like shit." Shi admitted, looking warily for Creekstripe. The dead sire was in the corner, keeping quiet for now.

Checking over his vitals again, Dr. Wu nodded to Gildedtongue, "Taking sixteen stunrod blows will do that to you, even a chakat." She gently touched near some of the places they had struck him, causing the chakat to wince in pain. Captain Matilda Jefferson walked to the chakat, bending over to look at him more properly.

"What happened in there, Wanderer? We thought that there was another boarding gone unnoticed with the screams and the bang. The fact that you dented the transparent steel hull, well, that'd take quite a bit of effort," the female C.O. said coolly, not angrily, but not very sympathetically.

A few tears rolled up to Gildedtongue's forehead, as she blinked them out of the way, feeling confused and scared, "I-I... I don't know, I..." a few words sank in to his head as she lifted his head. "What experiment?"

Matilda seemed unphased by the question, replying flatly "Huh? What do you mean?" Gildedtongue grunted slightly, maybe it was another hallucination, but, even if it was, she needed to get to the bottom of it.

"When I was waking up, you four were talking about an experiment and the Federation and... getting medical licenses back and clearing criminal records or something?" As she said it, it seemed stupid as the Caitian approached his table.

"It was probably just a dream, Wanderer. Nothing you need to worry about. More than likely just cabin fever is getting to you." The feline alien purred, delicately putting her hand on Gildedtongue's lower chest, hesitant like she was worried the chakat was covered in acid.

Saldura got strangely quiet, clutching onto Gildedtongue's hand, kissing the back of it lightly. Doctor Wu let out a snort, shaking her head, "I really can't keep doing this. I'm really surprised that the rest of you can, especially you, Corporal Holbock." Doctor Wu gave a look back at the glaring Captain Jefferson as she knelt by Gildedtongue's side, opposite of Saldura. Her hand gently rubbing over Gildedtongue's upper belly. "Don't you find things a little... odd, Gildedtongue? You're arrested and put in a case where it's clear the whole deck is stacked against you, only to have the Stellar Federation come by and, all of a sudden, bam! You have the evidence and the means to win the case. Then, the Federation comes by and offers you free transport to wherever in the entire galaxy you want to go, but... they don't use their own, faster, more controlled ships to get you there, rather, giving you to a bunch of independent private ore runners?"

Gildedtongue grunted, the blood in his head starting to give him a headache as she lifted his head slightly, "I've got to admit... the circumstances were a bit... odd, to say the least." She looked at Saldura who was looking away, seeming very ashamed, and at Matilda who seemed very quiet and neutral. Thirtysilver was in the corner busying herself, trying to avoid being seen. "So, what was the experiment you talked about?"

"You know that Chakats need other chakats in order to function, right?" Gildedtongue nodded softly. "And do you know what happens when they don't get that empathic feedback from other chakats?"

Gildedtongue was about to nod, then stopped herself, thinking that question over before sheepishly shrugging with arms and forelegs.

Wu gave a small chuckle, "It's okay that you don't know. Neither do we. It's a poorly researched field because, well arguably, it's torture." Wu sighed, looking rather serious. "Previous attempts to look over the condition for extended periods of time resulted in family members terminating the program seeing the early signs of, well, various things you're showing. Heightened aggression, violent outbursts, physical manifestations of increased stress levels." She said, passing her hand through the silver and grey streaks in Gildedtongue's mane.

"Schizophrenic hallucinations?" shi asked, looking into Wu's eyes.

The doctor paused a bit, thinking. "Not that we know of. Have you been?" Gildedtongue nodded slightly. "Well, I'll be sure to take notes on that. But, the experiment was meant to be blind, that you didn't know that there was any sort of experiment. People act different when they know they're being watched."

"Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle when applied to anthropology. The mere act of being an observer changes the setting of the experiment." Gildedtongue nodded slightly.

Wu laughed, "See, shi's smart. Though most physicists absolutely loathe people invoking that in anything but Quantum Physics. But, yes. You were being watched and reported on, mostly by me."

Gildedtongue nodded again, trying to process all of this information. "So, why me? I mean, there's two billion chakats out there right now. Why this one?" Wu smiled, shaking hir head.

"So humble, Gildedtongue. You don't know how unique and special you are. A middle-aged chakat in good health, with no extraordinary Talents, who happens to have no close family ties? Gildy, you're pretty much one in two billion. Your various factors are so down-played, you're, in a word, perfect."

The chakat nodded slightly, not exactly feeling like shi won the Solar Lotto as shi looked back at the ceiling, swallowing once again. "So, all of you knew about this? You all knew about this experiment, and were all going along with the Federation for your own gain, even though you knew this, as Wu pointed out, was torture?" Hir confusion focused into anger as shi snarled. "That why you and Thallon started to sleep with me and fuck me?" shi glared at Saldura, the usually proud and strong badger shying away, trying to melt into the shadows.

Shi was silent for several moments before finally speaking, "Thallon didn't know. The only ones that knew about anything are in this room – Captain Jefferson, Thirtysilver, Doctor Wu, and myself. All the rest of the crew knew that we had a VIP coming aboard and that would clear our blemishes with Federation space."

Shi was still mad, but the fact that Thallon genuinely had feelings for hir without any orders made hir feel better. "Criminal record? What are you? Drug runners? Slave traders? Illegal mercenaries?"

Saldura spoke quicker, but kept hir face looking at the floor, "Mostly merchandise that's been embargoed between planets. Two planets declare war upon each other, they fight, but the populous won't get the resources they want or need from the planet they're fighting with. We make sure the merchant class still has something to sell, pretty much." Shi sighed slightly, "Otherwise, petty food runners. The beef you ate earlier was skimmed off of the shipment to the last Epsilon station. Most space stations have strict rules against natural meat. The products are irradiated and checked for maladies, before you ask."

Gildedtongue nodded, surrounded by people who run toys and burgers. Shi looked back at Saldura, who was going out the door, leaving the group. It didn't take an empath to know the badger was shamed as shi grunted a bit, "This is getting really uncomfortable. Do I need to remain strapped down like this?" shi asked the doctor.

"You think you'll punch out a half dozen more of our security detail?" Gildedtongue shook hir head. "Well, I don't see a problem with it. All right with you, Captain?" she asked, addressing Matilda, who just nodded her head. The doctor quickly took off the straps holding down the chakat, and soon shi rolled over, stretching long, feeling hir backs pop slightly.

"That certainly feels better," shi sighed, looking around, turning hir head back to Wu, "So, is there anything you can do to end this experiment?" Shi cocked hir head.

Doctor Wu gave a soft chuckle. "All I've got here is aspirin and bandages, really. Besides, the amount of anti-anxiety meds you'd need would choke a quange." She thought to herself, then said, "The best cure would be being with another chakat. Heh, I guess your experience at the Epsilon station gave you a bit of a boost, but the stress must have drained it."

"Yes, but, I'm the only chakat on board here," Gildedtongue said, cocking hir head to one side, "Unless there's crew I don't know about?"

Doctor Wu smirked again, "Well, no other chakats here right now, but... I'm sure one could... pop up in about a year."

Gildedtongue processed that, before blushing hotly, giving a quiet 'oh.' Shi often thought about having a cub to relieve hir of hir loneliness, but felt that action would

be just unfair to the kitten, pushing it off to the future. Now it seems it might be necessary for hir mental health.

Shi stepped out of the medical bay, running right into the huge tower of foxtaur, Thallon. He gave a soft 'ooph' then quickly wrapped his arms around the chakat, giving hir forehead a nuzzle as his bushy tail wrapped around his haunches. "Been waiting out here for you to wake up, love. How are you feeling?" His usual cavalier voice having a tinge of concern in it as his black furred hands gripped the chakat's shoulders tighter.

Shi sighed, pressing into his strong chest as shi closed hir eyes. "Mmmmmph, well, still a little groggy and sore. And, well, apparently more than a little crazy. Very crazy most would say. Completely nutter." Gildy drooped slightly, clutching onto Thallon. His hands continue to caress and run over hir body, chuckling quietly.

"I'm not surprised, Gildy. Most people tend to flip out on long voyages. To be honest, I think you've made it longer than most people, so, don't worry about it, you're made of stronger stuff!" his tongue lolled out in a grin, showing off the dark purple muscle. Gildedtongue couldn't help but chuckle as well, feeling his support.

"Well," shi started, taking a deep breath, "It's a bit more complicated than that. I'd like to talk to you, but, well, privately would be best."

Nodding, Thallon gave another kiss to Gildedtongue's forehead, rubbing along hir shoulders some more. "No problem; our room's just down a bit." Gildedtongue grunted slightly, feeling the fur on hir tail go on end as hir hearts pounded faster.

Shi shook hir head against his chest, "N-no. Could we just... go to my room? No offence, but... this is something I don't want to talk about in Sal's place." Thallon was a bit confused, but took Gildy's arm as they made their way to hir room. Thallon shedding his clothes whilst the chakat played lightly with hir own blouse, keeping it on.

Retelling what had just gone on, Gildedtongue watched the fox'taur lay down on hir bed, listening attentively. Shi leaned against the padded platform, continuing the short tale, looking at his grey eyes getting darker. "That's all really hard to swallow, Gildy. I mean, I'm not calling you a liar, but, these people are all the family I've got, and, well, for them to do something like that." He sighed, grunting, "And Sal as well? That itself is hard to believe."

The chakat nodded, reaching to hold one of the foxtaur's foreleg paws, looking up at his face, "Well, shi admitted shi was one of the conspirators, but... I dunno," shi muttered, hir tailtip flicking about next to hir.

The door buzzed lightly as someone pushed the doorbell on the other side. The chakat got up to hit the short comm, asking who it was. "It's me, Saldura. I just want to talk."

The voice sounded a little distraught. Gildedtongue wanted to open up the door, but a deep fear and bitterness held hir hand from the button, shaking hir head.

"Not tonight, Sal. I'm sorry, but, I'm not sure I can trust you right now. I'm sorry." The chakat put hir hand to the door, even hir weak skills could feel the dark despair from the other side, imaging the badger. Sal could easily override the lock and come inside, but all the chakat heard was a muffled 'bye' before things went silent.

Gildedtongue was sobbing as shi crawled back into bed with Thallon, feeling the strong centauroid wrapping his limbs around hir, telling hir things would be okay. The two fell asleep in each other's arms, forgetting dinner for the depressed 'kat.

It was cold in the chakat's bed when shi woke up next, seeing it empty beyond himself. Thallon nowhere in sight, probably off working or something. Gildedtongue ran hir tongue around hir mouth, trying to get some spit built up to wet hir maw. Creekstripe stood in the corner of the room, smiling wickedly, like a cat torturing a mouse. "So, you sent your mate away when shi was feeling pained and in need of comfort. You're really a wonderful chakat, aren't you?"

Gildedtongue sighed, it was far too early in the morning for hir insanity, but shi decided to play along with it. "Shut up, I'm a person first. My species isn't high on my list. Besides, there was an obvious reason I wouldn't have been someone shi should be around," shi grumbled, turning on the bed again.

But Creekstripe didn't let up, walking over to where Gildedtongue lay. "I'd say turning your back on someone you claim to love would also make you a failure of a person, no matter the situation, wouldn't you?"

The chakat whimpered loudly, grabbing hir forearms tightly, digging hir claws into hir own flesh. "Please stop... Please, father." shi begged as Creekstripe laughed tauntingly. The chakat's hands scratching hir own arms hard, leaving bloody gashes through hir flesh as shi continued to cry, hir face buried in hir pillow. Shi felt a hand touching hir shoulder, causing hir to bolt upright, thinking that hir dead parent was made flesh, seeing Thallon hovering over hir. Gildedtongue quickly covered hir arms, looking down at the bed, though the huge foxtaur already saw the damage.

"We should get that looked at." he muttered, not really sure what to say.

Gildedtongue sighed, "I'll be fine. We recover pretty quickly, any sort of scarring should be covered up by the fur anyway," shi muttered, lowering hir head to lick over hir wounds.

Thallon wasn't completely convinced, but dared not to prod his lover any more. His strong hands didn't leave the older fur's shoulder, gently stroking through hir wrinkled

and slept-in blouse. "Sorry, I was in the bathroom when you woke up, I guess," he muttered, stroking through his mane. "What was that about your father?"

Another sigh came from the leonine chakat, nodding to the spectral Ringtailed Cat patterned chakat in the corner. "Lately my sire, Creekstripe has decided to haunt me, it seems." Shi saw the fur along Thallon's back rise, giving a small chuckle. "I'm pretty sure it's all in my head, love. Don't worry about it. Just that I'm absolutely crazy."

Thallon hugged Gildedtongue again, nuzzling. "You're not crazy. Crazy people don't acknowledge that they are." Gildy chuckled at that, shrugging in the strong arms. Thallon loosened his grip, looking at his again, "So, I guess your father didn't like you or something?"

"No, no... just the opposite," Gildy muttered, closing his eyes slightly, "Shi was the most supportive, kind, loving parent anyone could really ask for. A wonderful example of everything that a chakat should be." Shi slumped against Thallon's stronger body, "An example of everything I'm not. It hurts when you're born into a species of Mary Poppins and you're, well..."

Holding Gildedtongue close, Thallon kissed his lips, stroking his cheeks dry of the running tears, "Shhhh, don't talk like that. Gildedtongue, my dear, I love you. No one's perfect." he chuckled softly, "Besides, everyone worries that they live up to their parents, even chakats I bet."

Gildedtongue grumbled but accepted the peptalk, nuzzling Thallon's cheek again as shi looked at the larger creature, "Thanks. Ugh, sure you're ready to love someone like me? I mean, this is the package you're going to get." Thallon only responded with a kiss, clutching the older chakat tightly to his form. The door buzzed once again as Gildedtongue straightened his face slightly, "That's probably Saldura. I guess I really shouldn't put any of this off," shi said, going to the door and opening it.

To his surprise, Captain Matilda was at the door, looking over the two occupants, holding several sheets of paper. The chocolate skinned human coughed in her hand before offering greetings to the two. Gildedtongue stepped aside, letting the captain in the room as Thallon offered a salute. "At ease, Rosefur, not like you're in uniform." She turned to Gildedtongue, a melancholy look in her eyes, "I owe you a large apology and explanation." The chakat's eyes narrowed slightly, giving a slight nod. "However, I'm not sure anything I can say can really compensate for the things you've gone through, or will go through." She offered the papers to the chakat, who looked over them slightly, raising an eyebrow in curiosity.

"Those are the contracts that were given to Thirtysilver, Doctor Janice Wu, Corporal Saldura Holbock, and myself. Pledging our secrecy and promises of compensation for our cooperation with the Stellar Federation." Gildedtongue thumbed through the pages, finding signatures from three of the people, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't see Saldura's handwriting in any of these. Actually, one of these contracts are blank." Shi asked, a little confused. Matilda sighed, nodding in agreement.

"You won't find it. Shi didn't sign one in protest." Matilda walked to the window, looking into the star field, "Shi didn't agree with the thing from the beginning."

Gildedtongue nodded slightly, looking over the blank contract, "Well, that's great, but, shi did it anyway, didn't shi?"

"Saldura was always a good soldier; shi took orders even when shi disagreed with them," Matilda said, still keeping out of eye contact. "We didn't think things would have become as bad as they are now..." she trailed off, looking over her shoulder to look at Gildedtongue's bloodied arms. "I don't think anyone was really aware about what would happen."

"So, they didn't know, the Federation just signed me off on some experiment, and just hoped for the best? Jesus Christ help me. Why?"

Matilda turned around, addressing the two others in the room, "They saw an opportunity and took it. I doubt even most of the Federation knows about it, most likely just some small department in the science and research branch going through the cracks and green lighting the experiment before the higher ups know what's going on." Matilda shrugged slightly, "The Federation is a multi-trillion person organisation, of Terrans, Caitians, and many, many more. Keeping track of all things that go on is out of the realm of possibility."

Gildedtongue frowned, tossing the papers on his dresser, "So, you're saying they don't care about us unless we're useful, eh?"

Matilda chuckled, shaking her head, "Gildedtongue, it isn't that black and white and you know it. The Federation is no evil empire as much as it isn't an infallible union. No, it probably doesn't care too much about the quadrillion individuals under its care, but it does want the best for its people." She shrugged once again, her epaulettes moving over her shoulder, "If they just didn't care, they would have just stuffed you in an observation room and that's it. They wanted to compensate you something, even if no one knew the price."

Gildedtongue snorted, looking at the captain before sighing once more, "Okay, I'll... I don't know, I don't want to let it slide, but, I think they owe me more than this." Shi rubbed over his own shoulder, "I'll accept your apology, Captain Jefferson. It seems we're both pieces on a chess board."

Matilda smiled, approaching Gildedtongue and gave him an uncharacteristic hug, making the chakat's tail poof out slightly. Matilda let go, nodding to Gildedtongue, "I certainly thank you, Chakat Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe. But, I do hope that you forgive Saldura as well."

The chakat nodded, "I'll admit, hir betrayal cut me deeper, but..." Shi looked up. "Is shi in hir room?"

Shaking her head, Matilda nodded at the door, "More than likely in Shir Labs room. Shi came to my room last night looking for comfort, but I had none to offer." Gildedtongue frowned, seemed that there was no room in many inns for Sal's psyche.

"I think I'd better go talk to hir. Thank you, Captain Jefferson, for this information, and everything. Thallon, ah, I'll see you, soon." Shi hugged and kissed the unusually quiet tod before slipping out into the hallway.

Where shi immediately got lost remembering that shi had no clue where this person resided, having only seen hir once six months ago. Bashfully shi peeked hir head back in hir room. "Room 78, to your right." Matilda gave Gildy a small smile and nod before shi went back to the hallway, tracking down the room.

It didn't take too long as the chakat looked over the door, gulping slightly, hoping shi wasn't too early in the morning before hitting the bell. It took some time before the door opened up, a topless badger looking at Gildedtongue, hir breath reeking of heavy drinking as Saldura's eyes were heavily bloodshot.

"Here to twist the knife a bit? Not that I blame you. Just, keep it quiet, my head is killing me."

Gildedtongue frowned, moving to take the badger into hir arms and hugging hir taller body tightly to hir own. "Matilda showed me the papers. You didn't sign them. Why? I mean, you didn't know me."

Scoffing, Saldura blinked hir eyes, still feeling the hangover affecting hir detoxing body. "You hear orders from some big wigs to 'just watch somebody'. you know something's suspicious." Shi looked inside. "Come in. Sorry about the mess. Guess we got crazy last night." Beer bottles littered the quarters as the rat occupant, Susan, lay on the bed. Gildedtongue quickly saw the naked white rat was a hermaphrodite as she was giving hir best impression of a sundial. Saldura cleared off some of the floor with a few kicks so the chakat could sit down as the badger solved hir problem with the hair of the dog.

Gildedtongue frowned, not enjoying seeing someone shi cared for like this. "I wanted to come here to tell you I forgive you, Sal. I forgive you and that I still love you, that is, if you still love me." shi blushed slightly, rubbing hir clotted arms.

Turning back towards the chakat, Saldura couldn't help but laugh, "I do. I do love you. Those eyes, your fur, the way that you blush almost all the time." The badger's demeanour got more serious, "How curious and timid you are. The way you handle those kids all day. The fact that your brain is brimming with information."

Gildedtongue's ears were as red as his mane as he coughed slightly, "Well, useless trivia best suited for pub questionnaires than anything else."

"Look, I fucked up. I fucked up really bad, and... I really wish that I could have done something different." Saldura frowned, sitting on the edge of the bed. Gildedtongue moved over the mess, stepping over some game controllers to stroke the badger's side.

"It's okay. Look, I'll accept the Nuremberg defence. Like everyone said, we didn't know." Shi lifted Saldura's chin to look him in the face, "We do now, and now we've just got to fix it, right?" Saldura nodded, going to hug Gildy tightly, closing his eyes as he cried, the most emotional the chakat ever saw the badger.

"Mmmph, but, how are we going to do that?" he asked finally, wiping his eyes, mindful of his augment port on the side of his head. The chakat sighed, ruffling the badger's long hair.

Gildedtongue was quiet for a few moments, shrugging a bit. "Well, as they say, the only way to really fix this is to get me near other chakats for empathic feedback. There aren't any others on board, so..." he sighed once again, "Best course of action is to... well, make one."

Blinking at the prospect, Saldura nodded a little, cocking his head to one side, "So, are you going to self-impregnate?" he asked, a little curious. Gildedtongue thought about the question, shaking his head.

"That's something I've mulled over for decades, and, to be honest, it's repulsed me. No, I'd rather attempt to try and have a child out of love, even in these desperate times." Gildedtongue muttered slightly, seeming lost in thought. Shi shook his head clear, looking back at Saldura, "I'd like Thallon to sire my child, if he'd have me."

Saldura nodded, smiling, "Well, I'm certainly fine with it, if that's what you're wondering."

Gildedtongue frowned a little. "Although," the chakat continued, "I guess maybe it's my upbringing, but, I'd rather not have a child out of wedlock, if you catch my drift." Gildedtongue played with his forepaws on the ground, looking down sheepishly.

The badger ohed softly, looking away. "Well, you have my blessing, of course, and, I guess when we reach Chakona you'll want him to be with you. I wish for you both a long, happy life together." he looked back up into Gildedtongue's eyes.

The chakat just shook his head, "This time you're the one jumping to conclusions, love." Shi knelt down, looking at the taller badger. "I couldn't imagine separating you two, and I wouldn't want to have one without the other. Saldura Holbock, would you marry me?"

Saldura's white face went deep, deep red, stammering incoherently.

"You two can do whatever the feck you want. Just let me sleep!" Susan groaned in the bed, making the two conscious herms laugh and hug tightly.

"Yes! Yes, Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe. I'll be your spouse!" An annoyed finger pointing towards the door shoed both of the giggling lovers out of the room. Saldura, half naked, wearing a large smile, joined the chakat up at his quarters. Thallon still inside, now wearing his uniform, smiled at the herms, seeing that they've made up. The two lean to kiss his cheek, hugging him close. "Gildy, should you ask again?"

The chakat nodded, smiling at Thallon, "Thallon Rosefur, will you be our husband and sire my cub?"

The fox/wolf'aur looking between the two, laughing softly.

"I don't think I have much of a choice here!" he snickered, holding both of them tightly to himself, giving each a lick, "Erm, guess that means I'm going to have to be a good fox from now on then?"

Gildedtongue sighed, shaking his head slightly, "I don't think so. Consider this a formal agreement of being lifemates than anything else." Shi chuckled, looking at Saldura, "I won't mind if you see or be with Susan Labs or anyone else, but..." shi blushed a bit, "While I'm biologically incapable of being jealous, I'm still a curious queen and would at least like to meet people that you're being with."

Both furs agreed as they exchanged kisses and remained holding one another. Talks quickly went into plans for the event.

Gildedtongue gulped to himself, pacing in the small dressing room. His hands going to his mane, checking the condition of the paper flowers braided in it and looked over his white blouse. Shi had to give technology credit, in the hands of a master programmer, they could get replicators to do amazing things. Saldura opened the door, clad in his dress uniform, smiling handsomely at the other herm. "My God, this is going so fast. I mean, I'm still not believing this is happening. I dreamed about this since I was a kitten and..."

Shi was silenced by a kiss, Saldura holding his hands, breaking the smooch after shi was sure Gildedtongue finished his bit of craziness. Wordlessly, Saldura tugged on Gildedtongue's hands as they went into the spine of the ship. The whole crew was gathered as speakers softly played, unoriginally, the Wedding March. Thallon was at the end of the path, standing next to the captain, and Dominic stood next to him, holding a pillow where the rings rested upon. Even Creekstripe couldn't help but

smile as some part of Gildedtongue's subconscious couldn't ruin this for hir.

Holding Saldura's elbow, the two hermaphrodites strolled down the aisle. Both of Gildedtongue's hearts were pounding like mad as shi did hir best to not trip and fall over hir own feet. Shi could see Thallon looking uncomfortable in his tuxedo, but still wore that goofy grin. Reaching the end, Thallon stood next to Gildedtongue as he and Saldura bookended the chakat.

The captain smiled, nodding to her crew to take their seats. "In the Age of Sail on Terra, a captain, while at sea, had the power to join members of his crew in matrimony. In this age of the stars, I shall invoke the same right, to bring these three members of my crew, my family, into a union of love and life." She smiled, the human enjoying the dramatics. "For like the ship sailing into the black ocean, we all explore the unknown of life, and what better way to do so, than in a fleet to watch and help one another.

"Chakat Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe," Matilda addressed the chakat, using hir legal name, "Do you take Thallon Rosefur, and Saldura Holbock as your husband and spouse, lifemates to stand with and support in times of plenty and famine, fortunes grand and poor, in joys and sorrows, so long as you live?"

The chakat's eyes were watering heavily, tears rolling down hir cheek as shi stammered out, "I-I do."

"Do you, Thallon Rosefur, take Saldura and Gildedtongue as your spouses, to walk with them through their paths, caring for them and guiding them through love and loss, joy and sorrow, courage and fear?"

"I do." Thallon responded with a smile, though even with hir weak empathy, Gildedtongue could see he was nervous. Happy, but nervous. Shi gave his hand a gentle squeeze in support.

"Finally, do you, Corporal Saldura Holbock, take Gildedtongue and Thallon as your spouse and husband, to defend their bodies and souls in peace and war, order and chaos, pleasure and pain?"

Saldura looked at the two, giving a small smile before turning back to Matilda, "I do."

Nodding, Matilda turned to Thallon, "Do you have the rings?" The large taur ohed quietly, turning to Dominic who presented him with the pillow. Three rings with interwound gold, silver, and copper bands given to the foxtaur. They weren't very large as the highly conductive metals were still useful to the ship, especially in their current crisis, but some was scrounged up for the event. Thallon placed a ring on Gildedtongue's finger, who placed one on Saldura's, who finally put one on Thallon's.

Matilda grinned, nodding as the ritual was coming to a quick end, "Then by the

powers invested in me by the Stellar Federation, I now pronounce you spouses. You may kiss whomever you please!"

The ship's crew was in an uproar of cheers as the three newly official mates exchanged kisses and hugs, bringing a bit of joy in the current darkness.

Chapter 8

Life continued quietly after the wedding. The crew went back to their jobs, and the officers sat bored on the bridge, watching the pinhole stars inch closer towards the ship. Most of the engineering corps were busy working on the communications array or the warp core as the ship slowly plodded along space.

Gildedtongue wandered through the spine alone. Two heat cycles had gone by and shi and Thallon had yet to conceive. Shi had been putting this off for so long, shi worried that shi missed hir chance, but shi knew shi had several more decades of being viable; shi was just impatient. The stress and worry, though, furrowed hir brow as hir soft feet moved silently over the steel flooring.

"Dominic certainly does miss your classes, Wa- eh, let's drop it, Gildedtongue." Terry was leaning against the door to the medical bay, arms crossed as she smiled at the chakat. Gildedtongue blushed sheepishly at the observation. Since hir last episode, the students had gone back to lessons from the ship's computer, a wealth of knowledge more than what Gildedtongue could offer, but a cold and unhelpful teacher.

Sitting on hir haunches, Gildy looked back at the human. "Well, I do apologize for not being able to be there for them, but, obviously, I'm kind of a psycho right now." Shi shrugged. "I do feel like a bit of an absolute failure, though. I mean, letting down the kids, I'm just kinda sucking up space here, heh, even failing at having a cub... Some chakat I am."

Wu sighed slightly, "That sort of talk isn't going to help you either, and you know it, Gildedtongue. Besides, seems like you were successful in gaining two mates, am I not correct?" Gildy blushed and nodded. Wu smiled and continued, "Besides, as many mothers can attest, *trying* to have a child turns to be the biggest contraceptive, and trying to *not* have a kid (coupled with a night of heavy drinking) almost assuredly leads to the pitter-patter of little feet." Wu smiled, "Come with me. I think you need some relaxation."

Perking hir ears, Gildy followed the human into the medical bay and to the furthest back into a wide yet shallow room with a door on each end, looking like a tiny corridor. Gildedtongue looked around the room before shi heard the sound of a lighter

right behind hir. Turning around shi saw Terry leaning against the wall, taking in one drag from hir cigarette, holding it in for a moment before exhaling lightly. "If I recall your records, you do smoke, do you not?"

Gildedtongue blushed slightly, nodding a bit, "Heh, thought these things were bad for your health? But, damn, has to have been well over a year last time I had one," shi mused, laughing out loud. "Yeah! Hee hee; the night I got arrested I was hoping to catch some kids smoking so I could confiscate their packs. Heh, guess I'm certainly no angel." Shi accepted the doctor's offering of one white cylinder, deftly using the offered lighter and worked it on the tip, taking in a breath to let the embers pull into the tobacco and light the object more properly. Taking the first drag, Gildy felt the smoke burn hir upper lungs, mostly regenerated from hir last time doing this. It made hir eyes water out of a sensation shi was no longer used to, but it made hir smile, enjoying the burning in hir upper chest before exhaling slowly. "Damn, that certainly feels good." Shi took another slow drag, letting the smoke dance around hir mouth before exhaling.

"Now, as your doctor, I can't really recommend these to anyone pregnant or may become pregnant, but I think it's a week before your next cycle..." Wu said, trailing off as she took another drag on hers, sighing contently, "I really ought to quit. Most planets have some serious restrictions on these things, your Chakona especially." she said, pointing the butt towards Gildedtongue before resuming another puff, "But, I guess a life without some wrong isn't lived right, no? Besides, what was it that Manfred said to the Abbot about not absolving oneself, to be accepted for vices and virtues?" she smirked.

Gildedtongue laughed slightly, shaking hir head. "A captain that reads Dante, and now a doctor who reads Byron? Here I thought only old fogies like me read ancient Terran texts." Shi smiled as shi finished hir cigarette, Wu having done with hers as shi lead Gildy back into the main area, closing the door behind them. The airlock sounded, and soon the smoke and air was jettisoned into space. Gildy blushing hotly, "Erm, we were that close to The Nothing?"

Smiling, Wu shrugged. "Old Russian way of sneaking out for smokes, at least on Mir." She laughed a bit at how pale the chakat became, even through the fur. "As far as your first observation... there's a lot of nothing to do out in space, and ship databases usually contain a considerable amount of literature." Wu shrugged a bit, "Fifty terabytes of text is just a drop in the bucket really."

Gildedtongue chuckled, "I suppose, though I have to admit, it just isn't the same without the feel of the pages in your hand." Shi smiled and shrugged slightly. "But, I'm glad to hear it. Heh, suppose it's nice all the texts I read in the Monastery aren't limited to just there."

The doctor lead the chakat to her desk where she took a seat, still smiling. "Well, yes

and no. Spacers like us are a bit of a breed apart from most planetary folk. We often don't have access to the newer media out there, so there's a lot of opportunity to look over earlier works." Wu leaned back, looking at the ceiling. "Besides, the various Terran governments have key interests in maintaining ancient Terran cultures, especially to those from Space. The planet itself might be finite, but the words it creates can possibly last forever."

"For a cynic, you certainly have a bit of a romantic streak to you, Doc."

Wu's eyes narrowed. "And if you tell anyone, next time you're in for your check-up, I won't be as nice." She smirked, then let out a maniacal laugh. "But, seriously, no one can be always mean and rotten and all, right?" She sighed, seeing her computer flashing slightly. "Except when there's paperwork to be done. If you'll excuse me, I need to put my nose to the grindstone." Gildedtongue nodded and bid adieu to Terry, walking back out into the Spine.

Noises came from the door next to the medical bay. Sounds of hoots and hollers and metal clashing. The curious chakat peeked hir head into the cargo bay, seeing a group of people looking over the catwalk and into the hold. Gildy managed to nudge hir way through the crowd, listening to cries of "Get'm!" "Oi! Oi!" "To yer left!" "That'sa grapple!"

Making it to the railing, Gildy peered over. Hir eyes went wide as shi saw two figures between two large storage containers. The artificial gravity panel between them must have been turned off because they were both floating in the air, using electromagnetic cables to latch onto the containers and pull themselves around, in their primary hand they each carried a charged stick, about the size of a sword. Peering closer, Gildy's eyes went wide, seeing one of the combatants was hir mate Saldura, and by the looks of it, shi had hir opponent on the run. "What's going on?" shi shouted to the person next to hir to try and get over the din.

"Wha-? Oh? Issa fencin' match!" was all Gildy could get from the akita morph next to hir before there was the sound of a horn and cheers raising from the crowd. Both participants grappled themselves to the ground and pulled themselves down before the grav plate was reactivated, making Saldura's hair go from a flowing halo, to cascading down hir shoulders. Shi gave hir opponent, a relatively tall human, a congratulatory handshake and a pat on the back. After gathering their gear, they made their way up the stairwell, Saldura laughing and nodding to the crowd as the man gave a sheepish wave.

"Not exactly Olympic rules fencing, I think," Gildy said to Sal as the badger got close. Hir partner laughed and gave the chakat a firm hug as the two walked back into the Spine together. "Seemed like a hell of a thing. Sorry that I just walked in on the ending." shi said as Saldura lead hir to the showers. The herms undressed, stuffing their things into a locker before finding an empty spigot.

"Well, when growing up in a low or no gravity environment, people sometimes change the rules for some games." Saldura smiled, starting to wash his hair, stooping down to get the majority of the water onto his head. "To be honest, I'm considerably more comfortable in no gravity, as is most of the crew here." Shi chuckled a little bit, shrugging.

Blushing, Gildedtongue gulped slightly. "Um, then I hope we're not keeping the gravity on for just me." Shi muttered, starting to use some of the powdered soap to help clean his lover, feeling the soft padding surrounding a strong, well muscled frame of the stocky badger. Sal lifted his head to laugh at that.

"No, no, it's not just you. Trust me, it's not just you. There's some wonderful things about gravity, like having things you set down still be there when you come back, or a nudged box stopping a whole lot faster." Sal smirked some more. "Besides, Zero Gee sex? Be prepared for concussions and bruises. It's nowhere as slow and intimate as they show in movies." Sal laughed, giving a knowing pat to his own head.

Gildy laughed and kissed his mate's forehead lightly, then stuck his tongue out after tasting the soap. Shi was about to comment on what a bad idea that was of his when the intercom blared.

"Attention all personnel aboard the *Purgatorio*, a meeting is to be held in the holo room in thirty minutes time. All available hands to be in attendance." The comm repeated itself. Saldura sighed slightly, then gave a smile to his mate, standing up straight to return the kiss to Gildedtongue's forehead, stroking along his cheek.

"So much for a quiet day, no?" The two herms laughed as they started to rinse off, taking the time to touch over each other as much as they could. They went to the dryers, turning on the large fans and used towels on one another to clear off the rest of the water.

"Heh, this one time I was in here, this guy, well, he couldn't keep his hands off of me." Gildedtongue admitted, his ears as red as his mane.

Laughing, Saldura winked. "That so? That so? Bet you liked it, didn't you?" All Gildy could do was nod sheepishly. "Right proper feline, feeling the need to be worshipped," the badger smirked, putting on his uniform, belts and buttons strapped onto the large frame of Gildy's lover, finally plugging in his monocle into the port around his eye, the green transparent lens flashing to life. The chakat put back on his usual long-sleeved, casual wear top. Sal leaned to kiss the chakat, "You ought to show off more," Shi whispered.

"Not much to show off," Gildedtongue handwaved it off, drawing a shoulder punch to his left from the badger as they made their way down the Spine towards the holeroom. The usually large room was packed to the walls with the available crew. Gildedtongue kept to the back wall as Shi let Saldura move his way through the crowd

where Captain Matilda and a few technicians were standing, discussing something. Gildedtongue's sharp ears couldn't catch it through the din of the assembled.

Finally Matilda approached the crowd, clearing her throat. "Attention!" The group's conversations snapped shut like someone pulling the wire out of a speaker, making the audible noise of boots clattering on metal flooring as the crew turned to address their commanding officer. "Often these meetings are never good news, and considering our current situation, I'm sure everyone here is wondering if this is the meeting where we decide who gets eaten first." There was a small chuckle through the ranks. Matilda held up her hand and smiled. "Thankfully, this will be good news for once. Technician Rodriguez has an announcement for you all." Gildedtongue pricked up his ears, staring at the jaguar morph wearing the technician's jumpsuit most of the engineering crew wore. Her hair tied back into a ponytail as her golden eyes looked across the room, a bit wide in her stage fright, grabbing her hands together before her.

"Thank you, ma'am. Um, yes, good news. During the third shift, me and Anna," Rodriguez nodded to the waving human woman behind her, "finally managed to get the ship's astro navigation running and operational again." She took some time to cough as murmuring ran through the audience.

'That would be to say we've been flying blind this whole time?' Gildedtongue's eyes were wide, a sense of fear and dread welled up inside of the pit of his stomach, but she swallowed it back, reminding herself that obviously this has been put behind them.

"First shift today we all managed to calibrate the system, and we now know where we are." The holoream's projection summoned up a map of the galaxy, a box highlighting and zooming in on a spot over and over before a pointed arrow showed the location of the *Purgatorio*. "Now, as you know, space moves. Not as fast as a ship, and not as fast as we're going now, but just enough to alter where things are at any given time. That's why a Nav computer is so important, having to calculate billions of paths and trajectories, something no sentient mind really can comprehend, unless it was plugged into an A.I. Machi-..." Captain Jefferson gave a sharp cough, indicating that the technician get on with it. "Right. Anyway, with the computers back online we found that this Federation Frontier Station," the point was highlighted on the map, "Delegation code Bravo, Tango, Tango, Alpha. This point is six months away from our location at our current maximum warp. Theoretically, we could also be in range for real-time communications in four months time, provided the repairs made on the comm systems are as successful as we think they are."

The crew was holding back their applause for just a moment, the question of 'yeah, so?' hung in the air. The jaguar female coughed into her fist, looking nervous, turning to her superior officer, who just gave her a smile and nod of encouragement. "Well, for starters, the station should have a military grade replicator. After the Federation stripped out computer's databanks on *Purgy*, erm, the *Purgatorio* we, of course, lost

the data files pertaining to warp core manufacturing. We can get to the station, get the ship repaired, and get to our next destination from the station in about eight hours at maximum warp."

Rodriguez wasn't sure what to say next, but was luckily patted on the shoulder by a smiling Matilda. The captain addressed her crew, "Well, you heard what she said. We either keep our current course for the next four and a quarter years, or we change course and limp our way to the next pit stop. I think I can safely assume that you all would rather the latter option." The assembled let out a cheer of 'yes, ma'am!' Matilda grinned softly, nodding, "Crew opinion has been taken under consideration. Helmsman Watanabe, to the bridge and set course for F.F.S. Bravo, Tango, Tango, Alpha, maximum warp this ship can handle. Communication officer K'Thera, at 1200 hours each day, send a distress message towards the station, use direct comm paths and avoid using distress frequencies. Last thing we need is some other hungry wolf nipping at our toes, present company excluded." She gave a bit of a smirk at some of the wolves giving a grunt. "Dismissed!"

Most of the crew made their way back into the Spine, feeling the holeroom too cramped with all of them in there. Gildy kept to the back, letting people walk around him before starting to make his way towards where the speakers were. Matilda was still talking with Rodriguez, and Saldura was chatting away with Susan Labs. The badger and rat turned to the approaching chakat, smiling warmly. "Well, great to hear a bit of good news for once, isn't it, Wanderer?" Susan smiled, having dyed his headfur to a dark purple, some black spots on his cheeks that were either dyes or grease from the engineering bay.

"Ah, please, Susan, just call me Gildedtongue or Gildy. Everyone else on this ship knows and calls me that anyway." Gildedtongue chuckled. "Besides, it's sometimes confusing to keep answering to someone else's name. Guess I'm not good at theatre." The three chuckled as Gildedtongue thought. "So, wait, the replicators here can't build warp cores? What if, well, like our condition here, we're stuck and in desperate need to fix or replace our warp drive?"

Saldura gave a bit of a chuckle, "Uh oh, Gildy, you've opened up a huge tin of worms here. Stick a fiver in this one and she'll talk weapons and engineering for hours." Shi slapped Susan's shoulder gently, the rat turning to stick his tongue out at Sal.

"Well, it isn't just engineering and weapons, but, rather restrictions on them. Warp cores themselves are rather highly regulated, much like nuclear materials were in the 20th and 21st century, and for the same reason. A warp core explosion is a terribly destructive force that pretty much makes things disappear. Essentially it makes all the atoms in its radius go to warp, in random directions, since a warp bubble, like what we're in now, is what makes us keep in one piece, in a little pocket of real space as space all around us is folded."

Gildedtongue nodded. "Erm, so, like how Madeline L'Engle described it? A wrinkle in time is the fastest method of travel." Susan touched his nose and pointed to Gildedtongue, nodding to his answer. The chakat thought, "Wait, isn't our warp core is damaged? Aren't you concerned that we might cause this to explode all around us?"

"Ah, good question, Gildy. See, unlike the movies where everyone is running around screaming, 'Oh God! Oh God! The warp core has gone critical-slash-unstable-slash-whatnot!' Warp cores are more stable than most people give them credit for. The only way to explode them, really, is on purpose. There would have to be no warp bubble formed, the antimatter supply would have to be set to full, the warp drive would have to probably be cranked to eleven, and all that without any of the fail-safes and other restrictions kicking in. No no, the most likely thing to happen is a warp bubble popping, like when that grav mine got us in the attack, and even then, the bubble generator is so entwined with the core, that when one's shut off, the other powers down immediately." Susan looked at Gildedtongue's confused face. "Um, okay, in layman's terms, it's nigh impossible for us to go boom that way. The reason why we can't make warp cores is because they have to be tracked by the Federation, at least in this space, and made to their specifications lest they're turned into a weapon more powerful than a hundred fuel-air bombs, and more psychologically scarring than a hundred nuclear bombs."

"I think I'll just sit here and nod while you say the smart things," Gildedtongue chuckled slightly.

Saldura laughed and slapped Gildedtongue's shoulder. "That's what I do when shi gets like this – suits me just well." Susan stuck out his tongue again and Gildy noticed the appendage's light teal colouration, cocking his head to one side.

"Um, your tongue is a bit green, Susan – are you... feeling okay?"

Laughing, the rat smiled at Gildedtongue. "Fit as a fiddle. A throwback gene to one of my ancestors. Guess some point in time someone wanted to be their own Captain James T. Kirk and wanted to bang some green, quote unquote, 'alien' chick," his hands lifting up to give 'fingerquotes.' "I'm rather lucky my nose is pink, but under this fur is a green skinned mouse." Shi laughed, "No, I'm not photosynthetic."

"Seems like you know a lot about your family," Gildy said, cocking his head to one side.

"Quite a bit." Susan smiled, puffing his chest out in pride. "I've got my whole genealogy mapped out to the anthros first created in the laboratories."

Saldura patted Susan's shoulder, then wrapped his arm around Gildy's. "And we ought to leave it at that, or shi'll talk your ears clean off." The badger smirked, bidding his friend a good day before escorting Gildedtongue to Sal's quarters. Thallon was on the bed, snoring loudly in a nap. "Guess he missed the meeting. Will be good to tell him

we'll be making dock soon. His wanderlust has been kicking in I've noticed."

Nodding, Gildedtongue kissed hir lover, holding the badger close, careful not to wrinkle or mess up the uniform shi wore, feeling the brass buttons press against hir belly and chest as shi had to crane hir head up to get to hir lips. Both sighed after the kiss, holding each other quietly for a moment. "I love you, you know that, Sal?"

Nodding, Sal smiled, moving to sit down on the side of the bed, minding the sleeping centauroid on it. "I know. So, guess we'll be out of this mess soonish it seems." Shi blushed a bit, giving Thallon's scrotum a pat, making him grunt in his sleep. "Suppose we can end 'Operation: Breed the Chakat' then, eh?"

Gildedtongue blushed, trying not to stare too much at hir dozing husband as shi looked back to hir spouse, shaking hir head, "Well, I certainly don't want to stop. I told you, I love you and I love Thallon, and if you both would let me, I'd love to carry his cub. Hell, I'd carry yours if that was possible." Sal smirked and nodded to that. "Yeah, the courtship and marriage was all rather whirlwinded, and some lawyers and such could argue that I'm not quite in sound mind and body, but..." Gildedtongue trailed off, sighing softly, "I feel happy, and safe, and, for the first time in my life I feel like I actually belong in someone's life."

Sal beckoned the chakat over as Gildy moved in to another kiss, holding hir lover tightly as both groaned in happiness. Thallon roused from his slumber, seeing both of the herms in their lovers' embrace, letting his dark purple tongue loll out playfully, "Don't think Gildy is quite in heat, but, I suppose that doesn't stop us from some... practice."

And practice they did.

"Citizen Wanderer, please report to the Bridge. Wanderer to the Bridge," the speakers blared in Saldura's room. The chakat quickly got dressed as shi made hir way up along the Spine, combing hir mane en route. This was the first time shi had ever been called anywhere, hir eyes wide and nervous. Shi didn't recall doing anything wrong, so shi didn't think shi'd be reprimanded, and even so, shi'd be spoken to from hir location, not summoned to the control sector.

It was four months since the Astro Nav computers came back online, a full year since the pirate attack. Gildedtongue's lower belly was swollen heavily, more than average for a chakat with cub, and shi could count the reasons. '*Twins!*' shi thought, still not quite fully grasping the weight of the matter. 'I'm sixty-eight years old, never had to help raise a cub in my life and God decides, *I think you need a double shot*. That does it, God's a woman, only She could enjoy such bless'd irony.' Hir outfits and uniforms were starting to fill out as well, no longer the baggy clothes hiding hir body as the new life had kicked hir regenerative qualities into overdrive, swelling hir bosom out a

bit nicely.

The chakat panted, finally getting to the door at the end of the Spine, making sure this was to the Bridge and not Engineering as shi looked it over, looking for a place to knock. Shi sighed, putting hir hand on the lock and, to hir surprise, it opened up.

The Bridge wasn't like anything shi expected. To be honest, shi almost expected it to look like the observation deck on Nemo's *Nautilus*, with huge windows and sweeping bronze and iron pipes and fittings. Instead there was no windows, not even the type found in the quarters. Hundreds of screens flashed information in the cramped room. The main screen displayed a map measuring the distance between the ship and its destination with weak scanner pings hunting for anything incoming. The helmsman sat behind one computer, reading a magazine and the communications officer fiddled with his own machine. Saldura and Matilda were seated in a corner, speaking quietly with a younger human officer, whom Gildy has only seen a few times in the galley, Yeoman Gunther, shi recalled. Gunther saluted and made his way out of the bridge, slipping around Gildedtongue. The chakat approached hir mate and hir mate's superior officer, giving each an awkward salute. Matilda laughed, "No need to worry about that, Gildedtongue. At ease, at ease."

Gildy blushed sheepishly, looking around the cramped room. "Um, not to question your orders, Captain Jefferson, but, why am I here? Certainly you don't think I am going to steer the ship in or anything like that."

Shaking hir head, Saldura smiled at hir spouse, "No no, don't worry about that. All we want you to do is stand in the background and look cute." Gildedtongue shot a confused look at hir mate, then at the captain. Sal continued, "Most Federation officers have a soft spot for chakats – they're pretty much the organization's golden child. So, often it helps out to have a few in view when speaking to the officials. Hope you don't mind using you just a little."

Gildy shook hir head softly, "Well, this is certainly one of the less invasive ways to use me, I guess." The chakat looked between the two, "So, we're going to be able to talk to the Federation station from here? What are they going to ask, what are they going to say?" shi asked, confused.

The man at the communications desk turned around, another very fair-skinned human with blonde hair, which Gildedtongue had learned was common among the "Spacer" humans, "They'll probably be asking the usual questions – who we are, why we're in the middle of nowhere, and what are we doing, and, hopefully later, what our location is and what's our problem so they can pick us up. This ship can fit easily in a Federation battleship's warp bubble, so, hopefully they can give us a tow, so to speak."

Matilda nodded at the assessment. "And we made initial contact with the station fifteen minutes ago. We wanted to be ready to make another call. All hands to your

stations! Gildedtongue, stand behind me to one side, and for God's sake, smile!" Matilda adjusted her longcoat as Saldura gave a final assessment to his sash and hair. The helmsman chuckled his magazine under the console as the comm officer counted down before sending another request for real time communications.

It took half a minute, the longest half-minute Gildedtongue remembered in recent history, but soon the image of a portly skunk morph appeared on the screen, wearing the uniform befitting a Federation commander. The way the top stretched was evidence of the morph's breasts, but as soon as audio feed came through, the person on the other end was obviously a hermaphrodite with a deep, bass voice, sounding almost Churchillian through his fuzzy jowels. "*Purgatorio*, we read you, but your signal is very weak. This is Commander Kim Johnson of the Federation Frontier Station Bravo, Tango, Tango, Alpha. We've received your distress call, what is the problem?"

Matilda took a half a step forward, her shoulders pulled back slightly, giving her a gallant look through her coat, "F.F.S. BTTA, this is Captain Matilda Jefferson of the *Purgatorio*, independent ore frigate currently en route to Mining Colony Omega 56-74. We were hit by a pirate attack and our engines and communication systems were badly damaged. We've managed to partially fix our commsys, but direct transmissions are all we can do now. Requesting a Federation ship to pick us up and bring us to you for repairs."

Three minutes of silence passed. Gildedtongue was beginning to think that the commander was ignoring them, but she soon started to speak again, the chakat putting two and two together and realizing there was a heavy delay, but three minutes for hundreds of thousands of light years isn't bad. "We read you, *Purgatorio*, however there are no ships docked here large enough to take you in. We have two squadrons of fighters and that's about it. Will you be able to make the rest of the trip yourself?"

There was a collective sigh of disappointment in the bridge, two months to span something any battleship could breeze through in hours. Matilda kept a stoic look, though, "Understood. We'll be fine, F.F.S. BTTA. Our estimated arrival time is 57 Terran days. I request daily communication between this ship and your station, say, fourteen hundred hours?"

Another long pause. "Very well. Keep safe, *Purgatorio*. We'll keep in touch. Batta out." And the main screen flipped back to the stellar map. Sal and Matilda slumped back to their seats as the two crewmen went back to occupying themselves. On the whole though, it was the first time they managed to speak to anyone but themselves in over a year, thus there was some progress.

Matilda, though, didn't seem thrilled, leaning towards the badger, "I'd like for you to join me in my quarters at 2000; will that be a problem?" Saldura perked his ears, looking at Gildedtongue who gave his spouse a small smile and nod. The badger told

Matilda shi'd be there, and that seemed to warm the captain a little.

"If it pleases you all, I'll be heading back," Gildy said, crossing hir arms behind hir, "I don't want to be in anyone's way." They nodded to the chakat. "Captain Jefferson. Corporal Holbock," shi bowed slightly, giving a smirk to them both who both stifled a quiet giggle. Gildedtongue walked out of the bridge and stretched as much as hir felitaur body would let hir. Shi couldn't believe how cramped it was in there, and the Spine looked more big and endless than it usually did.

Gildedtongue's stomachs growled loudly at hir as shi sighed. Stuffing two stomachs was work, but now shi had to feed six! Shi made hir way into the galley. Shi took extra servings of sandwiches, soups, and other foodstuffs. Shi felt a little guilty about how much shi was eating lately, but both the chefs, the quartermaster, the doctor, and the captain all assured hir that shi wasn't taking undue rations, and the ship was doing fine. More so now considering the proximity to the space station. The chakat saw Thallon and Susan talking with one another as shi took hir tray to them. The huge foxtaur quickly moved a chair out of the way, looking for a cushion for Gildy to sit on. The leonine 'taur laughed, shaking hir head at Thallon. "Dear, I'm barely past the first quarter. You don't have to dote on me. I'm made of harder stuff." Shi and Susan laughed as Gildy looked at the bowl in front of Susan, a few spears of pickle sticking out of a bowl of ice cream. The chakat lifted an eyeridge, "Um, are we expecting more little ratlings?"

Susan looked confused for a moment, then looked at hir meal and laughed, "Oh? Oh! Oh no!" shi smiled wide, "No no. But, I have to admit, that's what got me to try this. Was looking over some mid 20th century American media, and someone said something about pickles and ice cream. I guess that female humans craved it when pregnant or something. Anyway, I was kinda curious and, well... I have to admit, the saltiness and the vinegar of the pickle compliments the sweet cream really well. Want to try? Might be good for the cubs!"

Gildedtongue feigned away the green stick with the dripping ice cream pointed to hir. "That's okay, hon. I think I'll be a neglectful mother and avoid such foods for now." Susan gave a soft 'suit yourself,' as shi resumed eating the bizarre meal. Gildy turned hir head to Thallon, giving the taller 'taur a scratch on the shoulder, "Well, apparently they can't send anyone to come get us, but, don't worry, in less than two months, we'll be on the station, get repairs done, and then we'll be on our way once more." The chakat gave a small smile. Shi could feel hir husband's anxiety rising, a general sense of claustrophobia clinging to both the foxtaur and the chakat. Collectively, they took in a deep breath and let it out, trying to compose themselves.

"That so? Cheapskate Feddies. Can't live with them, and without them would be a bit of anarchy. Quite the conundrum they make." Thallon's grey eyes slit halfway as he sighed slightly.

Gildedtongue nodded quietly, "So, is that the reason the League of Non-Aligned Worlds have kept as a separate faction from the Federation?"

"That's a good question," Thallon leaned back, glad for something to take his mind off of things. "Probably best for Sal or Captain Jefferson, but from how I see it, largely it deals with a difference of opinion on how to run an interplanetary government. See, while the Federation doesn't get involved with local governments per se, there are various contractual clauses stating that 'in times deemed necessary, the Federation has the power to utilize a planet's resources, population, and military as seen fit by the Federation Council.' So, just like you, yourself, were 'conscripted' into the Federation's needs, so have many other people throughout this galaxy." Thallon tapped a claw on the metal table. "Also, the Federation demands tax and tribute for their services, keeping their space clear and protected from pirates, though many planets view this as a form of... well, like the Syndicated Criminal Organizations from Terra, or, even pirates of today, how they offer 'defence' in return for 'protection money.' Refuse, and you might have trouble stepping out of your airspace with a Federation cruiser informing you that you're in a restricted zone."

Gildedtongue had a slight look of horror about all of this, but Thallon gave the chakat a small pat, "But, I'm just talking about the bad things. They do a lot of good as well. They send resources and scientists to places that need it the most. They do actually provide protection in the more core planetary areas. And compared to what they could be taking from some planets, they do offer their services relatively inexpensively." Thallon smiled. "I'm just listing the reasons why some places wouldn't like the Federation." The foxtaur laughed, "A bit of irony is that Chakona itself could be more aligned with the LNAW if it wasn't for the fact that the Federation is footing the bill and all." Gildy cocked his head slightly, making Thallon laugh. "Most chakats aren't exactly one for bureaucracy."

The chakat ohed slightly, leaning to give the foxtaur a one-armed hug, Thallon returning it as Susan finished up his interesting meal. Blushing, Gildy looked at the standing rat, clearing his throat. "Um, probably not tonight or anything, but, um, Susan, if you're ever inclined to join Sal, Thall and I... um, I think that could be arranged." Susan blinked at the offer, then blushed himself, nodding.

"Heh, I'll keep that in mind. But, now I've got to head off to work. Glad to have spent time with you both!" Shi waved and headed out, Thallon chuckling loudly.

"Well, looks like we're making a proper chakat out of you, yet!" he teased, stroking Gildy's sides. Shi continued to blush, but rested against the hybrid's larger form.

"Maybe, maybe. But, for now, I think I'd like a nap after all that food," shi said, looking at the meal shi wolfed down as Thallon was talking. "And, um, don't think Sal will be joining us tonight. Methinks shi and the captain have some... debriefing to do tonight."

Thallon grinned, "Oh, don't lie to me, love. You and I both know Sal doesn't wear briefs!" They laughed as they went to their bedchamber.

Terry was making a few scans of Gildedtongue's womb, nodding with a smile, "Things seem to be going well; they're both growing healthfully and you yourself seem to be getting stronger."

Gildedtongue nodded slightly; it was the day before docking with the Frontier Station and Wu wanted to give the chakat one more once over, smiling wide. Shi was already halfway through hir pregnancy and hir breasts had capped off at a small C cup, the nipples having moved to a more appropriate position as they had been getting ready to express true milk. Gildedtongue's mane, however, hadn't changed its streaked nature, but with all the food they had been pushing on the chakat, hir face and body had plumped up as well, giving the felitaur a healthy set of curves rather than looking like a starvation victim. Wu did mention that on Terra, Gildy was essentially starving himself, eating such small portions, and that finally shi was on a proper diet.

"How are the hallucinations?" Dr. Wu asked, looking over hir PADD. Gildedtongue looked over in the corner, seeing Creekstripe staring at hir in disapproval.

"Still there," Gildy sighed, looking back at Terry, "But, I guess I've been getting better at ignoring them." Shi shrugged, not exactly feeling happy about that. Wu smiled, giving Gildy's foreleg paw a gentle squeeze.

"You're doing great, then, Gildy," she encouraged. "Don't beat yourself up about this; it'll only make things worse. Honestly, this isn't something anyone can cure, just what they can deal with. You're doing very well." Wu put a hand on the lion chakat's shoulder, offering a smile.

Gildedtongue sighed, rolling off of the examination bed, stretching slightly, "Maybe, maybe. But, suppose I can't help but feel that my children deserve better than some psychopath..." Hir ears splayed slightly, feeling hir mood dropping again. "I'm sorry, I really need to stop doing this. Every time I start to think about these things, it just gets worse and worse."

Nodding, Terry offered a quick hug. "Slipping into the mire is really easy. Getting yourself out of it is really hard, nearly impossible without help. It's annoying that there isn't anyone here really able to help you, but keep your chin up and try to smile a little bit. I'm sure once we get you to your destination, you'll do fine. The chakats there will be able to help you out and get you on a path where you aren't on a balancing act all the time."

Gildedtongue nodded quietly, forcing himself to smile a little to Terry, who gave hir a genuine smile. Gildy slowly made hir way out of the medical bay, loosing a held

breath. Shi hated people fussing over hir and hated even more feeling helpless and unable to simply fix hirself. That pigheadedness and stubbornness never did hir well growing up, but never seemed to have left hir as an adult.

Most of the crew were busying themselves around the ship, making sure everything was as repaired and shipshape as they could get it. Fourteen months after the pirate attack they would finally have the resources and methods to fix the ship proper. Thirtysilver, however, was not quite ecstatic, running through the numbers over and over again, making sure that the ship could afford the expense, often mumbling about her desire to join a trading company rather than remain independent.

Making it back to Saldura's room, the chakat flopped on the bed, feeling drained from hir current bout of depression. Creekstripe breathing hotly over hir neck, a tremble ran through hir body as shi turned around to face the phantom, not seeing hir sire anywhere. Both of Gildedtongue's hearts pounded faster and faster as hir fear thickened. Shi wasn't sure what shi was more afraid of, ghosts, or losing hir mind. No, shi knew shi feared insanity more.

Closing hir eyes, shi willed hirself to try and keep sane, for as good as it would do hir, clinging on a bit of hope that perhaps there was a couple of chakats aboard the station that might help hir psyche. Clutching on that bit of hope, shi embraced a bit of sleep.

"Boarding with Station in three hours," the comm channels rang, waking up Gildedtongue, whose nap took far too long. Hir bleary eyes blinked away the sleep clutching to hir lids as shi overheard another message, "Citizen Wanderer to the holeroom for a meeting."

Grumbling, the chakat sighed as shi was forced to wake up now. Shi took off hir top, looking at the mirror. First shi took stock of hir face and mane, rubbing hir fur the right way and did some spot grooming, then ran hir fingers through hir mane, trying to get it looking somewhat cared for. Shi blinked a bit at the mirror, seeing something wrong. Shi raised a hand to hir chest, feeling Frank's cross missing! Shi pounced the bed, pulling sheets and the mattress away, panicking. Creekstripe laughing at hir in the corner. "Some friend you are. That was an heirloom from someone who thought you were a good friend, and now you just lost it like a pen. Wonder what he would think?"

Gildy continued to hunt, rubbing hir neck idly, the speakers gave another call for the chakat as shi sighed, realizing shi had to give up for the moment, putting on one of the active duty uniforms laid out for the chakat. Shi marched hir way to the holeroom, looking around the Spine, realizing that it was a very old piece of jewellery, and likely the chain broke from constant wear. It had to still be on the ship, obviously. That didn't give hir much comfort as shi arrived at hir destination. Saldura, Matilda, Thirtysilver, and Terry sat at a table, nodding to the chakat as shi sat down at one

reserved spot. "You look like hell, love," Sal said bluntly, looking at hir spouse.

"I lost Frank's cross," shi muttered quietly, feeling childish for being so distraught over some piece of metal, but, it was something that hir first and closest friend gave to hir. Saldura nodded, putting hir hand on the chakat's shoulder.

"It's on board, I assure you," the badger smiled. The chakat composed himself a little bit better, looking at the assembled officers.

Shi felt a little intimidated, being thrust with everyone hadn't, traditionally, been the predecessor of happy times, but the captain offered a warm smile. "I'm sure you're confused about what's going on here." Gildy nodded quietly, "Well, Commander Johnson has expressed interest with meeting you. Shi mentioned that shi'd like to have dinner with us and yourself.

"Now, you understand our predicament is a little awkward, considering the lack of another chakat on board." Matilda continued, "Thirtysilver and chief Holbock have fudged the records a little bit and have added one more casualty, a denmate of yours, Chakat Marlow, child of Tetra and Wintercoat. It may or may not come up in the meal, but if you feel you aren't sure what to say about hir, just tell our host that the trauma has made you too distraught to discuss hir."

Gildedtongue sighed, more lies. And lies on top of lies. Shi was getting jaded from the oft romanticized spy thriller, realizing that this sort of thing wasn't any sort of fun, and gave hir a headache trying to keep up with who was who. At least shi had memorized hir cover name. "Well, hope you're not expecting me to talk too much. I mean, I'm certainly no good as an actor, as my time here I think has shown."

Nodding, Matilda looked over the chakat. "It'll be okay. I'm pretty sure that we will be able to keep a few Federation officers entertained. Some stories, some talk of places visited, should be simple enough." Matilda stood up from her seat, looking at the map of the sector, as well as a diagram of the Frontier station, looking like a massive top slowly spinning in the heavens. Matilda moved her conversation tangentially, "You'll probably find the members of the station to be a little... eccentric. Frontier stations aren't quite as contacted as controlled space ones unless there's a problem or a discovery, or whatnot, so, they tend to have a bit of cabin fever, so to speak." Matilda looks over hir PADD, "In theory, Frontier crews are rotated every five years because of this. Beta, Tango, Tango, Alpha, however, hasn't been sent a relief crew in the last fifteen years." Matilda shrugged slightly, "This, however, isn't all that unusual. I've read reports of one crew spending twenty years stationed on one Frontier. The Federation just doesn't have all the people necessary to keep that sort of rotation up. So, if people at the station seem unusually inquisitive, or a bit socially... strange, try your best to keep your smiles on and your good graces forward."

Gildedtongue smirked to himself. "Because there's nothing more normal than a psychologically deranged chakat?" shi joked. "But, I see, I see. I'll keep doing my

best to stay under the scanners, until all the repairs are made." Shi blushed a bit. "Um, I know it's a bit late, but sorry about all these setbacks. I'm guessing they're being rather costly."

The Caitian cocked her head in confusion, "Sorry about what? Are you in league with those pirates? Have you set us up or something?" Gildy shook his head, blushing slightly as shi looked at the assembled. Thirtysilver shook her head gently. "I know you like to apologize for everything, but this happened out of your realm of influence, Gildedtongue. We appreciate the concern, though." Gildedtongue nodded and Saldura gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder and a smile.

Matilda dismissed the meeting as Saldura walked out with Gildedtongue, smiling at the chakat still. "You'll do fine. If you're feeling put on the spot, just give me a poke on the shoulder and I'll do my best to keep everyone else occupied." The badger gave the chakat a one-armed hug as they made their way back to Saldura's quarters. Thallon was inside, bouncing about like his usual self, the wanderlusting hybrid ecstatic that he would be able to enjoy some different sights and smells soon. He gave both Gildy and Sal a firm hug, tousling the chakat's hair, who smirked and poked Thallon's chest. Gildedtongue sighed softly, leaning against the larger 'taur.

"You didn't happen to see a small cross somewhere? Gold-plated aluminium, with most of the gold having flaked off? You know, the one I'm always wearing?" shi asked, hoping that maybe the large wolf/foxtaur had found it somewhere and put it away for safe keeping. Thallon, though, shook his head, making Gildy sigh and lean against him in defeat. "Shit! I have to find it. It's Frank's gift and..." shi was stopped by a kiss as Thallon held him tightly.

"It's on board," Thallon whispered, breaking the kiss, stroking Gildy's mane gently, "The advantage of being on a space ship, even a big one, is that there just isn't that many places it'll end up. We'll keep a look out for it. But, first we've got a docking to attend to."

Sal nodded, stroking Gildy's back. "And a dinner to prepare for. But, we'll find it, love. Just, try to calm down, okay?" Gildedtongue nodded to his mate, kissing the badger's cheek lightly before going to freshen up. Exhaling, shi wiped his face with a small amount of water, cleaning the 'just woke up' look on his face. As shi looked in the mirror, Creekstripe stood as clear as day, tilting his head to one side.

"I'm really sure that Frank will be soooo pleased to hear that his family artefact got lost by such a clumsy cunt like you. And now you're getting so distraught and nervous, you're gonna freak out at the dinner, eh? Maybe you'll haul off and attack that commander skunk, and they'll have to put your crazy ass down for good! More than you deserve, let me tell you." The phantom continued on as Gildy muttered to himself, repeating a mantra that has been keeping himself somewhat stable, or, at least shi thinks shi is.

"Don't be crazy, don't be crazy, don't be crazy, don't be crazy..." Splashing a bit more cold water on his face, Gildedtongue sighed to himself, at least turning down the litany of negativity the anthropomorphic avatar of his subconscious to a dull whisper. While continuing to whisper this to himself, the chakat started to brush his headfur, pulling hairs out with each firm stroke. His hand gripping the plastic handle harder and harder, the blue colouration starting to go white.

A knock on the door broke Gildy out of his daze as the brush clattered in the sink. The chakat opened the door, letting in Saldura, "You were in here an hour, was making sure you're okay," Sal said, looking over the chakat, frowning slightly. "Are you feeling okay?" she asked, concerned. Gildedtongue shook his head, leaning to hug the badger tightly as she started to cry, she wasn't exactly sure why. Sal closed his eyes and stroked the chakat's mane, trying his best to comfort the centauroid, letting him unbottle the emotions jumping around inside of him.

Gildy sniffed slightly, making sure not to wipe his nose or face on Sal's dress uniform. She pulled back his head, taking in a deep breath, "Fuck! How the hell am I supposed to raise cubs when I can't even take care of myself? This isn't fair to them, this isn't fair to you, Goddammit."

The badger continued to rub over Gildy's shoulder softly, giving him a firm snug. "This isn't fair to you either. Once we get you to Chakona, things will be better for you. There'll be people who can help you and get you on a more stable path. Until then, Thallon and I will be here to keep you afloat as best we can. We love you," she whispered, kissing the chakat's cheek.

Gildy sighed a bit, looking at the mirror again. "You both are going to keep on the ship though? Probably won't see each other for years at a time." Saldura looked down, nodding softly as his fingers fell from Gildy's shoulder. The chakat shook his head, giving a faint smile. "Well, if I am getting better there, I probably won't be too idle there." She blushed as Sal kissed his cheek.

"I wouldn't ever want you to be idle, love," Sal whispered before starting to groom his mate. His long, wavy hair pulled into a simple braid, faster than restarting on the brushing and combing. As they came out, Thallon had Gildedtongue's dress from the night of the party before she left Earth. The chakat declined, putting on a new dress uniform.

"Sorry, Thallon, I just don't want to risk hurting that, especially after losing my cross. Besides, according to the meeting, I'm here to represent the *Purgatorio*, and so, well... best to at least look the part." Gildy laughed, kissing Thallon's cheek. "But, thank you. Are you coming to the dinner as well?"

Shaking his head, Thallon rubbed Gildy's shoulder, "Nah, I'd be a total pest there. I think I'm going to do some snooping around the place, get to enjoy the new sights and smells and stretch my legs out. I'm really not one for anything too formal." Gildy

nodded and kissed Thallon's cheek, before Saldura took the chakat's hand, smiling to hir supportively before they made their way to the cargo bay. A large set of doors towards the aft were opened as engineers were moving to prep the bay for the repair and maintenance of the warp drive. The two herms were joined by the three other women ready for the meal. Thirtysilver was dressed in Caitian formal wear, looking both exotic and beautiful at the same time. Matilda didn't look too terribly different, except she opted out of her long coat, wearing a dark green uniform top that matched her blue slacks and boots. Terry, never one in a skirt or a dress, wore the same suit she wore to Gildedtongue's wedding.

The five stepped out of the ship and onto the hanger of the Frontier station, all taking in a deep breath. The air smelled different; it was the same recycled sort that was on the *Purgatorio*, but just knowing they were in a different place made them feel more at ease. The increased gravity tugged more knowingly on Gildedtongue's body as hir steps became more laboured, noticing that hir companions were also feeling the pains of acclimating to the artificial pull. It made Gildy feel a little better that shi wasn't the only one.

Surprisingly, there wasn't anyone in the hanger. No one living, that is. The sound of metal legs clicking on the metal floor of large, four spindly-legged robots scurrying around the area, each the size of a small horse. The engineers seemed to be nonplussed with their co-workers so Gildedtongue just took it as normal. One such bot came right up to the five, bowing its forelegs, speaking in a melodious, Terran voice. "Welcome, visitors, to F.F.S. Station Bravo, Tango, Tango, Alpha, or as the commander likes to call it, Batta. I shall be your guide for this evening; you may call me, Jasmine. Commander Kim Johnson is awaiting your company most eagerly."

"They send a machine out to greet us? I'm glad we rank so highly on the commander's priorities," Wu muttered dryly, eliciting a cough from the captain.

"These stations are often undermanned, Doctor. I'm sure our host is offering as many amenities as shi can." Matilda smiled softly, looking at her companions. "Besides, you know what they say about the mouths of gift horses."

Wu rolled her eyes as she joined the travelling. "Yeah, they bite." Saldura laughed, keeping to the right of Matilda, letting the captain take vanguard. Gildedtongue stayed near the wall, unconsciously lifting a hand to run along the wall as they walked. The metal felt different, was probably just a different texture, or the temperature of the structure, kept just a little cooler than the *Purgatorio*. The clicking sound of the bot's feet tapping on the metal floor became more and more monotonous, and Gildy was tempted to ask for it to stop, but logic reminded hir that it would be nigh impossible for the machine to move without doing so.

The path twisted and turned through the corridors. The lights were left low. Gildy could see fine, but hir companions were squinting a bit to get through the place;

luckily the tapping made the bot's presence known and easily followed. Finally, they made it into the galley, the lights were much brighter, making all five morphs squint. Being lead around the tables, the bot buzzed at a door, making it open up. The opposite side of the metal doors were carved wood and the metal floor begat plush carpeting.

The officer's dining room was considerably more posh than the rest of the ship. Wood panelling wainscoting the room about a quarter high, and above some simple floral print wallpaper, enough to add an accent, but not enough to be too gaudy. Stained oak moulding ran along the sides, matching the large oaken table in the middle of the room. The place was lit by candlelight, a chandelier above, as well as several candelabras on the table, resting on silken sheets.

At the head of the table stood Commander Kim Johnson. The skunk, a portly herm, at first glance built similar to Saldura, at least in this gravity, but the motion of hir arms betrayed the atrophy of hir muscle. "Welcome, honoured guests. So good of you to join us tonight!" shi smiled, bowing hir head and back slightly. It was also apparent that the skunk was rather gravid, close to hir seventh month of pregnancy.

The guiding bot lead the guests to their chairs. Gildedtongue alighted on the softest cushion shi ever had sat upon. The whole thing was a bit overwhelming, such a stately place put the chakat off ease. A foreleg paw reached to stroke along two boards of the table, feeling different grains on them, a good indicator that this was made by artisans, and not simply replicated. A new bot, with a bow-tie taped on the front, padded silently through the room, carrying a shelf where it started to serve appetizers.

"Captain Matilda Jefferson. Would that be the of the same Jefferson family that owns several mining colonies out in the Betelgeuse system? What brings you aboard such an old ship?"

"Guilty as charged, shir Johnson. I'm surprised my family is known out here. We're understandably known back home, but I wouldn't think out here," Matilda commented. "As for my ship, I have plenty of siblings, and I can't say I'm terribly high on the inheritance chain. Besides, I found myself in need to get out, and enjoy the galaxy outside of my family's influences." She and the skunk continued to speak as Gildedtongue's eyes drifted. Creekstripe was in the room, looking over the architecture, picking up a grape from the wax fruit sculpture and proceeding to eat it. Gildedtongue's face immediately shot down to hir plate, trying to ignore hir phantoms and listen to the conversation.

"Now, Corporal Holbock. Saldura, that doesn't sound like Terran etymology..."

"It isn't," Sal answered, then correcting herself, "Actually, it is; a dried up old river actually had my name, however, I was named for a friend of my sire's, a Rashkani shi worked with in the mines. Apparently the name comes from a Rashkani hero of old. A

grand, romantic hero, if I recall right. Successful in bed and battlefield."

"Hah! Well, I hope that you're as successful as your namesake, then, my good brock." Johnson chuckled, stuffing his face while listening. Creekstripe walked up to the herm, flashing his tits and making lewd thrusting motions with his forehips. Gildedtongue's eyes darted back down as she resumed his old mantra.

"Don't be crazy, don't be crazy, don't be crazy..."

"Shir Wanderer, is there a problem?" the commander asked, cocking his head.

Shit, this was not a good idea, this was not a good idea at all. Gildedtongue stammered for a moment, looking blankly at Kim, trying to remember all of the bits of data she was supposed to remember. What was the name of his fake mate? How long were they supposed to have been together? 'Why can't I be quiet and sane?'

Clearing his throat, Saldura rest his hand on Gildedtongue's shoulder, giving a firm look at the commander. "You'll have to excuse Shir Wanderer, Commander Johnson. She lost his mate in the pirate attack, and the loss has affected her greatly, and since we had no other chakats on board, there hasn't been anyone to comfort her the way she needs." Sal shot Gildy a supportive smile, "It's been hard, but, we're doing our best to get through this."

The skunk nodded silently about the dead, "It is a pity. Tell me, did you store the bodies appropriately for Federation review?"

Narrowing her eyes, Wu crossed her arms, "I'm sorry to say, no, we could not. Were we to have kept them, they would have been rotting, we did not have enough cold storage for that number of people." The doctor furrowed her brow, "Besides, I'm sure there's just one part of those that you really wanted to get your hands on. Sorry, the brains were disposed of as well."

Johnson didn't seem to appreciate Wu's words, tapping his claws on the table, "Well, I will have to fine you for your actions, however, why would you think that I would be after those?" She gave a soft chuckle, "Do I look like a zombie or something?"

Wu shook her head, leaning back in her chair, "Not at all, you certainly don't seem the cannibal sort, at least, not that way." The doctor glanced around the room, "Rather, it seems odd that you use so many bots at your workplace."

"They work better, harder, and complain less. Why wouldn't one use robots in lieu of more fragile, more mistake-laden people? Besides, aside from maintenance, they cost considerably less." Johnson was biting back something, everyone in the room could see the fur starting to rise on the skunk's neck and face.

Matilda nodded, "Considerably less, aye. Now, recalling right, there should be a

hundred thirty people stationed here, not counting ships arriving and leaving. Pilots for the fighters, mechanics for the station and ships, officers to chefs, and cleaning crew. All we've seen is yourself. Where are the other people on this station?"

Johnson was clearly agitated, balling his hands into fists, "Drone fighters are more reliable and offer less loss of life. And the rest of the crew is presently occupied."

"Yes, occupied with our ship, being worked on by my crew and robotic drones. What happened to your crew, Commander Johnson?" Matilda inquired.

Johnson's teeth clenched, a growl started to rumble in his chest, then, a calming smile, relaxing slightly as his hands steepled before him. "Like I have said, my crew is occupied, working on your ship, serving our food, cleaning the place." One bot scurried up next to Johnson, leaning next to him as the skunk gently stroked its frame, the machine buzzing happily. "They're so much more content, much more efficient this way. I don't have to deal with insubordination, nor complaints about hours, leave, or them wanting to leave me." Johnson smiled wide, "And now, you won't be leaving me either."

Eight more bots came out of the doors around descended quickly on the five guests. Saldura threw his chair at one, knocking it down for a moment, but just as quickly, it got back up. The smell of ozone ran through the air as electrical discharges stunned the *Purgatorio* crew. Gildedtongue backed himself against a wall, trembling as the boxy machine's iris eye stared down at him, the stun rod extended, waving at him. Gildy reached to try and fight it off, but three other machines came from behind, and soon all was black for the chakat.

Chapter 9

Stars danced across the chakat's eyes as shi slowly woke up. Gildy's head was throbbing and his whole body was sore from electrical spasming. Shi had no clue how long shi was unconscious as shi shook his mane, looking across the room. It was well lit, and looked like a barracks. Shi was resting on the floor at the time shi awoke as the bunk beds lined the walls. "Looks like you were tagged the worst there. How many fingers am I holding up?" the English accented rat's hand was thrust in the chakat's face, three digits wiggling at him as Gildedtongue batted the hand to one side, reaching to clutch his cranium.

"The Engineering boys and I were taken out pretty quickly. Heh, we thought all those things were there to help put the ship back together, but..." Susan drifted off, shrugging his shoulders. Gildedtongue nodded, running his tongue through his dry mouth as shi looked around. Several other members of the *Purgatorio* were also in the room, mostly sitting on bunk beds, but some standing and talking to one another. The

door was open on the other end, but a faint purple shimmer betrayed the force field keeping them locked inside. One of the main spidery robots stood outside, no visible weapons, but as the prisoners knew, that didn't mean it was unarmed.

Saldura knelt near a few crew members who were babbling in hysterics. The badger trying hir best to calm them. Gildedtongue knew that panicking would be an appropriate response to this situation, but shi was either too groggy or too jaded to join in, getting on all four feet with a little difficulty. Shi put a hand to hir pregnant lower belly, feeling a spike of concern in hir mind as shi remembered shi was living for three now. Susan gave a reassuring pat to Gildy's shoulder, "They've been squirming up a storm while you were out, so... I'm sure they're fine." Gildedtongue nodded mutely.

"So, this is it? We're just going to wait here until we die? Not exactly how I expected it," Gildedtongue finally found hir voice, keeping it quiet not to disturb any of the other occupants. As shi looked around shi noticed that everyone in the room were the ship's hermaphrodites, like hirself, Susan, and Saldura, putting two and two together, figuring they were divided by sex, and the men and women are somewhere near by in the same predicament.

Susan chuckled, slapping Gildedtongue on the shoulder. "Oh, I'd like to think you know us better. We're gonna look for a way out of here and fight until we die." Shi pulled Gildedtongue towards a corner of the barracks furthest from the door, hir voice getting low, "You see, we've seen a loose panel on the door frame. With any luck, it was from when these bots jury-rigged this place into a cell. The problem is, well, it'll take time to open it, and, if it's an emitter for the forcefield, well, I don't have any tools, so, it's gonna be... interesting getting that thing to short, but, if we can, Sal's pretty sure there's enough of us to take out one bot, the key is to do so before it summons the swarm. That happens, well, we're fucked."

Nodding, the chakat peered back at the door momentarily, then back to Susan, "And you expect that thing to sit there idle as you do all of this?"

"No, no, definitely not. If that thing notices us, we're equally fucked. They'll probably come and knock us all out again, repair the panel, and we're, once again, fucked." Susan shook hir head, "We've got a slight chance, though, if what Doctor Wu is right, from what Sal mentioned from the dinner, then each of these robots use a Terran brain as a central processing hub." Gildedtongue gave the rat a "yeah, so?" look, to which Susan lifted a finger to let hir keep talking.

"Anyway, brain processors are popular for A.I.s because of their ability to adapt, process, even be creative, given the right parameters, but, given our captor's tendency of control, we're lucky that we shouldn't need to worry about creativity on, well, most of these grunts. But, the most important thing is that, like I'm proving right here, the Terran brain is highly subject to distraction. So... anyway, we're hoping you'd go and

do some distracting."

Gildedtongue furrowed hir brow, about to shout, but thought better than to compromise their escape, "Me? Why would you want me to stand there and distract that thing? Isn't there someone better for it?"

Susan sighed, then smirked, "You're sitting in a room full of engineers and security officers, and one teacher. Who would you put in charge of disabling the field, who would you put in charge of disabling the robot, and who would you put in charge of distracting the robot?" Gildedtongue looked a bit sheepish, nodding. Susan smiled, "Besides, the kids all mentioned that you certainly kept their attention in class, so, I'm sure you'll be fine." Susan clapped an arm around the chakat's shoulder as shi lead hir towards Saldura, who was standing up. The badger had been stripped of hir weapons, unsurprisingly, as well as hir monocle, the captors doing their best to not give their prisoners any advantage, despite the number of captives. The green-eyed badger lowered hir head to kiss Gildy's cheek, giving hir a firm hug.

"How are you doing, love?"

"A pounding headache, but I think I'm getting used to it by now, with how many times I've been knocked out." Gildy offered a sardonic smirk, which Sal laughed at. Susan filled in the badger that the pieces have been more or less set up for their escape attempt. "So, you just want me to stand there and talk to the thing while you, less than a metre away, try to pry off a metal panel and short a circuit to take down the force field, putting me right in the forefront, so that Sal and the other bits of security will, hopefully, take it out?"

Susan nodded as Sal shrugged with a 'it's the best we got' expression. Gildy couldn't help but roll hir eyes, nodding in agreement. Susan produced a few metal supports pulled out of some of the uniforms that could hopefully be used to bypass the circuitry, as shi went to sit down on the floor next to the panel in question. Saldura resting on a bunk bed nearby, leaning back nonchalantly. Stage fright was getting the better of the chakat as shi felt hir hearts both feeling ready to burst from hir chests. Hir hands trembled as hir footfalls were slow to approach the guard. The robot moved in an unnatural manner, adjusting its weight every few moments. The camera head scanned the hallway before it before snapping towards the barracks, jerking left and right before returning back to the hall in a casual scan. This is what Gildedtongue had to distract?

The chakat coughed into hir fist, sitting down on hir haunches before shi managed to croak a weak 'hello.' The machine's scanning camera turned around, facing the chakat, focusing on hir. Through the indigo shimmering field, shi saw its lens shift its focus as it peered at hir. "Gildedtongue, Chakat, Born Terra, Terran reckoning July 26th, 2255. From the Holy Christian Kingdom of North America," it prattled in its electronic voice.

Gildedtongue nodded. "Um, yes, that's me. How do you know of me?" shi asked, cocking hir head to one side.

"Biometric imprint matches the same in the Stellar Federation databank. Accuracy approved to 99.993495 percent, rounded up." The chakat thought for a moment, shaking hir head. If the data came from the Stellar Federation, then surely it had to have been updated to match hir new persona, 'lest shi be tracked by every single camera and waypoint shi's passed.

"When was the last time your databanks were uploaded?" shi asked. In the corner of hir eye shi saw Susan beginning to fumble, but shi locked hir gaze to the robot, not wanting to give away the plan.

"Last systems update was, Terran reckoning, Febuary 20th, 2309. Federation command has not sent any further updates since," it beeped out. Gildedtongue raised an eyebrow; apparently the lack of communication between the Federation and this station has been a two-way street. Batta really was a forgotten little blip in the star charts. Gildedtongue saw that shi couldn't keep up this conversation though, so quickly tried to change topics. Shi couldn't think of anything to ask, so shi just started to interview.

"What's your name?"

"My serial number is 0041-Alpha. The commander calls me Alphie when shi wishes our intimacy." Gildedtongue fought back a feeling of disgust, not wanting to figure out what the robot meant by that.

Thinking fast shi asked, "I mean, what was your name before..." shi trailed off, realizing this might infuriate the robot. Shi didn't think that many people would like to be reminded that they were no more. "...Before you died."

The robot stood quietly for a moment, looking like it was thinking, or it was simply angry, shi couldn't tell with the lack of a face. Finally it piped back up, "Biological memories indicate that the brain you were referring to belonged to one Jeanne Hsu. A member of the civilian Star Corps company, in charge of repairing and maintaining this station and incoming vessels."

"So, are you Jeanne, or, I mean, do you have Jeanne's memories or anything?" Gildedtongue asked, now genuinely interested in what shi was looking at.

The robot spoke immediately, "The answer is... complicated. I have the ability to access many of Ms. Hsu's memory fragments located within her cerebral cortex, however how they are linked to one another, and their meaning, emotional attachment to each memory and various other information has been lost." The robot was quiet for a moment as it processed, "To place it in a computer parallel, it is akin to removing the master boot record. The data is present, but there is nothing to say what it all

means." The 'helpful' explanation went straight over the chakat's head.

"So, in essence, the person known as Jeanne Hsu is dead, then?" Gildedtongue asked, thinking for a moment, "So, there's nothing left at all? You're like any of the other robots here?"

The machine moved in a way that the chakat could have sworn was a chortle, the camera tilting in an almost smug manner. "Precisely, but wrong. You see, the way a brain goes through life, it creates new pathways and new sectors of nerve tissue. So, unlike a standard processor, the pathways from input to output are not straight, managed routes, but convoluted systems of nerve that builds an AI to the self-aware point, and..." the machine stopped as the indigo glimmer of the force field suddenly shut off. The bot was confused for a moment, stepping into the entryway. Saldura took the moment to tackle the robot head on, slamming it against the door's frame. The rattling caused the shorted connection to come undone, turning back on the energy wall at full blast on top of the machine. Sparks emerged from the door frame, making Susan, Gildedtongue, and Saldura backpedal.

The forcefield flashed a few times before shutting off. The smell of electronic ozone filled the air as the machine lay still. The whole prison cell sat petrified, watching the door to see if any of the other machines would come and notice, or do anything. Eons seemed to have passed before they all released a collective breath. An otter herm walked over to the machine, giving a tentative poke to its camera with hir toe, and when it didn't move, the group approached the newly opened door. Susan, however, knelt at the carcass of their guard.

Saldura gathered as many of hir security detail as shi could find among the prisoners. The badger explaining the plan of finding an armoury first to equip themselves, then find the other crew members before retaking the ship and leaving the station. The engineering crew rallied together and discussed how they'd be able to get the ship out, when and if they could. Gildedtongue herself was at a loss on what to do, standing up slowly as the chaos organized around hir. Shi kept close to Saldura, feeling safer around the badger, keeping behind hir as to not get in the way.

Susan called over the security chief, smiling to hir. "C'mere, and make it quick!" shi said in a hushed shout. Sal raised a finger to hir crew, letting them know shi'd be a second as shi knelt by the rat, looking over the machine. "These things are pretty well armoured, but, luckily, their interconnecting network isn't too up to date. Avoiding personality dissidence, they can only broadcast and receive burst transmissions, which is why it seems like no one's noticed this one being down just yet. Anyway, I disabled its wireless communications," shi said, still sucking on the fingers shi held the wire to short out that system. "So, we should be able to boot it up without it calling for help." Saldura nodded, with the machine out of commission, it was considerably easy to remove its legs and disassemble its camera head, leaving the torso housing most of the processing components lifeless.

Jury-rigging a few wires, Susan managed to build an output port for the machine, which they carefully applied to Saldura's open monocle port in hir skull. After a few precautions with grounding was taken care of, Susan managed to crank the bot back on. The badger winced, gripping hir head as shi snarled. Gildedtongue holding the badger's shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Headache. Data's coming... too damned fast. Shit." Shi unplugged himself from the machine, clutching hir face. Blinking back a few tears, Saldura felt hir whole brain on fire with information bouncing around in hir skull. "O-okay. Fuck... just needed to process all that." Saldura said, standing wobbly back on hir feet, looking at the crew, "I got a glimpse of the local map. Yes, these are barracks, so, both the armoury, and everyone else should be close by. Most of the bots are making their way to the ship to start to disassemble it for parts for more machines."

Blinking in surprise, Gildy turned to Susan, "Won't that ruin our chances of getting out of here?" The two helped Saldura onto hir feet as Susan nodded.

"Well, more than likely they'll start with the ship's cargo, then move to the hull, no need to go for the volatile fuels or the engines off the bat. In theory." Susan sighs, "But, pending on their efficiency, that does cut our escape time considerably."

Saldura addressed the available crew, "All right. We don't have a lot of time, so, let's move quickly. There's an armoury and security office a few hundred metres to the right from here. We're heading there to get some things to fight off these buggers. We find equipment from the Purgatorio, we use those first, otherwise, take what you can from the Federation. Any Feddie weapon or item used here, I want you to drop them before we get aboard the ship. Nothing linking us to this station is coming with us. Remember the Ancient Terran proverb, 'leave the gun, take the cannoli.'" Shi turned to Susan and Gildedtongue, "You both, I want you and a couple guards in the office. Zajac, I'm sure you can hack into their system and open up their security systems, which should tell us where they are. Cameras, tracers, you name it." Sal ordered a tall giraffe herm, "Gildy, there should be some comm equipment in there, I want you keeping a close dialogue with me, okay? Let me know what we're up against."

Gildedtongue knew that it was mostly to keep hir away and out of danger, but the old chakat was humble enough not to fight an order, last thing shi needed was to put hirself or hir children in jeopardy. The group quickly made their way across the hallway, checking for anything that might spot them. Of course, any cameras and pressure plates would be impossible to avoid, but the team had already set the plan in motion; any going back would lead to their ultimate failure.

Feeling a little out of breath, the chakat fell behind slightly, the considerably stronger gravity making hir footfalls that much more heavy, but the team didn't let hir out of their herd. Several of the security personnel and Saldura kept around hir, keeping hir safe. They passed three doorways until they entered the one Saldura motioned

towards. Three security officers stepped inside, scanning the room before the rest of the group entered. It was a cramped security room, full of monitors and computers, mostly dormant from disuse, considering the robots had little need for it with their linked networks. "Zajac! Get on the computers and link up to the security system. See if you can find a way to blind the machines to it!" Saldura barked to the comtech, who quickly went to work. With Susan and a few engineers working on the computers as well, Saldura led his team and a select number of engineers into the armoury.

Gildy, nervous and trying to keep out of people's way, walked into the armoury with the other security people. Pistols and weapons, many confiscated from the Purgatorio itself, but most from the ship's own storage, were doled out to the team. Phaser-proof vests and helmets were distributed, as well as comm units, arming their group. The chakat looked over a phaser rifle, the heavy weapon much bigger than the coilgun carbines on their ship. Saldura walked over, taking the gun from the chakat. "I'd really feel comfortable if you weren't armed, love."

That made the chakat's ears splay as his ego was kicked down several notches, "Yeah, I guess you're right. In a stressful situation like this, I'm liable to go psycho," the chakat mumbled, looking down at the ground. The badger grabbed Gildy's shoulder, making the chakat look up.

"Trust me, love. It isn't that." Saldura gave Gildedtongue a firm hug. "These machines see you with a gun, they're going to want to neutralize you, permanently." The badger looked his spouse in the eyes. "Unarmed, hopefully the worst they'll do is capture you again. I want you safe, you hear me?"

Gildedtongue felt tears rolling down his cheeks as she nodded mutely. Saldura kissing his forehead again before donning a girdle with a case full of vibro blades. She checked the battery, testing its power before putting the hilt in the first brand. "Now, I want you to keep in constant contact with me, okay? You're my eyes and ears, love," she said, putting a comm unit in Gildedtongue's hand. Saldura found his monocle and plugged it in. "Well, this should help," she said with a chuckle.

Gildedtongue went back to the security room. The monitors were alive and blinking with information as three techs typed out on keyboards. Susan smiled to the returning chakat. "Well, Boss, our new command centre is up and running." The rat ran a hand through her blue-dyed hair. "We've set up a ghosting of the network, so while we can remain undetected, we don't really have much in the way of controlling the information. Well, not yet, anyway."

Nodding, the chakat kept dumb and wondered exactly what she was supposed to do. Maybe just relay the information from Susan to Saldura, which would have been easier directly. The chakat tried to take his mind off things, looking back to the monitors. Screens flashed through various feeds, jumping from one to another, giving

the chakat a slowly growing headache from the information. The badger stepped back into the security room, patting Gildy's shoulder with a gloved hand. "What's the status?"

"Seems like the men are about a hundred and fifty metres to the right, and the females are two hundred left down the corridor. Corridor activity is low, patrols moving through at fifteen minute intervals," Susan reported to the badger as Saldura thought to himself, eyes looking over the camera feeds.

"All right. As much as I'd like to rescue the top of the chain of command first, it'd be best to get more soldiers as fast as possible. Gildedtongue, you should be fine with the people I've got here, but I'll try to send a few more when we rescue them. Have the armoury ready to receive and arm the crew." Saldura nodded to the chakat before turning to Susan. "Labs. I'm going to issue you a small detachment of security officers. I want you to head to the ship now. If they're taking it apart, I need you to get there and undo any damage. I'll send over more men your way once we've freed and armed them."

The rat gave a smart salute before making hir way back into the corridors with six officers and three engineers. Saldura offered the same to Gildedtongue, barking something incomprehensible to hir troops, who responded with a uniform bellow before heading into the corridor. Zajac turned to Gildedtongue with a reassuring smile. "On your cue, we'll disengage the network. That will temporary confuse the robots. Unfortunately, it will also alert them to our presence immediately. Your recommendations, Gildedtongue?" the giraffe asked, hir conical ears flicking impatiently.

"Whe-Ell..." the chakat started, hir voice cracking in the pressure. Shi took a moment to compose himself, clearing hir throat. "Well, Sa-Holbock? Labs? Get into position before we turn off the security system. Keep out of sight before you reach your destinations. Let's try to get the drop on them before they get the drop on us, shall we?"

"Labs, Understood."

"Holbock, Gor-kath." hir spouse responded in Rathskani. The two teams continued their paths, leaving Gildedtongue behind further with the small detachment of guards and techs. Zajac and a hyena morph, Goldstein, kept tabs on Susan's team as well as they could through the flicking screens as a chihuahua herm and tabby cat did the same, trying to watch Saldura's squad.

Gildedtongue quietly sighed. They had to have noticed them by now, things were going too quietly. But, even if they had, it wouldn't make sense for any alarm sounds to commence, not with the robots linked up as they were. So the chakat had to fidget and wait, hir tail curling up in a knot in hir stress. "You'll kill them all, you know that." Creekstripe smiled wickedly, looking over hir daughter, "You're already

cracking, and you'll cause them to go into a frenzy, willy-nilly into danger."

Ignoring hir hallucinations for a bit longer, Gildy tried hir best to keep up with the techs. Sometimes it was difficult to see if the group was heading in a straight line or turning. Still, they waited for the call to cut the security feed. If they weren't discovered before, they soon would be. The chakat's pulses were both racing and shi felt hir upper heart try to escape out hir neck, but shi swallowed it down and steeled a little bit more courage.

"Holbock in position," the badger came through on the radio. It was only a few minutes since the operation started, and already it felt like an eternity. Gildedtongue gave an acknowledgement as they waited for Susan's report. The chakat bit hir tongue in worry, hoping that they weren't in trouble. But, if they were, surely they'd call in.

About to risk an outgoing signal, the chakat opened up hir mouth to question the tech's group. The rat beat hir to the punch, however, reporting their position at the edge of the hangar. Gildy let out a breath shi didn't know shi was holding before looking at the engineers in the room. "Okay, guys. We've got one shot at this. On my mark, Zajac, you terminate the network. Saldura, take out the sentry and free the prisoners, and Susan, reclaim the ship." Gildedtongue looked upwards and sighed slightly, offering a silent prayer for some luck and favour for success. "Labs, Holbock, Zajac, go!" Shi closed hir eyes. "And God save us all."

The giraffe herm punched in through the system, and soon all the monitors switched off. The occupants were still as Gildedtongue heard the sound of weapons fire through the comm unit. Finally the monitors flicked back on as Zajac leaned back in hir seat, a confident look on hir face. They'd managed to pry control from the system locally. Not easy on a Federation computer, but Gildedtongue figured it helped being seated at one of the main workstations. The monitors ran through their booting diagnosis, still leaving the command team blind.

Without the ability to watch what was going on, the chakat gritted hir teeth, feeling hir pulse rising. Hir heart started to pound in hir throat as shi heard the exchange of fire over the comm unit. Both teams had engaged the enemy and the chakat had to listen blindly to the actions, hir claws scratching against the carpeted floor. Creekstripe chuckled behind hir. "They won't win, you know. You've sent them all to their deaths." The chakat shut hir eyes, trying desperately to ignore the phantom as it loomed in hir head.

"We've got visual," Zajac said, looking over hir monitor once again. Saldura's team was finishing off the last robot as hir technicians were working on the force field. Gildedtongue let out a long sigh of relief.

The badger looked around in the corridor, keeping hir pistol trained at the unknown. "Holbock reporting. Two machines neutralized, none more in sight. It seems the station is running on all but a skeleton crew, which should explain the low

resistance."

"Yes, but, be careful. We've seen these things coming through the walls before." Gildedtongue warned, looking at the other monitors. Shi saw Susan's team pinned against an entryway to the hangar bay, firing almost blindly into the doorway towards their opponents. "Labs, what's your status?"

There was no response at first and Gildy looked to make sure that the rat was all right, finding it difficult to pick people out dressed in armour. Soon the Liverpudlian accent rang through the comm, "Labs here. Whatever resistance Holbock is lacking, we're more than making up for. Ammo is fine, but it's just a matter of time before these bastards flank us. Advice please!"

Gildy was quiet, not knowing what exactly to tell hir. Shi certainly was no strategist. Thankfully Saldura was listening into the feed. "Labs. Hold your ground for as long as you can. Gildedtongue, I need your techs to try and disable the anti-gravity units in and around the bay. That should disorient them long enough for the team to take them out."

"Gildedtongue, acknowledged. Labs, just keep safe for a little longer." Shi bit hir lip as shi watched the technicians perform the task hir spouse gave them, listening to keys tapping around. The ship's life support sub-protocols were better protected than its security systems, making its adjustment much more difficult.

"Shit, Lars is down!" Susan swore as Gildy observed the fox herm getting hit by phaser blast. The vest unable to absorb the energy blast, causing hir to crumple to the floor, smoke wisping around hir torso. Gildy backed up from the monitors, breathing faster.

"And that's the first one dead," Creekstripe chuckled, leaning over Gildy's shoulder. The chakat was stammering to hirself, finding it harder and harder to breathe.

"Holbock here. We've freed the males and sending them to the armoury. Gildedtongue, get ready to receive them." Saldura repeated hirself again before Gildy stammered an acknowledgment. "We're also sending seventeen, no, twenty children your way. Get them in the back and safe, you hear me?"

The chakat's features sank visibly, having forgotten about the children during the crisis. At least they were safe. Shi shook hir head, trying to regroup hir thoughts, "Understood. Leave me with some more soldiers to keep them safe, Holbock."

Sal laughed through the com. "Just what I was thinking. Hand pick four to stay with you, then send the rest towards Labs." Saldura's demeanour became more serious. Even through the monitor, Gildy could see Sal's stance change. "How are you holding up, Gildedtongue?"

Wiping his forehead, the chakat took in a deep breath. "Could be better," she muttered, his paws wiggling, "You rescued the males, right? Is Thallon there?" She looked over the monitors more carefully, finding things a bit difficult to view.

Saldura looked around and tossed his comm unit. A familiar voice rang through it. "Hey love. Are you okay?" Thallon waved a bit in the air to call attention to himself, not seeing any of the cameras. Gildedtongue choked on a laugh, smiling wide.

"Yes! I'm fine. I'm hanging in there. And you? Are you okay? How are the rest of the people?"

Thallon stretched a little bit, "We're mostly okay. A little frizzled and pissed off, but mostly okay and scared. Don't worry. We'll be out of here in no time flat, just you..." The large foxtaur's words were cut short as the whole station suddenly trembled. Zajac let out a bleat of victory, jumping in his seat, but as the artificial gravity was cut, she had to pull herself back down.

Gildy looked over the monitors to the actions going on in the hangars. With the gravitational functions turned off, the spider bots moved erratically at first, becoming easy targets for the Purgatorio's crew. Electromagnetic feet were quickly deployed, giving the bots some stability, however their usual rapid and erratic movements dragged them to a crawl. "Labs here! We're routing the enemy now. With that back up we should have the ship reclaimed shortly!" The rat's voice came sing-song in their mêlée.

"Gildedtongue here. Good to hear, I'll inform you when they've suited up." Gildy shut off the outgoing comm as she sighed, trying to make sure she'd keep it together. She paced as she waited for the males to come in, looking at the monitors once in awhile.

Saldura sped through the corridors with his team trailing behind him, bouncing off the walls and ceiling, taking a zig-zag pattern. Their near-random movements made it difficult for Gildedtongue to keep up with them, much less anything trying to aim for them. Taking a deep breath, Gildedtongue turned back on his comm unit. "I can see three guards out by the front of the female barracks. Careful; these look angry already." The bots on the monitor had their weapons already out, stun sticks waving in the air as phaser emitters scanned the hallway, knowing their opposition could come from any direction.

With a loud cry, the badger and his team tore down the corridor, weaponfire already screaming through the halls. Two of the guards were knocked off balance from the phaser fire, but quickly regained footing thanks to the magnetism, returning volleys at the Purgatorio crew. Gildedtongue could hear Saldura's screams as she threw herself at the vanguard bot, vibroword singing in the atmosphere and carving into the armour of the machine, taking a chunk out of its chassis. The other machines were preoccupied by the volley directed towards them.

With another slash towards the spider bot's 'head', Saldura's blade shattered, but it caused the machine to skitter around aimlessly. Raising his pistol, she fired two rounds of his coilgun into its organic processor. With a flick of a switch in the hilt, the blade remnants ejected from Saldura's sword and she quickly moved the empty hilt to the scabbard, drawing another ceramic brand before returning to the fray.

Gildy's attention was quickly pulled away as the males arrived at the security station. The children were quickly ushered in first, Dominic helping the younger ones to where they were being directed to. Thallon himself brought up the rear, and he turned to kiss the chakat deeply. She was surprised, but welcomed the distraction as his blue eyes closed, returning the kiss. The roguish male chuckled after it was cut short by one of the techs coughing. "That was from Sal. I'll give you one from me when we're out of here." He poked his nose and winked before heading into the armoury to gear up. The chakat rolled his eyes, looking back at the screen.

The skirmish was over and, aside from Saldura nursing a phaser burn on his left arm, the assault had gone as planned. The technicians, knowing what they were looking for, made quick work of the protective field. The badger walked inside, getting a hug from Matilda and Thirtysilver. "Where's Terry?" Sal asked, looking around, not seeing the doctor around.

The Caitian sighed quietly. "We aren't sure. She wasn't in here when we woke up, so, we were hoping that maybe she was with you all."

Saldura swore in an alien tongue as Gildedtongue checked through the monitors, seeing if she could find her anywhere. The technicians shrugged their shoulders as they went through the scan, not finding her at all. The men came out of the armoury, nodding to the chakat as she sat on his haunches. She thought of keeping Thallon near by, but the possibility of distraction was far too great, choosing three humans and a wolf to remain behind. She hugged his husband once more before they left, leaving Gildy, the children and the remaining guards in the security suite.

Wistfully looking at the leaving males, Gildy was brought back to reality hearing Saldura's voice, "Holbock here. We're sending the female crew to your position. Captain Jefferson will take over operations when she gets there."

Gildedtongue let out a sigh of relief. "Thank God. Understood, Holbock."

"I'll be taking my squad with me on a search and rescue mission for Doctor Terry Wu. I'll keep in contact." Saldura said with a hint of desperation to his voice. Gildedtongue acknowledged, knowing that time was of the essence if they had the most remote possibility of bringing her back alive.

Dominic came back into the monitor room, looking at the chakat. "Is Mom okay?" he asked, the sandy haired boy's large brown eyes looked over the monitors, seeing the incoming group of women and children, but not seeing the doctor among them.

Were it any other person, Gildy would have been tempted to lie to the child, but shi knew that not only did he want the truth, but after what he's been through, was ready to handle it. "We don't know. She wasn't with the rest of them when Saldura found them. Shi's looking for them now."

The teen's breath quickened as his hands balled into fists. He turned and started for the hallway, but was stopped by the security guards. "Let me go! I've got to find her!" he cried, trying to shove them away. Gildedtongue went behind him, holding onto his shoulders, pulling him back, trying to help calm him.

Dominic continued to struggle, but sagged after a few moments. The chakat stroking his cheek, "Dominic. Dominic. Saldura's out there to save her. If anyone can, it's hir. Shi's got the training and the weapons. Just, hold here for a moment, okay?"

Sniffing, the young teen finally agreed with the chakat. Still, his blood boiled and he wanted to do something more than just stand there, but he knew logically there was nothing else for him to do. "Go into the armoury and get it ready for the other kids, okay? They need you." Gildy offered the human a supportive smile, and a hug. With a purpose helping him, he went into the back for the others.

The chakat sighed, glad to have defused that little spark, the sound of Creekstripe's taunting just that more faint as shi looked back at the monitors. The doors behind hir opened with a sudden whoosh as the chakat turned around, "Aye, Captain Mati..." shi started, but was shocked to see three spider drones at the door.

Two of the machines quickly shot at the guards at the door, driving them back against the wall. The third one hitting Zajac square in the chest with a stun shot as shi started to turn around, causing hir to slump like a dropped doll.

The door to the armoury opened up in the commotion, Gildy turning hir head towards it, expecting more enemies, but saw Dominic running in with a phaser pistol. The chakat roared, leaping towards the boy as one of the machines turned towards him, recognizing the threat. Shi shoved him into the back room, as a blast of light intended for his head cut right into the chakat's right shoulder. The sudden shock and barrage of stun blasts dropped the leonine chakat quickly. As consciousness faded from hir, shi felt the bot's tractors tingling on hir form, and the machines humming, "Withdraw."

The chakat found himself coming to strapped to a medical bed. A dark portion of hir humour chuckled at how waking up like this seemed more normal than hir usual bed. Hir blue eyes slowly fluttered open, seeing a black and white blob before hir. As hir vision got better, the visage of Commander Johnson's grinning, upside down face greeted hir. "You really should have made this easier on yourself. It would have been far less painful."

The skunk laughed as Gildy snarled at hir, thrashing against hir bonds. "You Monster! What the Hell are you doing?" shi glared at the fat mephit with stewing rage as Kim stood up. The fat skunktail brushed over hir face lightly, making hir sneeze. Shi wasn't sure what was more uncomfortable, the tubes shoved into hir orifices, the feeding tube cut into hir first belly, or the fact that hir nose itched.

"Monster. That's what they call us, you know?" Kim shrugged, "The Humans, the Aliens, even other morphs." The skunk turned around, "Seeing all that nature has brought about, the moment that some species has achieved sentience, the one thing that they learn, and the one thing that they hold most dear, is hate." Kim smiled quietly, "But, machines, our artificial intelligences, that is one thing that they are programmed without. Even the Turners when they made your kin, they left Hate, because they knew that it is Hate that makes something really alive."

Shaking hir head, Gildedtongue groaned, "So, what are you going to do? Carve my brain out and shove it in some machine here, like Jeanne Hsu? Like the rest of the people that lived here? Came through here?"

Kim's laugh grew as shi leaned against the wall, "Oh, I could, and I most certainly will, eventually," hir hands slowly framed the chakat's head, as if feeling for the cerebral matter within, "You see, a chakat's brain is so meticulously put together, it would be the perfect medium for a cerebral processor." The long fingernails of the skunk pushed against hir flesh on hir cheek, going up hir scalp. "Perfect indeed, but, a waste for the long term for such a short term gain. No, you see, I've got other plans for you."

The skunk stroked over hir pregnant belly, "We herms are so well designed for growth, I must thank Chance every day I was born one. Already, ten of my children are growing in the lower nurseries, and when they are old enough, they'll spawn more. Some will be taken for new machines, and some will be culled for organic matter to feed the others..." Johnson said as casually as one would talk about raising chickens.

"Of course, I was hoping to have the rest of the hermaphrodite crew in such a production, but your fleshy friends just wouldn't go along with it, would you? I'm trying to go past what Nature can make, but you people are so connected with this... meaningless life, that you can't see what gifts I can bestow!" Kim moved hir hands over Gildedtongue's belly, "But you. You give me a gift... not just one, but two gifts. It would seem that Chance has smiled upon me again."

Gildy's eyes were wide. The lunatic's rantings bounced in hir brain as shi couldn't believe shi had to comprehend what this person was saying. Shi was planning on killing hir children for hir own little army, or worse, make them in the same position shi's in, forever in self breeding until they're used up and slaughtered. Gildedtongue's hearts both raced as hir breathing quickened. Panic ran through the chakat as fear

coursed through hir veins.

It was then that Gildedtongue felt another fear. Two fears, from deep within. Confusion and sadness welling up from within hir belly as the foetuses formed enough to perceive emotion, and the first thing they felt was that the world was a horrible place. Kim laughed as shi went up to look at the chakat's face again, flicking hir tail.

Shi didn't know where it came from or how shi did it, but in the next moment, Gildedtongue had broken hir left elbow lifting hir arm, yanking the limb from its bindings and clubbed the giggling mephit once, twice, and again, managing to make hir claws rake over hir face.

"You bitch!" shi snarled, holding hir face, reeling back. "You! Take hir to the meat locker. Give this impudent thing some time to cool off!" The skunk sulked off before Gildedtongue turned hir head, seeing a spider bot before hir. Hir eyes went wide, seeing Frank's cross dangling from its 'neck.' The chakat opened hir mouth to say something before shi was quickly knocked back unconscious by another stun blast.

'If it's a good chakat brain shi wants...' Gildy thought as shi woke up again, "Shi might want to ease up on the merchandise." The room was dark, as the chakat looked around. Hir lower light vision wasn't picking up too much, just a bit of bleeding from around the sealed door. The air was cool and it almost froze hir lungs to breathe in it. A station like this has a replicator strong enough to provide all the meals to its crew and travellers, but often it was easier to just thaw some meat that make new batches.

The chakat's stomach lurched as shi wondered where the meat shi ate earlier came from, or rather, who? Shi shook such thoughts out of hir head as shi saw a figure sitting against the wall near the door. With both hir arms recently injured, shi had to move carefully, though hir right shoulder felt like it had been treated in hir capture, able to use hir arm with some effort, but it was not impossible.

Getting closer, hir eyes went wide, seeing Terry Wu's face in the darkness. "Shit, Doctor! Here you are!" Gildy laughed, hobbling closer. "I should have known you were here. With a mouth like yours, you'd have to have been tossed in this prison sooner or later. Gildy wrapped hir good arm around the woman, tugging her close as she raised a hand to run it through her hair.

The chakat's hand felt something slimy and concave. Wu was totally unresponsive as she slumped against her. Shi pulled away, looking at hir hand, seeing it glisten just slightly in the darkness. The realization that hir hand was in hir friend's empty skull made hir retch again, expelling whatever was that foul dinner onto the ground.

Pounding hir good hand against the door, the chakat cried and screamed. Shi did not

want to be in this frozen tomb any longer, especially as the occupants were so close to hir. Pounding until hir hand felt like a ham-hock replaced it, the door finally creaked open. The bot from earlier staring at hir with its lens. The cross dangling from its neck. "Wh-where did you get that?" shi demanded, hir delirium making it difficult to focus on the things that mattered.

"The necklace?" The machine asked, touching it with a claw, "It was found aboard the space ship that docked earlier, in one of the beds." The machine looked over Gildedtongue's arm, "Are you okay, shir? You seem to need medical attention."

Hir head was throbbing, but shi shook it slightly, "I should have figured. Last place I'd look. I'm such an idiot." shi muttered, "Who are you?" The machine started to respond with its serial number, but Gildy interrupted, "Before you were...this. Your processor."

"Cerebral scans show that this one was a Doctor Terry Wu, a ship's medic aboard the Pu..." The machine couldn't finish speaking before the chakat's eyes went red with rage. Hir fists started to pound the machine as hir mind seemed to have switched off.

Gildedtongue woke up again, feeling a hand on hir shoulder. Shi jolted upright, yowling at the pain in hir limbs, turning to whatever was touching hir. Shi looked up at the concerned face of hir badger spouse. Shi looked back down at the mess beneath hir. Machine parts, bio-gel, and brain matter was spread across before hir. Tears welled up in the chakat's eyes, sobbing, "I killed her. I killed her."

Saldura looked at Terry's corpse nearby, then held the chakat, "No you didn't. No you didn't. Shh. She was dead when they did this to her. You set her at peace." The chakat continued to cry, pressed against the badger, shi barely noticed two guards shoving a bound Kim Johnson in the room.

"One slug to the head I think should be enough." Said the human security guard, leveling his rifle to the Federation officer. Kim seemed more pissed off than afraid, glassy eyes staring at the chakat, burrowing shards right into hir own head.

"Oh, yes. Fuckin' kill me!" the skunk spat over hir shoulder at the guard with the gun, hir tail bristled behind hir. "Then you and the rest of this whole galaxy will regret the sort of hatred you and all organic life has compounded!" Shi turned, glowering at Saldura and Gildedtongue. The guard adjusted his rifle before the badger held up hir hand.

"Regret, how?" Shi asked, approaching the kneeling creature, squatting down to hir face level.

Kim's sadistic grin moved hir jowls as hir eyes burned right into Saldura's, "My

body's connected to the ship's computer. And it's been programmed that when I die, it's to run a protocol that will start these machines to start warping themselves to other stations, killing the crews and making more and more. There isn't any way for you to stop me once I'm dead. So, yes, do it! Bring your pathetic meat to its end!"

"A-a virus." Gildedtongue muttered, hir addled brain catching some of the insanity, "Find a host cell, pump out more of its kind until it's used up and rots away, and then infect something else." Shi grunts quietly, "And, like viruses, aren't living...nor dead."

Rolling hir eyes, Johnson shrugged slightly at the analysis, murmuring a 'not quite.' Saldura kicked the skunk in the side for the snide comment, interrupting hir thought process. "Fine, you're coming with us, to the Federation. I'm sure that they'd love to see what sort of operation you've got here."

Groaning at the pain in hir ribs as shi giggled, Kim looked back up at Saldura, "That, what? A bunch of furs from deep within Pirate infested space brought back a commander from a station where the entire crew is dead? You really think they'd believe you?" shi smirked, "And before you even start to think about any records here, I've already scrapped the security storage room for parts for my children. An...unfortunate loss during our mêlée." Shi smirked, "And, who will they believe? A Fleet Commander? Or some long overdue Spacers with thoughts of robots running around in their brain?"

Saldura conceded that point with another kick to Kim's ribs. The truth was far more fantastical than any sort of lie that Kim could come up with, and in that twisted brain, not even a skunktaur could come up with the facts.

The room was quiet aside from Johnson's incessant giggling, which was seriously getting on everyone's nerves. Saldura smiled as a plan formulated in hir brain. The rough hand of the badger patted and ran through Kim's headfur, "So, we can't kill you, and we can't turn you in. I suppose we'll just have to leave you and let you live. Give us a warp drive, and we'll let you live out the rest of your days here."

"Turn tail and run? Well, I suppose cowardice is the Spacer's code." Kim snickered. Gildedtongue blinked at Saldura as the group started towards the hangar. The chakat's paws were all mangled and broken from beating the robot and hir arms burned. Several electrical burns were all over hir upper torso as shi winced in pain, walking with Thallon supporting hir.

Zajac was in the replicator control room, setting up the system to construct a drive. Saldura took off hir handcuffs to let the skunk operate the machine, placing hir hand on the palm scanner, leaning to the retina scanner, letting it verify hir. "Officer override has been accepted. Commencing construction of Warp Field Generator starting. Warp Drive Engine queued," the computer chimed helpfully. Just outside in the hangar, the warp core slowly started to materialize, part by part.

Kim turned to look back at the guards, "So, that's it, right? You've collected your spoils and going to go on your merry way?" Shi sounded a little annoyed, crossing his arms in front of his heavy chest.

Saldura shook his head, chuckling, "No, no. We're going to shoot you first." Shi grinned coldly. Kim's eyes went wide as Shi looked in shock.

"What? You said you'd let me go! You know what will happen when you kill me, you'll doom everyone you know!" Shi snarled, balling his hands into fists.

The badger chuckled an icy laugh, shaking his head, "I didn't say we'll kill you." Shi stepped closer to the skunk, who was backing away from him towards Zajac. "No, we won't kill you. We're going to hurt you. Tear apart your body slowly, and place you in one of your bots we've recovered, the legs, manipulators, and transmissions destroyed, of course." The badger's wicked grin grew, "You'll live, and the Bio Gel in the machine will continue to sustain your organs, but you won't recover. And as your body moves within the mass, and your nerve endings touch those cold, metal sides, they'll spasm in agony, reminding you of everyone else you've dropped in those things." The badger smiled coldly at the skunk, "And you'll be left alive, swimming in that goop, from now, until the end of time."

Kim was struck dumb, mouth agape as Shi shivered from the cold proposal. His eyes rapidly darting around the room as his breathing quickened, Gildy could hear the sound of his heart pounding faster.

Like a flash, Kim shoved Zajac, grabbing a phaser pistol from the giraffe's hip. Saldura and the guard moved to raise their weapons, expecting a fight from the insane commander. The skunk's mad, frightened eyes turned to look into Gildedtongue's, staring deep into the chakat's soul before they went blank.

A blast of light lanced through the skunk's fatty chin, up and through his skull before splashing on the ceiling, burning a dent in the metallic covering. Kim dropped to his knees before keeling over like a ragdoll, the wound cauterizing, leaving the dry corpse on the floor. Saldura swore, shaking the dead skunk. "Shit. You think Shi was bluffing about the bot distribution?"

Gildedtongue shrugged a bit, "I—I don't think Shi would have. Why would someone as crazy like that lie? Although," The chakat listened, "I don't hear any alarms or anything."

Zajac grunted, getting back up, looking sheepishly since it was his weapon that was taken. "I don't think that there'd be an alarm for something Shi wouldn't expect anyone to be alive to hear." Shi dusted himself off, looking down at the fallen foe. "Well, people say a lot of things to keep them from dying, but..." Shi trailed off, "I'd say we've got a fifty percent chance Shi was telling the truth."

"Great. I don't like those odds," Saldura sighed, crossing his arms, "Any way to track the bots?"

"Yeah, we could get back in the security system, but, the bots seem to be on a proprietary system, I don't know how long it'd take to hack it, and we might be too late already." Zajac shrugged again, looking at the console to think of a way to fix what was wrong. "I mean, I guess we could blow the station. There's enough antimatter here to send off a big enough shockwave to clear out whatever that maniac should send out before they get too far."

Shaking his head, Saldura sighed, "No, Zajac. An unfocused antimatter explosion would leave a massive agitation field around this station, and, were our ship to survive the thing, it'd be so heavily painted with the antimatter, it'd bring up even more questions that I the Captain nor I want to answer."

The group were quiet as Gildedtongue tried to not look at the body on the floor. Shi tried his best to pity the poor soul that took his own life, but found that shi couldn't. Shi found himself glad that shi was dead, that maybe his blood would appease the spirit of Terry. Shi knew that wouldn't be the case, but the thought still lingered. Zajac finally spoke up, "Well, there's a way to spend the fuel and blow up the station at the same time..."

Saldura nodded, "I'm all ears."

"We pump it through the station's own power core. The antimatter is fully utilized, thus removing the possibility of a field, and would, well, completely wipe this place clean."

"A warp-core bomb?" Saldura muttered, looking around, "Just... erase this whole place from existence, then?"

The giraffe nodded, typing on the computer, "Pretty much. I'm sure I can get this to start to overload the station's core once we're out of range." The replicator chimed and out of the viewport, the group saw that the Warp Field Generator was built. The Purgatorio's engineers quickly moved to load and install the massive piece of tech, getting Thallon to carry the generator into the cargo bay and presumably to the back with engineering.

"Warp Field Generator completed. Warp Drive Engine next on queue. Please make authorization to continue," the computer requested, making the giraffe comtech groan, rolling his eyes. Some systems were really touchy about authorization, being a pain in the tail to get them running. Saldura and Zajac hefted the corpse up to the machine, putting his hand on the scanner and shoving his face to the retina scanner.

The machine quietly ran its processes before chiming, "Access denied. Records show Commander Johnson as deceased. Operations shutting down until approved officer

override is input." Saldura cursed in Rakshani, giving the console a firm thump with his fist, but even the threat of violence didn't sway the unfeeling computer.

"Holbock to Jefferson, we've got a situation," the badger grumbled, "Johnson stole a gun and checked himself out. Apparently those bots are designed to spread when shi dies. No confirmation on this threat, but we aren't sure if they haven't already started the process or not. Best course of action is to blow this place, and the most untraceable method would be a warp core explosion."

"I'm hearing a great big 'but' at the end of this, Corporal," Gildy heard from Sal's comm.

"We've managed to build the field generator, but, with Johnson dead, we won't be able to build the drive." Saldura sighed, "So, either we call Johnson's bluff, and try to hack our way around these protocols, while it's shut itself down. Or..."

"I see. I'll contact engineering to see if there's anything we can do. Call again if you've received any information or ideas. And we'll have our engineers turn on our scanners to see if there have been any launched bots."

"Right, Holbock out." Saldura sighed, leaning against the wall, "Fuck. Heh, these things never turn out easy, do they?"

The giraffe nodded and sighed again, thinking, "Well, if we detonate a warp core, anything caught in its radius will have its atoms warped in random directions across the galaxy, well, unless..." Zajac trailed off.

"Unless what, Tech?" Saldura cocked an eyebrow.

"Unless it's contained in a warp bubble. The pocket sphere of real space should be protected from the destruction."

"You think the new thing will be able to hold that kind of activity? I don't think what we're about to do is covered in the warranty." Gildedtongue said, grumbling in his increasing pain as the adrenaline left his body. The giraffe smirked at the joke, but shrugged.

"Well, warping isn't quite the same as a physical push. We will feel the part that leaks into warp space, but hopefully nothing more than we could cope with. The catch is that we would be left drifting – without a drive, we'd be back to where we were before. Worse in fact since those damn bots did a number on our equipment."

The badger nodded, thinking about that. "At least it could buy us time. You get this thing set up to do what you need it to. Gildedtongue?" Saldura's hard eyes softened, offering the feline a soft smile, "I think you need to get to the med bay." The chakat grunted an acknowledgement as shi, Thallon, and Saldura moved towards the

Purgatorio.

Technicians were busy doing repairs to the ship's hull where the robots were removing parts for themselves, and several security officers were cataloguing the BTTA equipment that were utilized earlier. Susan was outside the ship, meeting the two. "Zajac told me what you intend to do. I've got no intention of risking a core explosion at close range and possibly drifting around for years though."

Saldura glared at the rat. "And what do you propose we do without a drive? We can't build one any more!"

"Who said anything about building one? Come on, we've gotta talk to the captain."

They made their way into the ship, finding the captain in the Spine, overlooking the preparations. Susan, Saldura, and Thallon offered Matilda a salute, and the chakat gave a quiet grunt.

"So, let me get this straight." Matilda said, pinching the bridge of her nose, "The fat fuck shot himself in the head, so we've got no ability to start building a warp engine, and in killing himself, shi might have set off the bots here to start jettisoning to other stations." She sighed. "Scanners haven't caught wind of anything leaving, so it could have been a bluff, but how certain would we be of that?"

Thallon nodded at the assessment, "And how exactly would the Feds be open to us saying "By the way, we just left your station, everyone's dead and there's some mechanical monstrosities heading places we don't know about." He chuckled wryly. "Or *if* they are."

The assembled nodded quietly before Matilda said to Susan, "You say you have a way out of this though?"

"Sure – take the station's." When they all gave hir a blank look, shi continued. "These stations aren't built out here. In fact these outposts are often temporary, so they want to be able to move them. They get built in a Federation shipyard and they are driven out to wherever they're needed. They only have a very small drive because speed is not an issue, and pushing a ship like ours will be painfully slow, relatively speaking, but we'd be able to get to our destination in weeks, not years."

Saldura looked sceptical. "You don't seriously think we can get rip out this station's warp drive and adapt it to our ship in a short time, or at all?"

"You've got a better idea?" Susan replied hotly.

Matilda adjusted her longcoat, "I don't care if you need to hold it together with string and duct tape – rip it out, shove it in, and make it work! Labs, I'm putting you in charge of this little operation. You're either going to be promoted or dead."

"Aye, aye, captain," shi said, scampering off. Matilda looked into Gildedtongue's face.

"And you need to get to sick bay. I'm sorry for all you've gone through."

Gildedtongue let out a half-hearted chuckle, "Not your fault, Captain. Not your fault." Thallon gave the captain and his spouse a salute before slowly taking the chakat back to the sick bay. Gildedtongue groaned again as the last bit of adrenaline was escaping hir body, the aches and pains of what shi'd gone through catching up rapidly. Thallon, always with a smile, rubbed hir chin, "Now it'll be my turn to nurse you while you get better."

"Heh, yeah, but you only have to worry about it for a little bit," shi chuckled. Thallon carefully helped the chakat on a bed just before they felt everything shake. "What was that?"

"Nothing for you to worry about now," Thallon reassured hir, even though he wondered about it himself.

The rat was enjoying himself. Virtually given carte blanche, shi was going at hir task with gusto. Shi had sent hir techs ahead to find the station's warp drive and start disconnecting its wiring and piping. "Get it done whatever way you can. Speed is the absolute priority!" shi instructed. With access to the station's heavy-duty transporters, shi first removed the defunct drive from the Purgatorio without taking the time to fully dismount it. Although it had been disconnected in preparation for replacement, a few bolts had been left in place for safety's sake. The transporter sheared off those remaining mounts, sending a shudder through the ship as the strain was abruptly released.

"Have you got that drive disconnected yet?" shi called over hir comm.

"You gotta be kidding!" came the exasperated reply.

"Do I sound as if I'm kidding? Chop them with a beam-cutter if you have to, but do it now!"

In spite of the ridiculous challenge, the techs got the important stuff disconnected in an incredibly short time, then reported back to hir. "It's close enough to ready, but there's no way that it's going to seat in our drive's mounts."

"Considering what I just did to the mounts, I don't think it's going to matter. Now get out of there. I'm going to beam it over to the Purgatorio."

Susan was a lot more careful with that transfer though. Fortunately its smaller size let hir place in the drive bay relatively easily. While waiting for the techs to finish the

job, shi had hunted around for anything useful and beamed it aboard the ship. Shi prayed that shi had found enough equipment to properly hook up the drive. Shi shut down the transporter and started running for the Purgatorio.

"Labs to Purgatorio," shi called ahead on hir comm. "We've got the drive, and everyone is heading back to the ship. Be ready to button up and get out of here when we're all aboard."

"Acknowledged," Matilda replied. "We're ready to trigger the warp core overload. You better be right about our warp field keeping us safe."

"Just be ready to move us at out top impulse speed to put some distance between us and the station, otherwise it'll be like trying to ride a tsunami!"

Saldura was at the hatch, checking off the final crew. When the last one was aboard, shi hit the comm. "Captain – everyone's aboard and we're buttoned up."

"Acknowledged. Helm – get us out of here fast!"

The helmsman had already plotted the fastest way to leave the station. Manoeuvring jets wreaked havoc with some of the station's more vulnerable external equipment, but shortly that would not matter in the slightest. The Purgatorio strained to put distance between itself and the impending explosion.

A great nothingness happened in space. What was the Federation Frontier Station BTTA suddenly disappeared from reality, like the finger of God came and poked it out of existence. The rippling of Space-Time sent the subatomic particles of the station and anything within three hundred kilometres in every which direction. But like a tiny iron bubble, *Purgatorio* was flung before the shockwave, safe within its cocoon of subspace.