

Gildedtongue's Story – Book III – Paradisio

by Gildedtongue

Sphere One – The Moon

The sirens were on nigh constant blaring as the rumble of hyperspace pounded upon the slowly moving Purgatorio. The station engine was working its ship slowly towards its destination, another outpost station a few thousand light years away from the now obliterated Frontier Station, BTTA. The captain would make good on her word, and Susan would be raised to the position of Managing Engineer of the 4th shift. This would be, of course, after the ship docked, as the woods were still encircling the wandering crew.

Laying on the medical bed, Gildedtongue was sobbing. Shi wasn't sure if it was the pain of hir injuries, or the residual fear of the space station, or the current fear of the ship barrelling through space, or a combination of all three. Thallon and Saldura stood at hir side, joining in the cathartic sobbing. It was a long day for anybody, though Gildy's empathic leaking of hir despair didn't help alleviate matters, things kept locked in the med bay. The chakat's limbs were wrapped in beige bandages, containing pain killers, disinfectants, and a number of Voxxan tissue boosters made to help bolster a body's natural healing. The chakat's natural immunity made the pain killers worthless (much to the discomfort of the chakat), but any added help to hir healing would be fortunate to hir health.

The captain stepped into the room, hir neutral expression grew dim with the exposure of the empathy, but as a good captain, shi held hir composure. “Corporal Holbock, we will be arriving at Space Station Ivan XIV in three days. According to Thirtysilver, our remaining cargo should cover the cost of repairs, and hopefully we should be able to pick up some freight to ship out. We also should be able to sell BATTA's warp drive and pick up a civilian model.”

The chakat listened in to the captain talking with hir spouse as shi lifted hir head, “Sell the warp drive? But, isn't that why we were ditching anything from the station? I don't think any one would want to pick up a stolen piece of Government hardware.”

A small smile curled Matilda's lips as she shook her head, “Of course they wouldn't, at least, not of their own government. Ivan XIV is not a member of the Stellar Federation. It belongs to one of the planets of the League.” She gave a soft sigh, “Typically this sort of thing would be classified as treason, but the League of Non-Aligned Worlds does have warp technology, and compared to modern ships, this thing is a relic, so it's on par on selling someone a spear when your people have assault rifles.” Turning back to Saldura, Matilda nodded, “But, I want you and the security detail on your toes. Ivan XIV is a slaving culture, and as such, I want all

morphs and non-Terrans to remain inside the Purgatorio for the time we have on the station. All repairs are to be done in-house, and myself and the other humans will act as outside envoys. After all we went through, the last thing I want is to lose a couple of us to slavers.”

The three morphs nodded in agreement as the captain excused herself, her stoicism at an end, but did not want to lose composure before her crew and passenger. Thallon ran his fingers through Gildy's mane, letting the chakat purr instinctively, despite the aching in his limbs. “What if they come in and take us by force?” The chakat asked, leaning into the scratching.

The fox'taur chuckled, patting Gildy's shoulder, which made him wince in pain, “Sorry.” he muttered before answering, “They certainly could, but it is highly unlikely. The Purgy has been smuggling for some time, and is known for being one avenue to get things to and from Federation space. If they kidnapped any of our crew, that sort of news and gossip would spread around, and the station, and even the planet its associated to would quickly be blacklisted. And on things like space stations, imports and exports are very important. That being said, if one morph went out and was 'arrested' then we'd have no real legal recourse to get them back. Thus our house arrest.” Thallon explained, seeming used to this sort of set up.

Saldura smiled softly, trying to comfort the chakat, “We've done this before and we haven't had any invasions yet. Sure, some have tried, but we give them a good thumping and show them the door. And while we're still morphs, we'd be technically 'owned' by Matilda, and most League places are really protective of their Castle Laws.” Saldura said, rubbing Gildy's pregnant lower belly. “So, as long as we're here, we are protecting our home.”

Gildedtongue nodded and sighed in his exhaustion, the aches were getting to him as he closed his eyes. He felt the lips of his husband and spouse on his face before falling back asleep.

The ensuing days were filled with more and more boredom, especially for the morphs as they were effectively imprisoned aboard the ship. Complaints were left at a minimum, however, as there was enough work to do to keep them occupied repairing the effects of the unstable warp effect. The last bits of stock was unloaded from the belly of the Purgatorio, covering what the station's warp engine couldn't in trade, as well as modify the civilian core to push past efficiency regulations and let them move a little faster, but not too much as to threaten to fry the occupants.

Gildy herself was doing well in repairs. The patches helped the chakat's lacerations and minor bone fractures knit up cleanly, and after a week, the still healing tissue

could be hidden with hir fur. Hir movement still had a limp as hir foreleg paws still felt rather tender, but Gildedtongue felt strong enough to move within the ship, getting out of the med bay and visiting various sectors of the ship. Saldura and Thallon kept hir company off their shifts, and while the station stay was getting increasingly dull, despite the fact that they were in non-Federation territory, a feeling of safety seemed to fill the air of the Purgatorio.

The chakat was taking a walk along the spine when shi easily picked out the tall giraffe walking the other way. Zajac smiled, bowing hir head to Gildy, "Hey, looking good there, Wanderer," the comptech complimented, the chakat returning the pleasantries before asking what shi was up to.

"Well, right now doing a lot of things that we're definitely not supposed to." Zajac chuckled softly. "Currently scrubbing the ship's log of anything related to the... incident." shi said, not wanting to mention the station by name. "And pretty much nuking anything made after the pirate attack. The official alibi is that the devices to record the ship's astronavigation charts were taken out in the attack." Zajac smirked, "Which is convenient since that's pretty much what happened. We're just leaving out that we patched it back up later, then destroyed the evidence." Zajac frowned, "The more I think about it, the worse it does sound, though." shi admitted.

"Well, we did murder a Federation officer, and did billions of credits worth of damages to the Federation Frontier," Gildy admitted, crossing hir arms. "Though, really, we were in the right in doing so."

"I shot the sheriff, but I swear it was in self-defence." Zajac retorted in a slightly sing-song manner. "Yet, I don't see that really flying all that well in the court of law, do you?" Gildy agreed that all that they went through, Kim was right, no one, not even a telepath, would really swallow such a story as factual. The giraffe leaned against the wall, crossing hir own arms, "Granted, now I'm going through and getting rid of all the Federation bugs that've been placed on this ship."

"Bugs?"

Zajac nodded, "Yeah, you know, listening devices and the like? You don't think they hadn't put an ear to us, what with what we were carrying out." the comptech said, gesturing to Gildedtongue.

Ear's splayed back, Gildy couldn't help but growl quietly, "Wait, you knew what was happening to me too?" Creekstripe's laughter ran up Gildy's spine as hir paranoia was piqued. The chakat's face moved right up to the giraffe, despite the height difference, the lion was looking intimidating to the prey species.

Hands lifted in surrender, Zajac's small horns knocked against the thick metal wall, "Hey, hey, calm down! Look, I was only told about things recently. After we left the Frontier Station, even." Gildedtongue backed up, giving Zajac some more room as

the giraffe ran a hand through his mullet-like mane. "Hell, even the captain told me to keep it on the hush-hush. I thought there was something odd going on when the ship first was land-locked, then some Feds talked to the upper crew, some scans of the ship, and rewrites of the ship's computer were made." Zajac shrugged, "Hell, they weren't even subtle, but, nothing we could do, they were in their right, I guess. Heh, not like we didn't already have a smuggling rap sheet. But, yeah, so Jefferson told me to go around looking for any sort of Federation recording devices."

Gildedtongue nodded, sitting back down on his haunches, "So, how are you finding them? Not like they'll have big blinking red lights on them or anything." Shi said, looking around the corridor.

Laughing, the comtech nodded, holding up his datapad, "True, but they do give off a signal. Federation agents need to be able to find them too and all. All you gotta do is send out the right call, and you'll get a ping back from them. Sure, we didn't have that data before but..." Shi chuckled, pointing outside, "They did, and I've been working on it the last couple of days."

The chakat nodded, thinking to himself, "So, you just use your PADD to send out a signal, and the recording device responds?" Shi blushes, "Think I can have that program too? I'm feeling completely bored not doing anything helpful."

"Sure thing." Zajac said, giving Gildedtongue his own datapad, "Take this one. I've got more back in my room. It's pretty simple. Just tap the scan button, and if you're within a couple metres or so, you'll get a ping number back. The bugs can't transmit too far otherwise our normal sensors would pick them up, so you've got to be close. Anyway, the smaller the ping number, the closer you are, you know, how long it takes for data to go to and from a machine and all."

"So, what do they look like?"

Zajac shrugged, "Just about anything, really. Well, they've got to be at least as big as..." Shi looked at Gildedtongue's hand, "About as big as the tip of your index finger. Since these have to record, well, months of data, they can't be microscopic, but, still, it's pretty small." Zajac smiled at Gildy.

The chakat looked over the PADD some more, "And when I find one?"

"Ah, good question! We can't really reprogram them without the Feds knowing what we're up to, and if we get rid of all of them, then it's really hard to explain to the agents why all their toys are missing. So, what I want you to do is get yourself a marker, and dot around the bug. We'll use a battery and some wire to overload the thing, like if we were hit by an EMP blast in the pirate attack. Not destroyed, but not readable either." Zajac smiled, "Think you're up to this?" The chakat nodded mutely back. The giraffe chuckled and patted Gildy's cheek, "Well, good luck!" Zajac whistled as Shi went back towards Engineering.

Gildedtongue made hir way back to hir own room. Shi hadn't spent much time in here, especially after the wedding, or even before then. The clothes in hir dresser were still clean and folded, but musty from lack of use. Flopping on hir bed, Gildedtongue looked over the datapad from Zajac, hitting the bright red button on the touchscreen display. A little animation of what looked like a submarine sonar display ran through, and the chakat blinked, seeing a display of "Ping: 1 – 34 milliseconds" The chakat's curiosity grew as shi walked around hir room, hitting the button again, keeping still and watching the numbers increase and decrease, like an electronic game of hot-and-cold.

It wasn't in hir dresser. The chakat lifted hir mattress, grunting at the pain in hir shoulder and forelegs, but it wasn't under hir bed. The door and the door panel were clean too, the highest ping numbers shi could get, and in the lavatory, shi got no signal.

Gildedtongue went to the window, tapping the button again, 5 milliseconds. The chakat slowly looked around, seeing a riveted seam on the metal walls. Using the datapad again, shi hovered it over the bumps. 3 milliseconds, 1 millisecond, it had to be around here. The PADD wasn't any more precise, so shi had to go at it herself. Hir fingers ran along the rivets, feeling the small bumps from the metal. One felt a little bigger than the others as Gildy's claw went along the edge, popping free a tiny disc.

The front was the same drab grey as the rest of the wall, but behind shi could see a mess of tiny wires, hooked up to this or that, and no visible power supply. Shi gently returned the faux rivet back to where shi found it, getting a marking pen to dot around the bug. Shi felt accomplished, but knew that there'd have to be another scan of the room after they disable that bug, checking for other listening devices. Flopping down on the bed, Gildy took in a deep breath and closed hir eyes, only wanting to relax and rest for a moment.

A firm hand was pushing the chakat's shoulder as hir eyes opened up slowly, seeing a worried fox'taur looking over hir. "Hey there. You missed lunch and dinner and we were a bit worried about you." Thallon said, taking a step back to let the chakat have enough room to get up. Gildy rubbed hir head, bleary eyes looking over the nearest clock. The momentary rest seemed to have eaten up seven hours, so shi wasn't going to look forward to sleeping that 'night.'

"Sorry, love. I guess I was out for a bit longer than I expected," shi covered a yawn, stretching out over hir bed, hir fur messed up all over the place before shi put hir feet on the floor. A small wince came from the chakat as shi first stood up, hir paws still a little tender in their recovery first thing in the day. Shi was afraid that there might still be some shrapnel in hir handpaws but wasn't about to go reopening old wounds to

find them. The fox'taur ran his fingers through his messy mane of hair as he sighed happily, "How are the repairs coming along?"

"We should be more or less ship-shape in the next couple of days, barring anything unexpected." He chuckles quietly, "Thirtysilver is currently desperate in finding funds to pay for the crew, but hopefully we won't be seeing any mutinies or the like." The big hybrid gave his spouse a firm hug after seeing Gildy's eyes go wide, "I'm just joking with you."

"Heh, right, right," the chakat went to the dresser, pulling out one of the ship's casual uniforms, putting it on. The two walked down the Spine in their quiet. Engineers and technicians scurrying about while the two large 'taurs dance the dodging dance of the corridor, accompanied with the usual song of 'sorry's and 'excuse me's.

After retrieving a couple of containers for supper, the two 'taurs sat at their corner table. With the replicator off-line in the repairs, the ship's crew had opened up into the emergency food supply. Thallon looking over what the rations was claiming to be beef in a mushroom sauce, though it came out to look more like a shoe sole in slime with some chunks. Gildedtongue's Caitian Pepper Stew didn't fare much better as the two forced it down in silence. Thallon gave a wide grin, "When we arrive at Chakona, the first place I'm going to head for is this little place in Amistad City, near the water. They do a Fish 'n' Chip with the local catch that is absolutely to die for." He grins, "I've made up my mind, you, Sal and I are going. The greasy fried fish and potatoes will clean this shit off our palates for sure!"

"Hehe, right, right. Is this before or after we go to the Caitian Grill there you talked about two days ago?" Gildedtongue smiled, though it wasn't really hard to guess why food was on their minds as he stomachached another mouthful. The chakat's ears drooped with his whiskers as he felt tears coming to his eyes, "And then, you'll be off in the stars, flying around in here, and I'll be down there, in what everyone told me at home would be my personal Heaven. God, am I so stupid." Dropping his spoon, he cradled his head.

Putting a hand on Gildy's shoulder, Thallon rubbed the chakat reassuringly, "We'll make it work. Once we get communications running again, we'll always be a phone call away." The pink-furred centauroid hugged the leonine one, slowly easing him up onto his feet as they made their way back to Saldura's room. The chakat's feet and injuries were aching once again in his agitation as he was put back into bed, curled around his husband, the one he'll have to say good-bye to.

"...Williamson? Wolf? Xing? Zajac?" Saldura was standing before the assembled crew in the holo room, reading names off of his roster, replied with

acknowledgements of their presence. “Thank you, you can go back to your stations. We'll be taking off at eighteen hundred, next stop shall be Chakona where we'll finish our repairs.” Sal put hir PADD in a hip pouch as the engineering department made their way back to the rear of the ship. Gildedtongue was sitting up by the front, near the badger during the rolle call, making hir way over and placed hir hand on the morph's shoulder. “Three days and still no sign of Peters, K'Sherra, or Boomburg, which is exactly why we told them not to leave the ship. Guess their unauthorized sightseeing tour is going to be a lot longer.”

“Any chance we might rescue them?” Gildy asked, hir tail curled around hir legs.

“Not really.” Saldura said, looking back at hir spouse, “Taking on a broken Federation space station was crazy enough. Trying to do the same on a fully loaded Russian station in the middle of Non-Aligned Territory is an assured suicide.” Shi sighed, “I know it sounds cruel, but if we don't leave soon, they'll start thinking about coming in and we'll be seeing a lot more people turn up missing, or dead in the firefights.” Gildy's lips met Saldura's, kissing hir to quiet the badger's sadness.

They left the room in silence, hands interlaced as they went down the Spine. Saldura's usually brisk pace dragged as they walked and Gildy gave hir spouse's hand a squeeze. “I love you.” the chakat whispered. Saldura responded with a smile, returning the squeeze.

“I love you too. I won't lie, though, this won't be easy for me either.” They stopped just before the ship's bridge. “But, first we need to make sure you'll get better.” The badger grinned, stroking Gildy's chin, “You deserve the best, love.”

Closing hir eyes, Gildy cuddled up with the badger, sighing in sad contentment. “So do you. So do you.” The badger's warmth filled the chakat's flesh, but Sal eventually pulled out of the hug., giving the chakat a kiss on the cheek.

“Work calls, love. Soon we'll get you to your new home, though, just you wait.” Saldura smiled, giving another kiss before heading into the bridge, the look of sadness in hir face not missed by the chakat.

Only a few more days until shi got to Chakona.

“Civilian H345-V Star Transport CT 45J-42I, designated Purgatorio. This is Captain Gordon Erikson the F.S.S. Cat's Claw. Please state your business in the Chakastra system.” The battleship displayed on the monitors in the Purgatorio bridge. Captain Matilda Jefferson stood up, addressing the monitor as the main screen blipped, transferring from an image of the nearby ship, to the communication feed from the nearby military ship. The fair skinned, bald, elderly human was a stark contrast to the

young, dark, Spacer who responded to the bored hailing with a smile.

“We're here to drop off some personnel, mail, and some goods, before making some much needed repairs and transport other goods.” Matilda responded, hands casually at her side. The woman's confidence amazed the chakat sitting on hir haunches on the bridge. Behind her, Saldura held hir hands behind hir in attention, the security chief standing imposingly.

Running his hand over his smooth head, the war ship captain looked over something off screen, “Purgatorio, we have records that you were scheduled to have been here weeks ago. Can you explain your tardiness?” Gildy peered back at Saldura before looking back at the monitor.

“Pirate trouble, Cat's Claw. We were attacked en route to a mining colony on the border of Federation Space. We were hit hard by a Grav mine, and the resulting shock to the warp drive had an electromagnetic effect on the ship, damaging our astronavigation systems as well as communications. The damaged warp core wasn't particularly speedy by then either.”

The captain nodded in agreement, glancing off screen for a moment. The pilot in the Purgatorio bridge turned his head, “Captain, we're being scanned.” Lifting her hand for quiet, Matilda kept her casual stare at the old Federation officer. With hir limited empathy, Gildy couldn't tell if she was bluffing, or was this confident that she'd be found as harmless.

It was common practice for Pirates to steal or duplicate Ship ID beacons, using them to masquerade into otherwise unfriendly places of port. This was most commonly done to ships destroyed in raids, Gildy recalled Sal mentioning it was called 'face carving' in the less polite sections of the Galactic Arm, when pirates would literally skin the faces off people to wear in the older, less defined visual communication transmissions.

“Purgatorio.” Erikson finally responded, looking back at the camera, “Please dock on the number 36 port on the Warp Gate, and Welcome to Chakona.”

The wide, leonine handpaws stamped on the ground like a nervous kitten as their owner bit hir lower lip. Making a final scan of the room, hir meager possessions had been stuffed in a duffel bag hoisted on hir shoulder. Hir books, jewelry, a PADD, and a number of uniform shirts donated to hir by the ship were all shi had to hir name. Touching the cross on hir bosom absentmindedly, shi reassured hir consciousness of its presence, hir momento of Home and what it stood for, the friends shi had left behind. Gildy thumbed the ring on hir finger in hir silence, the awkward stillness

breaking away for a smile across the chakat's face, having gained so much in such a short amount of time.

“So, once again, the slut runs away from the people shi claims to 'love.’” Creekstripe chuckled behind hir corporeal daughter. “Now that you've had your fill with them, time to go off to the next conquest, is that right? Just another leech on the backside of the universe, sucking everything dry before moving off to the next spot?” the ring-tailed chakat gave Gildy an evil grin. Gildedtongue's breathing became heavier as shi hied out of the room and down the Spine.

The ship's innards was saturated with Federation customs officials. The official rationale was that the ship was randomly selected for a thorough investigation, but the crew knew that they were there to pick up the planted bugs and debrief the remaining executive officers of the ship. Chakats and skunk'taurs dressed in the golden tunics were engineers and technicians of the Federation, the people most likely to be found on these details. Those in the green tunics, Biologists and Medical, those people were the square pegs in this round hole.

The scientists, mostly humans with some bipedal morphs, kept a noted berth from the chakat. Their gazes darted momentarily to the leonine centauroid, and even Gildedtongue could feel flashes of of curiosity. Shi couldn't tell what sort of fascination by empathy alone, however shi figured it wasn't that of getting to know a stranger. No, shi was their little experiment, and they were wondering if they had made a bomb.

At the door to the bridge, Saldura, Thirtysilver, and Matilda were speaking to a blonde maned lion man in the silver grey tunic of a Federation security officer. Gildy couldn't tell in the distance if he was a lion morph or a caitian, but seeing his almost flirty gestures to the quartermistress, and her general disinterest, the chakat figured shi could put hir money on the latter.

The badger was the first to notice the approaching chakat, offering hir a warm smile, “Speak of the devil, here shi is.” Gildy offered a quiet wave, which the caitian returned with a bow.

“Chakat Gildedtongue. You've certainly come a long way in getting here. Your friends here were just telling me about your voyage here. I'm sorry to hear about the pirate attack. We'll be sending patrols to that sector when we can.” The caitian saw hir gravid lower belly, grinning like a kitten. “I see you're bringing in extra cargo here.”

He reached over to give hir distended flanks a friendly pet, but in that uniform, all Gildy could see was the perverted grin of Commander Johnson and how shi would fondle hir pregnant belly. Hir hearts both started to race as shi found herself short of breath, claws unsheathing from hir feet in preparation to maul and flee from the psychotic skunk. Forcing a deep breath, shi found enough clarity of mind to take a step away from the alien, shaking hir head, “Please, no sir. It's, well, been ages since

I've had a proper shower.” The caitian opened his mouth to refute the denial, but Gildy preempted it with a dark “Please.”

Sighing, the security guard gave up, adjusting his uniform so his hand movements weren't put to waste, “Ah, right. If you would accompany me off the landing dock and into the Gate proper, I think that there is someone waiting for you.” The caitian offered a warm smile, trying to ignore his, or perhaps hir, faux pas. Adjusting the strap on hir shoulder once again, Gildy walked with the security guard through the medical bay airlock and through a short umbilical to the terminal. More uniformed men were there, sporting red tunics this time, commanding personnel, if Gildy's recollection was correct. A knot twisted in hir lower stomach as all of hir tightened up. Were these the folk who were in charge of hir experiment? A human, another caitian, and a fox person, possibly a voxan stood to greet hir with neutral faces. The lion's steps were slow and careful as shi made hir way forward.

The blockade was suddenly burst through with a streak of striped white. Arms outstretched, a white tiger centauroid made hir way past the Federation. “Giiiiildedtongue! So you finally made it here! We were worried sick that you were lost!” Jadestripe's grin was as wide as hir arms as shi wrapped them around hir long lost younger sister. Despite the five decades shi had on the lion, the tiger's spring was far bouncier than hir younger sister.

In the arms of hir sister, things flung all through Gildy's brain. Shi had finally made it across the stars to this homeworld, wrapped in the arms of family that poured their love into hir, physically and psychically. At first it felt like Platinum's invasion, but something softer, more familiar. Tears welled up in Gildedtongue's eyes as shi buried hir head into Jade's shoulder. Hir older sister's white furred hand ran through hir messy mane of red, combined with a gentle cooing helped relax the chakat enough to recompose herself. “Ave, Jadestripe.” Gildedtongue mustered a weak smile.

Wrinkling crossed the light dusting of green fur along Jadestripe's brow, blinking in confusion. Gildy loosed a nervous chuckle, but Jade dismissed it for the moment. “I'm just so glad you're here, sister. And look at you, with a cub! Tell me, who was the chakat that stole your heart? Or was it a rugged skunk'taur?” Jade grinned kittenishly.

Gildy could see that they weren't going to move very quickly as shi put hir bag on the floor, “Ah, neither, he's a fox'taur. Oh, you must meet my husband and my spouse!” Gildy grinned, for once shi could introduce hir partners to people, and not everyone around hir knew everyone else.

“Husband? Spouse? You don't need to use such archaic terms to dumb things down to me, Gildy. You could just say your lifemates.” Jade smiled reassuringly, “I mean, I can understand where you're from, people wouldn't understand such things outside of something like a marriage.”

The leonine chakat's ears burned with a blush, lifting up hir left hand, "But, um, I am married."

Jadestripe inspected the band around Gildy's finger, as if it was some alien artefact growing out of hir fur. Finally shi offered a wide smile, "A wedding band. How quaint. Well, come on, let's get out of these people's way!" Taking Gildy's hand, the tigress whisked Gildy into the Chakonan Warp Gate proper.

Major Federation planets all housed one or more Warp Gates around their planet, acting as liaisons between the surface and Space farers, a sort of orbital airport, but on a larger scale. Many Warp Gates house massive market places for traders to drop and deal with their goods without costly expenses in shipping material to the planet surface, and blasting off what isn't sold. While smaller transports like the Purgatorio could mitigate such expenses by touching down planetside, the much more massive freighters, unable to enter planetary atmosphere, are forced to spend on costly shuttles or the infant technology of teleportation.

Jadestripe made hir way through the crowd like a shark, darting through the ocean of flesh, clutching the hand of the remora-like Gildedtongue. "You gotta move with a purpose here!" Jade shouted back amid the din, "Hundreds, even thousands of people all make their way through here every day." Gildy could only nod mutely in response. Bright signs all around advertised just about everything, from governmental customs checks, to private shipping contract buyers and sellers, to restaurants and other facilities. Terralingo was the predominant language written, but Gildy understood barely enough Caitian Ratarsk to recognize those signs, but many, shi assumed, were in the Voxxan tongue, Yatta. A massive, transparent dome sat over the merchant plaza, to the left, Chakona slowly rose, with one of its moons peering from behind, alien star consolations peppering the eternal night in its backdrop. "Ya hungry?" Jadestripe didn't even wait for an answer as shi pulled hir younger sister into a boutique.

"Ah, welcome, Jadestripe," a young, ginger furred chakat greeted the two oncoming customers. Shi was wearing a lacy halter top with hir dark mane curled up top in a bun, which made Gildy ponder what sort of place shi was dragged into. "I see you brought in a new date, a bit earlier than usual," that didn't help the lion chakat's imagination either.

As if shi felt Gildy's uncomfortableness (probably because shi could) Jade gave hir sister's hand a reassuring squeeze, smiling happily to the other chakat, "This is not a date this time. Frecklepaw, allow me to introduce to you my younger sister, Gildedtongue." Gildy started to stick out hir hand, but soon it found itself full of haltered belly as the hostess wrapped hir arms around the immigrant chakat in a hug.

Gildy felt hir body seize up again, reminding himself upon meeting Dreamweaver's parents. Recomposing himself, Gildy put hir arms around the strange chakat, giving a gentle pat to the small of hir upper back.

“Well, any friend or family of Jadestripe is more than welcome to the Chakastra Dawn!” Frecklepaw grinned, disengaging from Gildedtongue, “So, what can I get you two? The usual, Jade?” the white tigress responded with a nod. “And I'll get a menu for you then?”

Gildy shook hir head, “Um, that's okay, I'm not...” hir dismissal was interrupted by hir growling belly, “I'll just have what Jade is having, then.” Freckle smiled and nodded, leading the two chakats to a niche. The area was booth-like, save for the benches being replaced with cushions on the floor. Freckle thanked them and went to the kitchen, leaving the chakats alone.

Looking around, Gildy saw that the restaurant was being productive, but not overwhelmed. Shi wasn't even sure what sort of food was served at the parlour, but figured if hir sister could stomach it, shi certainly could. Hir eyes went over to Jadestripe, getting a good look at hir for the first time. Hir curly white mane about shoulder length, with two black tipped ears peeking out. Hir forehead having the namesake lightly green furred stripe across hir forehead, and the black stripes on hir cheeks pointing to hir pink nose. Shi was wearing a low cut top that showed Gildy far more of the larger bosom than shi would ever want to show off.

“I'm just glad you're here, Gildedtongue. I'm sorry that it took so long.” Jade smiled, reaching to put hir hand over Gildy's, squeezing gently. The younger 'kat smiled back, trying to embrace the good vibes being sent to hir. “You'll see, things are going to be much better here.” Gildy nodded quietly, hoping to agree with hir sister as a waitress came by, setting down two large mugs of what smelled like spiced coffee. Jadestripe grinned, quickly picking up hir mug, “Most people call it Voxxee, though the proper name is Jalva e'Welsten. Go on, I'm sure you'll love it!” shi purred, taking in a mouthful. Gildy took it to hir lips, the mixtures of tastes like coffee, cinnamon and hot sauce. It made hir tongue curl in hir mouth and hir whiskers to spring at attention. It must be an acquired taste.

“So, do you live here on the station?” Gildy asked, after downing the alien fluid in hir mouth, trying to keep it from returning near hir taste buds.

Jade laughed, smiling wide, “Oh, some times it feels like I do, but my family and I have our own place down planetside, where you'll be living.” Shi grinned, sipping more of hir drink, “I'm just here for work.”

“You work up here? Wow, must be a hell of a commute to do every day.” Gildy chuckled, looking downward where shi assumed the planet would be despite seeing it above hir earlier. Jadestripe let out a loud 'HA!' in response.

“That it would be, that it would be! No no, I'm only here for about two days every other week. I'll show you my office up here before we go home, but most of my work is down on Chakona. I come up here for new clients and the like.” Jade smiled, leaning back as their meal was served, hot sandwiches filled with thin sliced meat. Gildy could smell the horseradish a mile off as shi folded hir hands under the table for a quiet prayer.

“I see, I see. I guess I never really heard what you did, Jade.” shi smiled, glad that their conversation started to get in motion. Shi didn't want to live with a stranger, much less a stranger that was family.

Jade finished hir first bite of hir sandwich, “I help new immigrants get accustomed to our planet. I suppose they list me as a social worker, but I'd consider myself as the smiling face and open arms of Chakona.” The older chakat took in another bite as Gildedtongue consumed hir own sandwich with gusto, it wasn't beef or anything shi could recognize from Earth, but it was complimented by the spicy condiment well.

“Most people don't really need much in the way of help in that sense,” Jadestripe continued, “Just to be polite and courteous of the morphic population.” A silence billowed from the table as the tigress's lips lowered in a frown, “Though, some morphs and 'taurs have a lot of re-education to go through. Some things on a genetic level, things I can't help with.”

Gildy nodded quietly, seeing the darker turn of the conversation, not wanting to be a killjoy. Shi mustered up a smile, “Well, I'm sure that you do a great job, Jade. A lot of people must give you their gratitude.”

The tigress's mood quickly picked up as shi feigned modesty, “Well, I do my best, of course. Those that get themselves here are the real heroes.” Shi purred quietly, “What are you going to be doing here?”

“Oh, I hope to continue teaching,” Gildy started, running hir fingers through hir mane, “Honestly, I'm looking forward for my biggest worries and excitements to be curriculum plannings, disruptive students, and seeing the look in kids' eyes when things finally click for them.” Shi smiled wide, leaning back and unconsciously taking another sip of the coffee before hir. It tasted better cold, but not by much.

“A fine enough profession to continue.” Jade's smiles were short lived as shi went back to a serious tone, “You're not going to teach them your beliefs, are you?”

That came out from left field and caught Gildy in surprise, “Beg pardon?” Shi shook hir head, “Not unless I'm teaching a theology or philosophy class, I can't imagine where it would come up.” The new chakat's confused look remained, hoping hir stumbling answer was satisfactory.

Jade nodded solemnly, taking in the information, “All right. As you might know,

while not strictly illegal, there's little tolerance of missionaries trying to shove their beliefs around." Hir smile returned as shi changed subjects, "So, when is shi due? Must be close, seeing how big you are."

Taken aback at the thought shi'd be out recruiting people to hir faith, Gildedtongue took hir time to recover from Jade's emotional whiplash, biding hir time with a final bite of hir sandwich, "well, they are due in just a few weeks. I'm hoping that it'll be soon enough that Thallon and Saldura can be there to witness." Gildedtongue said, reaching to pat hir flank, smiling in hir maternal pride. It certainly wasn't the best of circumstances to create such life, however shi didn't find himself regretting it, and hoped shi'll be a good enough mother to them.

"Twins? Well, well, that is certainly a lovely surprise," Jade grinned, purring up a storm, "Mmmmm, and born here on their homeworld, a most pleasant turn of events!" Frecklepaw came by, setting the bill on the table, and before Gildedtongue could reach, Jadestripe had pounced upon the sheet of paper, looking over it before nodding, "Well, if you're ready, Gildy, I'll just be a moment in the lavatory and we'll pay and be on our way."

The black striped streak had left the table in a flash. The twin cubs squirmed in the chakat's womb, reminding their 'ride' of their presence, by giving several swift kicks to hir bladder. The chakat opened up hir own pocket book, figuring if Jadestripe was going to pay for the meal, the least shi could do is leave a tip. Without knowing how much the meal came to, shi left a small stack of Fedcred coins before hunting for the restrooms. Signage was apparently lacking in this brave new world as Gildedtongue couldn't find hide nor hair of a simple worded arrow, or basic Terran pictographs.

Finally, shi gave up looking as the internal percussion became more and more pronounced, and went to the nearest waitress, seeing a snow leopard patterned chakat working on a stack of receipts, hir back towards Gildedtongue. The leonine chakat cleared hir throat before asking, "Ah, excuse me, shir, could you point me to the litter room?"

A directed jab of psychic, empathic frustration and annoyance speared Gildy right in the forehead as the waitress slammed hir hands down on the table, turning hir head. The young chakat momentarily confused, but shook hir head, "I'm sorry, ah, behind those booths back there, take a left, you can't miss it."

Thanking hir, Gildy made hir way back where the waitress directed. Just behind the door, a row of sinks stood under a window, with several doors on the opposite wall, their contents easily guessable. Jadestripe was at one sink, washing hirself up and gave hir sister a smile, "Probably a good idea. It's going to be a lengthy flight back down."

Nodding in agreement, Gildedtongue laughed curtly, "Heh, not a few hours here and I've already angered the locals." Jade cocked hir head, listening as the leonine chakat

explained hir recent events.

This just brought a laugh out of Jadestripe who patted hir sister's shoulder, "The number of wei- erm, interesting people we have coming in and out of the Warp Gate is massive. Shi probably thought you were some guy wanting to go back here for something. We get a lot of people who think that this planet is akin to some sort of space bordello, especially up here. The best way to go around here is simply to be upfront. They can't confuse your innuendo if you're blunt." Gildy nodded as hir sister left the lavatories.

Meeting back up with Jade, Gildy gathered hir duffel bag from under the table at the booth, starting to head out. Frecklepaw intercepted the two, smiling at Gildedtongue, "Oh, shir? You forgot this at the table." In hir hand was the stack of coins shi left for the service crew.

"Ah, no no. I mean, it's a tip, it was a wonderful meal! Thank you!" shi bowed hir head to Frecklepaw, who had a confused, and somewhat hurt look as shi pocketed the coins, wishing the two chakats a good day as they left. Gildy was considerably lost, looking at Jadestripe, "What did I do now?"

"Ha, oh, I guess there's a lot to teach you. Tips really aren't given around here, you'll see most of what would be the 'gratuity' fee on Earth are already incorporated in the bill. Waitstaff around here aren't paid too shabby." Jade smiled, "So, giving them extra money is sometimes considered a little rude, like you're telling someone to better maintain themselves." Gildedtongue frowned as hir limbs drooped. "Now, now. You're new here, you're expected to learn by doing, no?"

Gildy nodded, still not thrilled in insulting two people in less than an hour, but agreed to Jade's point. They walked toward a section of the plaza opposite of the restaurants. The front adorned in a large mural, looking about three quarters of the way finished. Images of the first explorers to the planet, the cultivation and civilization of Chakona, up to the ratifying of the planetary Constitution and the declaration of Chakonian independence adorned the wall. The image faded into elaborate pencil sketches and then nothingness, which Gildy took as an indication of the unwritten future of the planet. Jade made hir way to an almost invisible door, biding hir sister welcome inside as shi followed in.

Dozens of morphs, mostly chakats, but some bipedal morphs and a couple of skunk'taurs, were busying themselves within their work, carrying their PADDs and handfuls of files. Even more morphs were seated along the edges of the walls, small bags of their belongings before them, with more bags being taken around to them. The immigration offices were certainly buzzing with activity. "We try to do as much naturalization up here, that way when they arrive planetside they can start on their new lives as smoothly as possible." Jade's positive but boisterous demeanour cooled to a friendly professionalism as shi started to address the huddled masses. Some of

them looked not well-to-do, but were in control of their lives, but many looked sick and scared, clutching onto their families as they awaited judgment from the Chakonian government about their clearance to come live there. A reminder to Gildedtongue that Chakona wasn't just the new Chakat homeworld, but a home to every morph out there, sacrificing a lot more than shi had to break into a new life, a clean slate and a fresh start.

Jade went to speak to a receptionist for a moment, leaving Gildy alone in hir thoughts. Any daydreams were cut short before they started as the older chakat came back with a smile, "We've worked you in to meet with Yattle. Hy should have all of your paperwork ready. Good luck!" Jade gave Gildy a hug before taking hir bag, letting the chakat into the offices.

Not sure where to go, Gildedtongue wandered momentarily through the halls, looking at the door plaques. Thankfully it wasn't more than a few doors when shi happened upon one reading "Col. Yattle Redpaw, SFMC, (RET.)" Gildy lifted up hir hand to knock, but a voice from within called out, "Come in."

The first thing that hit Gildy were the stacks of filing cabinets along the left wall. Papers and files stuffed to the brim as the barely closed drawers had scraps of white and manilla peeking out. To the left, pictures of all kinds adorned the wall. Photographs of landscapes, many with a skunk'taur family front and centre. Crude crayon drawings made with the utmost care by young hands were taped nearest to the floor, "FOR DADY" sprawled in red above a rocketship and a black blob the chakat figured was the father in question. It made Gildedtongue smile unconsciously, wondering how many of these sorts of 'masterpieces' shi'll have to find room for.

"Wovven is certainly an enthusiastic artist," the voice came from the mephit seated behind the desk. Once midnight black fur had greyed into a dull pewter. The skunk'taur was an imposing, but warm figure. Grandfatherly spectacles rested on hys muzzle, in contrast to the red, furless scarring along hys cheek, possibly from a stray phaser blast. The red command uniform of a Starfleet officer immaculately cared for, though the ranking pips were all missing, worn like a professional top more than anything. "And I apologize for gleeming your intents outside." hy smiled, offering a soft chuckle, "Some people think a lot louder than they realize."

"Ah, I apologize, I, um, guess," Gildy blushed embarrassed, sitting down on hir haunches before the desk. The skunk'taur picked up one of the many PADDs on hys desk, thumbing over it, looking over it quietly, letting the chakat stew in the silence for a moment. "Quite a long line out there. Sorry about bumping the line."

Yattle waved hys paw absentmindedly, "Seems like the Stellar Federation had pulled some strings to get you here, though I'm not sure why. No special skills, no direly needed job. I mean, you're a chakat, which means that you didn't have that high of a hurdle to come here anyway, but," hy sighs, shrugging his upper shoulders, "I swear,

25 years in the service and despite what people around here think, even I never seem to know what ever went on there.” hy shrugged, putting hys thumb on the corner of the device, making it give a tinny, triumphant 'ding!' with papers printing out next to hym. Dividing up the stack, the skunk'taur stood up and made hys way around the desk, offering Gildy half of them with a smile, “Welcome to Chakona, chakat Gildedtongue.”

The newly greencarded chakat sat in hir sister's office while Jade worked on hir computer. More pictures and filing cabinets adorned the walls as Gildy quietly studied them. Dozens of pictures of Jadestripe with cubs, with adult chakats, and other people stood looking back at Gildy with their smiling faces. This was hir family, a whole section of hir existence shi was, until recently, almost completely oblivious to. Shi turned back to hir sister, “So, Jadestripe, why did you never call or write until now? I mean, it did come in out of the blue, and all.”

Jade's fingers never left the keyboard as shi continued to input more and more data into, well, something Gildy couldn't look at. “Well, after last we left each other, I'd had figured you weren't in much of a mood to talk to me. Guess after the years I just started to forget.” The tap-tap-tapping stopped momentarily as Jadestripe offered a smile, turning to Gildy, “But, I guess now we've got more than enough time to catch up!” shi purred before getting back to work.

It was a reasonable enough excuse, and Gildy had to agree, shi didn't want to talk to Jade after the last time. Shi went back to studying the room, looking over the filing cabinets, “Heh, I remember seeing a lot of these back at the Monastery. I'm surprised you people here haven't gone totally paperless.”

The typing didn't stop, but it was joined by a soft chuckle, “Mmmmm, we keep trying to, and push it harder and harder. Though, the archivists prefer having something physical to maintain the data upon. Not like it isn't capable of being completely backed up several dozen times, but, well, some people like old things.” The last part sounded a bit like a jab at Gildedtongue, who simply rolled hir eyes and smirked back at hir sister. Shi couldn't help but chuckle quietly as they seemed to be bickering like proper siblings. With a final triumphant keystroke, Jadestripe gave the keyboard a gentle shove, shutting down hir computer. “Done for the day. Sorry about the wait.” Shi purred, standing up and took Gildedtongue's hand as they left the Ministry of Immigration branch.

“Hopefully this won't take too long.” Jade said on the line to the chartered shuttlecraft for Amistad. People stood, looking over their tickets and adjusting their luggage. Jadestripe told hir sister to keep close, since hir ID would allow himself and a guest a free trip, as a government employee. A Bluepaw skunk'taur handled each bag coming

through. Without opening the containers, the telekenetic centauroid could inspect the items using hir material awareness, a byproduct of hir abilities. The security officer gave Gildy a warm smile and wished hir well on hir trip, letting the group start to board.

Things were cramped aboard the shuttle, families piled on, huddled together for the short voyage down to the planet. A free trip didn't, obviously, include luxury, but Gildedtongue was happy to set hir feet down on solid ground for the first time in a year. A stray thought ran through hir mind, touching the wall screen. A number of menu options popped up, and after a moment of scanning, shi tapped hir finger on "Time" "Calendar" and finally "Terra (Earth)." "Seventeenth of October, Twenty-three twenty-one," shi mused aloud, looking at hir sister, "Sorry it took so long."

Jade smiled, putting hir arm around Gildy's shoulder, since it was the only place it could go after a family of Raccoon'taurs came to sit next to them, "It was more than worth the wait, sister. I'm just glad you're here."

The fires of re-entry licked across the shuttle's hull as it eased into the atmosphere. The inertial dampners couldn't ignore the low rumbling of the shaking chassis as the air swallowed the ship, bringing it inside Chakona. A tropical sun shone down upon the planet as they came down above the great oceans. As the shuttle went from Space to Atmospheric flight, the draw of natural gravity started to grip upon the occupants. It was hard for Gildy to describe, but shi felt more at ease in the world, like hir organs were settling more properly in the more analogue planetary effects than the digital artificial ones.

The shuttle made a slow, almost casual loop, giving the passengers ample time to ogle down below, seeing the lush green islands dotting in the cerulean ocean. Patches of white cities poked out of the overgrowth, and the largest was Amistad, their destination. A final loop around the space port slowly brought the shuttle down to the ground, the pilot saying something unintelligible over the PA system, but Gildy figured it was a thanks for their patronage. Having only a single carry on, shi and Jadestripe left with the masses of morphs out of the warm shuttle and into the umbilical tunnel to the port proper.

Gildy hadn't felt even remotely this heavy since that first space station shi visited on the beginning of hir trip, the fact that shi was walking for three, however, only exasperated the sensation. "Good Lord, on one hand I'm thankful for being on solid ground once again, on the other hand, I think it's going to be a long, long while for me to get my land legs again."

Rolling hir eyes, Jadestripe patted hir little sister's side, "Well, for the next week or

two, I don't imagine you doing much in the way of walking.” Shi smirked, looking over Gildy's gravid waddle.

“I guess so. Speaking of which, I'd better call the Purgatorio and tell them I arrived safely, and, well, I obviously want my mates at the birthing.” Gildy said, walking with Jadestripe, who stopped and smiled.

“Of course, and, of course, any friends and such you've met. A good, proper chakat birthing party! Now, that's how you start your life here, bringing in new life, your own, and your children!” Gildy couldn't help but smile at Jade's enthusiasm, but shi was right, in a way. Jadestripe lead hir sister to a public Comm console, helping hir locate the channels to the docked space ship. Soon Hernandez, one of the bridge crew, answered the incoming call.

“Hey, Wanderer!” the bobcat morph on the other end of the line called out in a sing-song fashion, “I'm gonna guess you'll wanna talk to Saldura or Thallon. Thallon's a bit busy helping with some of the repairs, but I might be able to patch you into Saldura.”

“That'll do just fine, thank you,” Gildy smiled, watching the screen. The image went to static, buzzing silently for a moment before a block of text appeared over it, reading 'NO IMAGE AVAILABLE.'

Still, through the speakers, the familiar, low alto voice of Saldura came through loud and clear, “Gildy, love. How are things going over there? Still have a few snoops peeking around up here, but otherwise we're looking to start some of the major overhauls and repairs. Helps a lot being in a state of the art ship dock.”

“That's good to hear. Things are going well enough here. My citizen tests and interviews were,” shi gave an unseen shrug to hir lover, “rather short to non existent. I guess I shouldn't complain, though. I've had enough trouble getting here, I'm going to enjoy some smoother times.” Shi shrugged again, dancing around the conversation looming in hir mind, “I should be birthing in about a week, and, well, obviously I'd like to see you and Thallon there with me. Um, well, maybe Susan, Matilda...” Dominic's name passed through hir head, but Creekstripe's chuckle and mutterance of 'creep,' held hir tongue, “I mean, if they want to and all.”

“I'm sure they would love to join in. Matilda might be bringing Thirtysilver as well. It should fit in our schedule easily enough. Hanging in there, love?” Saldura asked, a hint of concern in hir voice.

“Just fine, thanks,” Gildedtongue lied, curling hir tail around hir haunches. There was a moment of quiet before Saldura spoke again.

“Anyway, I'd better get back to work, but, I'll talk to you soon, maybe tonight!” The badger's cheerier voice came through, “Though, I'm sure you'll want to have some

unwinding. But, if you've got anyone on Earth you want to say hello to, I'd recommend doing so at the star port, probably would be the cheapest." Gildedtongue's eyes went wide and shi nodded, unseen by Saldura. "I love you, Gildy, and I'll see you soon." The chakat returned the sentiment, touching the screen quietly.

Interstellar calls weren't as inexpensive as contacting the orbiting Space Station. Gildy found a place to insert hir credstick before typing in the details of hir call; Earth, The Holy Christian Kingdom of North America, the City of St. Altretic. Shi typed in the name of the communal home Frank lived in near the school. Shi patched himself to hir friend's room, waiting as the comm rang. It was idle for a few minutes before, shi figured, being transferred to the main desk. A portly, balding monk wearing a Franciscan robe answered the Comm, "Altretic teaching dormitories, how may I conn..." he was silent for a moment, peering at the screen in disbelief before smiling wide, "Gildedtongue? My God, you're alive! It is you, isn't it?"

The chakat smiled, purring quietly, "Ave, brother Markus. It does seem that the rumours of my demise might be a little preemptive. It's good to see you." Jadestripe watched on behind Gildedtongue, crossing hir arms "Is Frank there? I've missed him, and wanted to say hello."

Markus frowned quietly, shaking his head, "We haven't seen hide nor hair from him for six months. One day while leading mass, he announced that he was leaving, and afterward, he climbed into a cab and then..." he shrugged as he trailed off. "As far as we knew, he went to the nearest star port. I'm not sure where he'd get the money."

"My God. Th-thank you, Markus. I hope you're doing well, but, I think I'd better make some more calls."

"I hope you're able to find him again. Go with God, Gildedtongue." Markus offered a sad smile.

"As to you as well, Markus," Gildy said before signing off. Shi could barely believe it, hir best friend turning his back on everything after so long. Shi bit hir lower lip, hoping he was okay as shi called up two people who might know more on the situation. After a moment of ringing, a slightly bleary-eyed Starpelt answered the Comm, blinking momentarily as shi was waking up. Gildedtongue bit hir lower lip, if Markus answered the phone earlier, it must have been the night shift. Finally shi smiled to the groggy Starpelt, "Ave, Starry. Remember me?"

Shi found herself awake quickly, seeing the familiar chakat through the viewscreen, "Gildedtongue? I thought you had simply left. It's so good to see you!" The dark furred chakat smiled wide, approaching the monitor, shaking hir head. "Oye, either it was good you left when you did, or things fell apart after you left," hir smile went down as shi sighed, "The whole school had gone completely nuts. Fights breaking out all over the place, some of the teachers seemed to have been encouraging things. We

pulled out Dreamweaver shortly after shi tried to escape a ruckus in the sports fields and caught a rock to the side of hir head.” Starpelt sighed, shaking hir head as Gildedtongue winced, drooping at the story. “We've been home schooling her for the last few months, and Firefoot's gone north to Ontario, looking for a new place for us to live.” Starpelt shook hir head, looking back to Gildedtongue, “And what have you done all this time?”

Nodding, Gildy sighed quietly, “To be honest, I've just set foot on Chakona a couple hours ago.” Shi related hir story to Starpelt, omitting some of the more incriminating parts. “So, that's how I'm here on Chakona and pregnant. I know it must be late over there, but, is Dreamweaver awake? I'd like to say hello to hir.” Starpelt nodded and trotted off for a moment. Gildy blushed, hoping the dead air won't be too expensive, but then waved off thoughts of that nature. Soon an almost familiar face came into view. Hir straight hair hung down to hir shoulders, framing a sleepy, but bright face. A once bean-pole thin frame had developed into the form of a beautiful young chakat. Dreamweaver smiled happily, gasping in surprise.

The two old friends caught up with one another. Dreamweaver's bright smile and attitude having not dulled over the time apart or the traumas. Shi and Toookiee still were a close item, and Gildy could tell by the twinkle in hir eye and the tone in hir voice that this won't be a weak bonding broken by the upcoming move. “I've missed you, Gildedtongue.” Shi finally said.

“I've missed you too, Dreamweaver,” Shi saw the teen yawning as shi chuckled, “Why don't you go to bed. We'll talk at a better time.” Dreamweaver nodded, waving as the two exchanged their farewells, and with a reluctant press, Gildy terminated the call. Hir hand brushed over hir cheeks, finding them wet with unknowingly shed tears.

Jadestripe reached to touch hir sister's shoulder supportingly as Gildy looked back at hir older sibling. They exchanged a tight hug as Gildedtongue clung onto hir new home.

“Babelcat, Stripetail! We're home!” Jadestripe called out, opening the front door of hir home. The home was a handsome, stucco structure, two stories tall, in its eggshell white mudded walls, out the front door was a sweeping view of the great ocean stretching out below the mountain's side. Within, cool, thick tiles greeted Gildy's sore paw pads, and behind hir, the PTV was picked up by its next needed user, the porcine next door neighbour.

It took a moment, but two young adult chakats, somewhere in their early twenties. One stood tall and lanky, hir burnette hair cut short into a bob, adorning a skunk

patterned face and body, a blue pawprint gripping just over his right breast. Shi was as nude as his sibling, a shorter, broader Southwestern Bobcat patterned chakat. Both smiled and doubleteamed the new chakat in a tight hug. Gildy blushed, returning the hug as best as his weary arms could muster before looking back at Jadestripe, "I really apologize, Jade, Babelcat, Stripetail, but, could I just find somewhere to sleep for awhile? It's been a very long day and I'd be much more sociable after some rest." The bobcat patterned chakat nodded, taking Gildy's duffel.

"Sure thing, Great Aunt Gildy. I'll take you to my room, so you hopefully won't be disturbed in the communal room," shi, who Gildy assumed was Babelcat due to the lack of stripes on his tail, led him down the hall, pointing out the bathroom as they passed it before arriving at a door at the end of the hall. Babel's room looked clean enough, aside from some toys on the ground, doubtlessly left by some careless cub, but it didn't much matter to Gildedtongue as shi crawled onto the sleeping pad and was out like a light.

Shi didn't know how long shi was out, but shi knew that it wasn't long enough. Gildedtongue's sleep was interrupted by the feeling of sharp fangs digging into his tail, making it flick hard, having Gildy's head bolt upright to see what was the matter. A small chakat kitten, no more than a babe, but old enough that his first set of teeth were in, jumped up after being knocked aside. Shi puffed up as menacingly as a small ball of tiger-patterned fluff could get as shi hissed at Gildedtongue's tail. The still groggy chakat yelped as the kitten went for a second attack, biting again on the same spot, but didn't expect the sleepy lion to be fast enough to pin him under his prehensile tail in a counterattack. The kitten mewled in defeat as Gildy gently picked him up. The squirming thing seemed to be all right, just feisty and a little embarrassed that his 'prey' seemed to have caught him.

Making his way back into the house, shi followed the sound of conversation, making sure the wiggling hunter didn't pull himself out of his gentle, yet firm grasp. Stepping into the kitchen, shi saw the three adult residents shi knew of drinking a large pot of, what Gildy assumed by the smell, voxxee. "One of yours?" Shi asked, looking down at the cub who finally pried himself out of his hands and lept towards Stripetail, hiding between his legs. "I woke up to find him making breakfast of my tail." Shi looked back at the appendage, seeing a little blood welling up from the sharp teeth's damage.

The skunk patterned chakat laughed quietly. "Oh, that'd be our little Bravehunter," shi said as Hunter responded with a soft growl, "Nothing bad happened, I hope?"

Gildedtongue shook his head, "Not that I think so, I mean, aside from him taking a chunk out of my tail, and in my sleep, my tail batting him aside. Shi still looks fresh from the fight, though." Shi sighed and poured himself a mug of the vile, but available and caffeinated drink, "Looks like I won't be getting the sleep I was hoping for. Thank you, Babelcat, still."

Gildedtongue's whiskers continued to twitch as shi swallowed down the spicy drink. If anything, it certainly worked as a method of waking up. "No problem, Gildedtongue, and we're sorry. Seems Stripe's little kitten either has hir mother's latent telekenesis, or likes taking running jumps at the door handles." Jadestripe laughed, putting down hir mug.

"Oh, it's the latter, B-Cat," Jade grinned, leaning back and smiling at hir sister, before looking at the two younger chakats, "Speaking of, aren't you going to introduce yourselves?" Babelcat and Stripetail blushed and nodded, coughing quietly. Stripetail began, smiling at Gildedtongue.

"I'm Stripetail, daughter of Jadestripe and Roothie, and I'm your niece. And this here is Bravehunter, daughter of me and Lovefur," Shi waved Bravehunter's unamused paw at Gildedtongue, who returned as friendly a smile and wave as shi could, wanting to hopefully make amends with the cub.

Babelcat put down hir mug, hugging Gildedtongue tightly, "I'm chakat Babelcat, daughter of Kelly Bobtail and Ambereyes. Amber is one of Jade's daughters, so, that would make you my great aunt Gildy. GAG, right?" Babelcat laughed, then got a second thought, "Actually, that's a really bad acronym. I'll get back to you on that." Shi sheepishly said.

Gildedtongue nodded and smiled, "I'm Chakat Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe. I'm so happy to meet so much of the family I had lost." Shi purred, ruffling Babelcat's headfur. "So, Jadestripe, I guess I know of Ambereyes and Stripetail. How many daughters do you have?" Shi smiled taking a drink.

Jadestripe laughed and leaned back, mulling things over. "Oh, there's Crystalmane, Ambereyes, Dawncry, Yellowmane, Goldheart, Rain Kwitha and Stripetail. Well, those just the ones I've birthed or sired," Jadestripe said proudly flicking hir tail behind hir. The list made Gildedtongue almost spit out hir drink. Hir sister certainly had more than made up for hir procreational lacking.

"And the Lord sayeth unto Abraham, go forth and multiply," the leonine chakat couldn't help but chuckle. Both Stripetail and Babelcat joined in on the smiling, but Jadestripe's sour expression silenced it relatively quickly.

Shi sighed, "I really don't want that kind of talk in my home, Gildedtongue, do we understand?" Gildedtongue nodded, figuring such teasing was uncalled for, and felt genuinely sorry for crossing any lines. Jadestripe nodded, smiling, "Good."

Both Stripe and Babel had plenty of questions for Gildedtongue, asking about hir years and life growing up on Terra and in the Kingdom. Shi was the foreigner, and shi happily wove hir audience the stories of hir youth, growing up in the vineyard farms, to hir years of education at the monastery, and hir teaching career. Of course shi only gave an abridged summary, there was no need to empty all of hir material for future

storytelling.

“So, you actually had human friends out there?” Stripetail said in honest amazement, getting a biscuit from a plate in the middle of the table. “All I've read about the Kingdom said that humans and morphs didn't mix.”

“And all I've read about Chakona is the endless orgies and massive families,” Gildy said with a smirk. “There are a lot of people out there who do firmly believe in segregation of people, and some who are outright hostile,” Gildy trailed off in thought for a moment, considering the riots and the apartment fire after shi was released from prison. Shi shook hir head free from the memories, “Thankfully, there are people who believe in living in peace with morphs and aliens. We all have to share this universe together.” Babelcat nodded quietly, considering hir sister's question and Gildy's answer. Gildy smiled at the pointed-eared feline, “Babelcat, eh? A towering presence, eh?” Gildy's joke landed with blank stares before shi coughed, “How did you get that name?”

“Well, I was born Pinetail, but, well, with all the other 'tails running about, thought I ought to change things up,” shi chuckled, shrugging with hir forelegs, “But, really, I wanted to learn languages and become an interpreter. So, I was looking up names of translators, and I found a name from an old Terran book...”

“The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.” Gildy finished with a bemused smile, “I've got a copy in my bag, if you're interested, but, yes, so you're named after the Babelfish, very nice.” shi purred, eating another biscuit. “So, Jade, you live here with your daughters? I'm a bit surprised at how small it is, considering the size of your family...” Gildy trailed off as the three other chakats laughed.

“Oh, I'm only here visiting on the way home, sis,” Jadestripe smiled, nodding to hir daughter and granddaughter, “No no, my home is down at the Skunk'taur Archipelago. I just figured that, considering your condition,” Jade's long tail ran over Gildy's gravid belly, “that it might be a smart move to wait here in Amistad until you give birth.” Gildedtongue nodded, figuring that sounded right. “Now, who wants another mug?”

Gildedtongue was the only one hesitant on answering that.

The lion waddled in hir cage. In the last few days Gildedtongue found hirself expanding just enough millimeters to find hir sides trapped in most of the doors in the house. The midwife, a chakat Whiskertwitcher, explained to Gildy that the cubs had been moving to get into a more proper birthing position, which might be more comfortable and easier for them, but it would make hir life just a tad more interesting. Sleeping in the communal sleeping quarters wasn't too difficult to get used to, but shi cursed each time shi had to visit the loo and wedging hirself through. Gravid, twin-carrying old farts like hir were not in the general architectural plans.

Still, shi could make it to the hall and the kitchen, but almost always needing to take a breather halfway. Gildedtongue couldn't wait until after the birth that day, but the dozens of people in the house were waiting for the main event.

The few members of the Purgatorio that Gildedtongue invited were mingling with a glut of strange natives. Babelcat and hir companion, a handsome young male raccoon morph, were talking with Susan, and many of the cubs in the family sat in rapture as Thallon wove great and wondrous stories for them all. Gildy couldn't help but smile as so many of the plots and characters were lovingly ripped out of many of the movies they watched together. Matilda Jefferson and Dominic Wu smiled as Gildedtongue walked by. The two seemed to have been regulated to the corner of the room. "Hi. I hope you are enjoying yourselves," Gildy smiled, walking over to hir friends. Matilda smiled and patted Gildy's shoulder, giving hir a reassurance that they were doing well.

"I dunno. People seem to be giving us a wide berth," Dominic said, sipping on a cup of fruit juice local to the planet. The fair skinned teen enjoying the initial taste, but after each gulp the backwash left a sour expression on his face. "It's weird," he shrugs, staring at the drink, making Gildy question if he meant the people or the drink. Still, the humans smiled as a Bengal Tiger chakat cub pulled himself away from Thallon's storytelling to show them hir new doll.

"...know shi spent a lot of time with them, and got to be friends with them, but, I dunno, just how they've been." Gildedtongue was walking in through the crowd of family shi didn't know shi had, hearing the feline drawl of Jadestripe. "That boy, I mean, the first thing he looked at when he got here was my tits!" the endowed white tigress shook hir head, a mug of voxxee in hir hand.

Shi was in the middle of a conversation with Saldura, whom was looking more and more agitated by the hostess's conversation. "I guess I shouldn't be too surprised." Saldura's green eyes lit up seeing Gildedtongue nearby as shi got to hir feet, "Ah, Gildy! There's something I need to talk with you about." The badger put hir arm around the shorter chakat's shoulder as they slipped into the kitchen, as stealthfully as the wide loaded chakat, and the head-taller badger could be. "How are you doing?" Saldura asked, sequestering Gildy into the back of the house. Whiskertwitcher was also there, the tabby patterned chakat, clad in hir medical apron was going through hir supplies, as well as brewing a pot of hot water.

"I guess okay. Just, I mean, a whole lot of people going around, it's a bit overwhelming," Gildedtongue shrugged, turning back to the midwife, "So, you really need boiling water for birthing?" Gildy asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Whiskertwitcher laughed, hir namesake thick, black whiskers twitching about. "Yes, absolutely necessary! A midwife without hir tea is a very growly doctor indeed!" shi smiled coyly, and the promise of tea had perked up the leonine chakat, having not had

a cup of anything hot that wasn't that alien brew in over a week. Having only one teabag to go around, it was weak, but Gildy savored the old world taste. "So, these will be your first, Gildy? I don't think I've ever had a mum as old as you on hir first, but..." shi rolled hir hand, "Not about the age, it's about the tyke, no? Well, tykes in this case." Shi smiled as shi gave Gildy's flanks a pat.

Gildy winced, feeling a tremor rolling around in hir womb. Whisker nodded, "Contraction?" shi asked quietly, not wanting to raise the excitement in the already crowded building.

Gildy nodded as the midwife pulled hir blonde hair back into a ponytail and smiled, "Okay, let's just go quietly to the common room, I've got everything set up in there, so, I'll meet you there, preferably before your water breaks." Whiskertwitcher smiled, going off ahead as Saldura and Gildedtongue made their way through the crowd. Gildedtongue tried to keep calm, but halfway through the hall, surrounded by other chakats, Gildy felt another contraction. The momentary discomfort enough for the empathically attuned residents to all stop their conversations at once, turning towards the silver streaked lion with large, almost predatory grins, "It's time!" called one. The empathic uproar gave Gildedtongue a headache, but shi offered a sheepish smile as shi was whisked towards the prepared birthing area.

The chakat didn't know when shi had lost hir top, but with one hand shi clutched the crucifix in hir palm tightly, making sure not to lose that. Gildedtongue knew that nudity was a core trait of a chakat birthing party as Saldura and Thallon came to hir sides, as unclad as shi was, but perhaps shi was not paying enough attention to the debriefing when shi saw the rest of the group standing naked around hir. The only one wearing anything was Whiskertwitcher, and that was just hir apron with all of hir tools. Every set of eyes was glued onto the older chakat. The feelings of joy, curiosity, and anticipation filled the room like a thick fog. Gildedtongue tried to hear the midwife's instructions over the pounding of hir hearts. Shi looked around, seeing the strange faces of hir family all looking at hir. Aside from Jadestripe, Babelcat and Stripetail, and, of course, hir spouses, Gildy couldn't see any of hir friends in the crowd. They were probably in the back, shi wasn't sure.

"You'll have to calm down," Whiskertwitcher's voice came through finally as shi looked down at the midwife between hir hindlegs, covered in the amniotic fluid, hir water must have broken when shi wasn't paying attention. Gildedtongue realized shi had been holding hir breath as shi finally exhaled. Another contraction ran through hir body. Whiskertwitcher sighed, hir hands poking and prodding against Gildy's hind end. "Gildy, you're going to have to relax. Your hymenal sphincter is shut tight, and I can't imagine your cervix is any better!"

Nodding, Gildy tried hir best to relax, but being commanded to relax was not exactly easy. Whimpering, Gildedtongue tried to focus on hir breathing, attempting to ignore the stares. Shi squirmed, pain growing in hir lower belly as shi tried to open the

passage for hir cubs. Everyone around hir expecting hir to do this, waiting anxiously for the new cubs to appear. The leonine chakat swallowed dryly, trying to open up the required sphincters, but shook hir head. “I-I can't,” shi whispered to Thallon, the fox'taur nodding before relating the message down to the midwife.

Whiskertwitcher nodded, clapping hir gloved hands before standing up, addressing the onlookers, “Folks, I'm going to have to ask you all to step out.” There was some grumbling by the gathered chakats and morphs, but it was quickly quieted by a stern look by the tabby midwife, “Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to fawn over the kits soon. Now shoo, shoo!”

The group shambled out, tails dragging on the floor. Turning back around, the midwife smiled warmly at the chakat and hir mates, “Now, is this more comfortable?”

Gildedtongue nodded, feeling relaxed already as shi breathed slowly, “S-sorry about that. Heh, bit of a party pooper.” Gildedtongue shrugged, trying to get back to the task at hand.

“Don't worry about it,” Whiskertwitcher smiled. “A lot of first mothers get clamped up, especially when performance anxiety comes into effect.” Saldura and Thallon laid next to Gildedtongue, holding hir hands as the midwife continued, “Honestly, that many people made even me nervous. Guessing your sister wanted the whole family involved, eh? Extended and all?” Whiskertwitcher's gloved hand managed to slide past Gildedtongue's relaxed hymenal sphincter, nodding in approval, “Okay, you're fully dilated, and I can feel a nose, so, I want you to push like we talked about all week.”

Gildedtongue grunted, doing as shi was asked, thankful that hir birth canal was more accommodating for the larger centauroids. The eager child, blood red furred under the amniotic fluid, came into the galaxy, and hir sister, a light grey colour, came soon after.

Whiskertwitcher expertly cleaned and readied the cubs, clearing their noses and mouths, and doing away with the umbilical cord and the afterbirth in a sanitary method. When Whiskertwitcher gave the okay, Thallon went to address the assembled party. Gildedtongue smiled, watching the two suckle eagerly from hir milkfilled bosom. Hir family had come to Chakona.

Sphere Two – Mercury

Saldura shouldered the small bag of clothing shi took planetside, looking into Gildedtongue's eyes, giving another kiss. "I'll be sure to call when I get to the ship," the badger reassured hir spouse and mate, who was currently clutching a pair of weeks old kittens to hir bosom. "We should be back in a couple years. Don't worry," the badger's smile was a little forced, trying to be supportive of hir spouse, but shi didn't want to leave as much as the chakat wanted to see hir go.

Tears were running freely down Thallon's cheek, trying to look away from Gildedtongue, not that he could hide his sadness from hir empathy, but he felt worse unable to control his feelings. Gildy made hir way to the crying folftaur, using hir tail to lift his chin to kiss his lips, "I feel the same, Thallon." Hir husband ran his fingers over Gildy's ears, deepening the kiss for a moment before pulling back. Steelfur, the light grey furred kitten clutched in Gildy's left arm, squirmed slightly, unlatching hir sated mouth from Gildedtongue's nipple to let out a mewl that shi was finished. The larger Thornbreaker took this as a cue to switch teats as well, squirming all around the motherly chakat's arms. "Gah, you two! If it isn't one it's the other!" As if in response, Steelfur's diaper felt heavier and wetter as the kitten gave a contented gurgle.

"And that's our cue to get out of here!" Thallon said with a mischievous grin, walking towards the door, "We'll call you when we get to orbit. Love you!" Saldura smiling, offering the same sentiment before they got into one of the PPTVs towards the spaceport. The chakat sighed, not helping himself to smile at the departure as shi went to change the cubs. A pang of envy ran through hir head, imagining himself blasting back off into the stars. Shi did choose to live here, even if it was Dreamweaver's suggestion, and it made sense to at least try out a bit of domesticity.

After shi was done changing them, the two cubs got up onto all sixes, crawling around in hexapedal motions, their back muscles not quite strong enough for full quadruped movement, but the kittens could cruise around well enough despite that. Enough, certainly, to keep Bravehunter on hir toes. Jadestripe stepped gingerly over the darting kittens as Gildy disposed of the soils. "You know, if you let them run around more, they'll find the box easy enough," Jade chuckled quietly as Gildy rolled hir eyes, shrugging. "Been keeping up with them well enough, sis?" Shi asked, responded with a nod of agreement before Jade smiled more, "And the feeding?"

That did cause Gildedtongue's ears to splay as an embarrassed blush ran through hir ears, "Barely. They're getting hungrier every day." Shi admitted, giving a quiet sigh as shi watched hir children play, Thornbreaker was stalking Steelfur, unaware that the grey furred kitten was trying to make the hunter the hunted. As if choreographed, both kittens leapt in a pounce, landing in the other kitten's spot before they both bolted underneath the elongated couch.

The two old chakats laughed at the youthful antics. Gildy sighing quietly as Jade smiled, ruffling hir younger sister's hair, "Next time you're full, Gildy, call me over

and I'll have a drink. Things would be easier with two sets of breasts for those hungry mouths, no?" Jade smiled as shi walked off, leaving Gildedtongue watching the cubs and thinking about the offer. Shi sighed again, knowing that Jade was right. Hir brief melancholy was interrupted by two sets of pouncing paws atop of hir flicking tailtip.

The rest of the household was busy cleaning up after their guests, thankful of their neatness as Babelcat put the extra towels in the hamper for later cleaning and Lovefur, another lion patterned chakat with dark headfur and a naming splotch on hir left flank, was redressing the beds. The guest room housed Gildedtongue as Jade spent most of hir nights in the communal sleeping den. Gildy felt a little out of place, having come to Chakona to spend time with other chakats, only to spend hir nights with hir non-chakat mates, but, baby steps.

Early in the evening Babelkat came home, bringing with hir a small stack of pizzas. Their greasy aromas pulled the house into the kitchen on growling bellies. Bravehunter attacked hir half slice with predatory gusto, getting most of the sauce in hir fur rather than hir belly, eager for the morsels of meat. "We've nearly got another Rakshani bible translated," Babel said between gulps of mushroom 'za, "It's in the ancient Sacred Tongue, and oye, if you think the Low Tongue is a pain in the arse with it's twenty conjugates, and grammar based on if the sentence is about someone friendly, an enemy, a superior, subordinate, formal, neutral, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I mean, that's just a lot of data on its own, but you can learn it. Translating Sacred Tongue? Ugh." shi sighed around another slice of pizza, this time covered in sausage, "It's pictographic, rather than alphabetical, so sometimes, I swear, we're just guessing."

Gildedtongue nodded at hir great niece's talk of work, eating hir own pizza, "Sounds like you could use a Rosetta Stone." The smile was shared between Gildedtongue and Babelkat as the rest of the group shared a blank stare.

"If we had that, well, I think I'd be out of a job quicker than I'd like," shi chuckled and shrugged. Gildedtongue glanced at hir sister, who seemed content on hir granddaughter's xenotheological job. Babelkat thought for a moment, looking at Gildedtongue, "I hate to ask, but, so, how does all this work with your own beliefs, Gildy? I mean, aliens, ancient civilizations, all that can't really fit all that well with Christian ideas, can it?"

The leonine chakat shot a look at hir sister, who's demeanour soured in the last few moments as the conversation changed directions to a more Terran one. Still, the exchange of ideas and the like couldn't be forbidden. Shi took a deep breath and smiled at hir niece, "To be fair, the Christian Bible is about Earth, when it was written, it wasn't really taking in consideration things such as computers, A.I.s, or the sort. Closest we've got to relation with anthropomorphic constructs would be the story of the Golem of Prague, but that dates to only the sixteenth century, and is more Jewish Folklore than Christian Dogma." Gildy sighed before taking a drink of water,

"It doesn't mention aliens, but it doesn't necessarily deny them either. Just part of the mystery of the universe."

Babel nodded, crossing his foreleg paws before him, leaning his forehip against the table, "And the various alien gods? The Caitian First Family? The Rakshani gods? All those?"

A small chuckle came out of Gildy's lips, "Well, I've been chastised often for taking a more liberal reading of the Bible, but, if you ask me personally, it's all part of the same world, the same God, just, as interpreted and viewed through different eyes. Earth was given Jesus, Cait was given the Seven, and so on and so forth. Love your family, love your neighbour, love your surroundings, love your God, all these tenants aren't wholly unique to Terran faiths." Gildy shrugged a little, "So, no, aliens don't shake my faith, just offers me a new perspective on things."

Babelkat seemed satisfied with the response, though it didn't look like Jade was all too happy. Before any objection could be raised, the wall comm buzzed with an incoming call. "That should be for me," Gildy smiled and excused himself, glad for the well timed call. Thallon and Saldura were pressed to one another, vying for the camera's real estate, which only gave Gildedtongue a mirthful giggle, "Hey you two. I guess you made it to the ship just fine?"

Saldura nodded, smiling back to Gildedtongue, "Yup, we're loaded up and ready to go. Things are gonna be a little touch and go for the next couple months, but if we keep our belts tight, we'll be back to fattening ourselves up again."

Rolling his grey eyes, Thallon gave Sal's ribs a gentle nudge, "Tell that to Thirtysilver, even at our best times she's fretting about." He looks back at Gildedtongue, "C'mon. I want another look at the cubs just before I go!" His bushy pink tail swished in the air behind him, making Gildedtongue chuckle. Luckily, the twin terrors weren't too far away after hearing their father's voice. The leonine chakat picked up each in turn, Thornbreaker looked at the screen, giving the image a loud, toothless yap.

Thallon laughed and smiled at the cub, "You're the spitting image of your grandmother. Too bad the only images of her are up here," he said with a thumb pointed to his head.

"Mmmmm, and that's pretty empty place otherwise," Sal smirked, peering into the taller 'taur's ear. Grinning, Saldura smiled at the squirming cubs, "Well, you two don't get too all up into your mum's mane. We don't want to come home to a bald lioness, now, do we?" Thallon laughed and nodded, of course, all the activity didn't help settle the cubs as Thornbreaker teathed his gums upon Gildy's chest.

"I, well, I'd better get to this, loves. So, you'll call soon, I hope?" Gildy gasped as Thornbreaker squirmed free of his mother's arms, landing on the ground on all six

limbs before darting away to find new mischief. Gildy rolled hir eyes, setting down Steelfur to do the same.

The laughter on the other side of the comm wasn't helping, "Hehe, we will." The three said their goodbyes before the screen went black. Tears rolled down Gildedtongue's face again as shi watched hir children play. At least they should be happy here.

"...and we ask that you put away any electronic devices, books, and check around your seat as we'll be landing shortly. MephitBelle would like to welcome you to New Bletchley and hopes you enjoy your time in the Skunktaur Archipelago."

After Jadestripe's second trip back to hir offices 'upstairs,' Gildedtongue and hir cubs joined the longtail back to hir home. The two infants were kept amused by some tassels on Gildedtongue's new top, and as the aeroplane eased onto the runway, the chakat found himself in a half unravelled top. Still, at least they weren't bawling their eyes out, so shi quietly thanked God for small miracles. The airport was small and efficient, reminding Gildedtongue more of the bus depots shi knew back on Earth than the grandiose Starports. Jadestripe hefted up hir suitcase out of the carousel as Gildedtongue manoeuvred hir cubs to one side, getting hir duffel bag on hir free shoulder.

An older, black maned lion chakat stood in the busy pick-up point. Gildy thought shi recognized hir from the birthing party, however shi found the whole party to be an out of focus blur. Jadestripe hugged the other chakat firmly, purring loudly before addressing hir sister, "Gildy, you remember Proud roar, don't you?"

A sheepish shake of hir head answered hir sister's question as Gildedtongue nodded to Proud roar, "I'm sorry, if we met, it was probably during the party, and I had about twelve billion things on my mind."

Laughing, Proud roar gave a one-armed hug on Gildedtongue's duffel side, "S'a-ight." The chakat gently took Gildedtongue's bag, tossing it into the open hatch on the rear of the purple PTV. "Got lotsa time t' make up for it." Gildedtongue did hir best not to question or even call attention to the chakat's ebonics, at least, not at the moment. Proud roar quickly did the same to Jade's suitcase before the five scrambled into the vehicle, and moments after Gildedtongue had buckled in hir cubs did it pull into the parking lot traffic.

Merging into the highway, Proud roar engaged the autopilot AI. "So, again, forgive me forgetting, but, are you one of my older nieces, or..." Gildedtongue trailed off, looking between Proud roar and Jadestripe, seeing if shi could guess. Empathically, all

shi could get was a mischievous mirth from hir sister. Proud roar snickered before prodding Jadestripe's flank with hir tail, getting the white tiger to giggle.

"Hey! Stop it!" Jade squirmed in hir seat, the movement causing the buckles to tighten on the chakat before shi batted away the offending tail, "Roary here is my Lifemate. We've been together, what, fifty years now." Shi smiles, reaching to pet the other chakat's tail gently.

Proud roar purred quietly, "Fi'ty-fou' yea's," shi corrected. The longtailed lion turned to address the middle aged one, "Tho', we were de'mates fo' twenny." Gildedtongue nodded at the explanation, which answered hir unspoken question of why shi didn't know about a lifemate the last time Jadestripe had visited.

"I guess I'm just a late bloomer," Jadestripe smiled back at Proud roar, who, in turn, tsked at hir mate and ruffled that white mane. "Well, not that I can complain, really. I've had so many good companions and denmates through my years, I guess things have been good."

The cubs were much more active in the back seat of the PTV, not having been so confined for such a long period of time. Gildy was having a difficult time keeping them entertained enough not to completely run amok. Thornbreaker had decided shi was hungry as Gildedtongue took the cub to hir breast, Steelfur not far behind, wanting the same attention as hir sister. "Proud roar, I've got to admit, I don't think I've heard that accent outside of old movies, where are you from?"

Roary loosed a loud laugh, one that the kittens joined with their mewlings, the other lion chakat crossed hir arms under hir bosom with hir grin. "Oh, I grew up in the mean, mean streets of 'Stad, where's 'kat-eat-'kat, n' ebry alley gotta phase aimed at yer eyes." Proud roar pointed hir finger at Gildy and shot a 'zap!' with hir mouth, followed by a wink. "Nah, pick'd't up on my work stat'n t' 'roid." Shi coughed slightly, taking in a deep breath, "You'll find a lot more lower class housing there, and I've come to use the accent to get some people to talk more openly." hir grammar and accent having moved to a more neutral Terralingo. "But, yeah, I work for the Stellar Federation, and when a colony is experiencing some problems with some civil unrest and I go in to see if it's something that can be dealt with locally, or if martial action is required." Proud roar shrugged, "Thankfully, the latter isn't all that common."

Nodding, Gildy kept quiet for the rest of the trip, minding the kittens as they play. The ocean to the vehicle's left, and to the right, the central mountain of the island, the volcanic summit looking like a scissor snipped the tip off of it. Jadestripe gestured towards the top of the mountain, "Mount Mephit. Her activity brought half of the islands on the archipelago to life."

The newcomer nodded, looking over them as they sped along the highway, "Is it dangerous living on an active volcano?"

Jadestripe shook his head, "Lava irrigation on the north side keep this from doing any damage. This volcano is more of a bubbler than a blower." Shi looked back at his sister, "Also the local geology labs from Dewclaw get data from probes in the magma, so we should get fair warning if something changes." Jadestripe grinned, "Otherwise, the volcanic ash is harvested along the irrigations and sold as fertilizer to the local farmers. The mineral rich ash is what makes this place so green. The backseat chakat nodded in acceptance of the information, not helping but be amazed at how these people have not conquered, but learned to direct nature to not only serve their needs, but let the local wildlife thrive.

They turned off of the main loop, joining a bridge highway to the northwest. Signs above the road warned "A.I.D. Bridge. All non-emergency vehicles must engage A.I. Drive assist systems." Considering Proudroar's lack of hands on the wheel, Gildy was safe to assume that they were following the letter of the law. The metal and concrete bridge cut across the clear blue sea, the sun reflecting off of the surface amid the pattering boats. A train sped by the side of the bridge on its own tracks. "So," Gildy started to ask idly, "are the schools near your home looking to hire?" Being more or less laid up for so long had made the chakat's feet itch, hoping to get back into the rhythm of working.

Jadestripe looked over at Proudroar for a moment, who shrugged slightly. Shi smiled back at Gildedtongue, "Ah, sorry. Guess we were so busy getting the house ready for someone new we plum forgot. But, you've been teaching for, what, more than thirty years? I think your experience should be able to get you through the door." Shi smiled, "You might be teaching age groups you aren't used to, though."

Gildy shook his head, chuckling as Shi tickled Steelfur's belly, "I'll bet you that isn't true. On that ship I was with kids of all ages." Shi settled back, nodding to Jadestripe. Shi was right, there shouldn't be anything that Shi should be worried about.

The sun was close to setting by the time that they pulled into the driveway of, what Gildy assumed, was Jadestripe's home. A stone wall peeked out of the green growth, the home built into the grassy hillside, and a rock staircase went up along side the front door to the rest of the hill. It would be easy to miss the house entirely had the PTV not parked in front of it, announcing their arrival.

Next door, a pair of porcine children played in the tall grasses, kicking a football back and forth, dodging the trees marking the opposing team. Jadestripe and Proudroar watched them with slitted eyes, their lips curled in disapproval. Thornbreaker gave a confused mewl, feeling the background emotions, which seemed to snap the two chakats out of their vigilance. Proudroar went to the back of the PTV, getting the luggage while Gildedtongue followed his sister inside the house.

Within the home, a modern, yet rustic décor contrasted and complimented the almost primal exterior. Clay tiles paved the floor, just underneath painted stucco walls with

heavy pieces of timber supporting the ceiling. The earth provided enough insulation that it rarely became uncomfortable inside. Of course, it came with the cost of requiring more lamps in any room deeper inside, but it wasn't a detrimental trade-off.

With the new smells and feel of the house, Thornbreaker and Steelfur were off like two furry missiles, there was much more to explore and new mischiefs to make. "I'll show you to your room, Gildy," Jadestripe smiled, leading Gildedtongue upstairs and deeper into the hill. Down two doors to the left, the tiger let in hir sister. It was a good sized room with oaken (or, at least what looked like oak) furniture around the walls. Wardrobe, desk, a chest of drawers, all with a motif of six pronged leaves carved in the fronts. A thick mattress was at the head of the room with pillows arranged neatly. Above a skylight brought in the red twilight, and Jadestripe pointed out how Gildy could open it to vent any stuffiness.

"I'll talk to Proud roar to see when we'll start dinner," shi smiled at Gildy, who nodded thankfully as hir stomach growled. Thornbreaker and Steelfur must have mounted the stairs well enough since they scrambled in, chasing their mother's scent. With a tired smile, Gildedtongue scooped them up before laying down on the cushions.

A white furred forefoot dug its claws into Gildedtongue's belly as a grinning Creekstripe leaned over hir daughter. "Thought you were done with me, didn't you?" Those claws sunk deeper into Gildedtongue's guts, piercing into hir very core. Shi could barely breathe, feeling hir heart getting squeezed as hir sire looked down upon hir with menacing eyes. Just behind hir, the fat face of the skunk commander laughed gleefully.

Sharp teeth sinking into Gildedtongue's muzzle opened hir eyes as shi gasped in pain. Thornbreaker let go of hir bite as shi and hir sister squirmed out of Gildedtongue's tight grasp. The kittens mewled softly, making themselves at home back on their mother's breasts, having a midnight snack. One of the moons was full, sending its light into the small hole in the ceiling, giving everything an ethereal blue glow. Hir growling stomach reminding hir of hir missed meal, but shi was too tired to get out of bed. Shi ruffled hir cubs' heads gently before closing hir eyes again, going back into a dreamless sleep.

Time froze in the receptionist office as Gildedtongue thumbed through hir PADD. Shi still hadn't totally accumulated hirself to Chakonian time, twenty hours a day, a hundred minutes each, and shi was a good hour early for hir nine fifty meeting with Personnel. 'At least it makes me seem more punctual,' shi mused to hirself, adjusting hir blazer. With some of the bonus money Peter Jacobs had gifted hir, Gildedtongue picked up a professional enough looking outfit, the beige jacket mixing well with hir fur, while hir white blouse offered a good contrast under a red bolo.

Hir eyes glanced towards the receptionist, a young cheetah morph, pencil clenched in her teeth as her fingers raced across the keys on her terminal. The halter top looked good on her, but it did make Gildedtongue feel rather overdressed.

"Shir Gildedtongue?" a dark blue chakat peeked out of hir office, nodding to the waiting one. Gildy nodded, putting away hir PADD, and momentarily checking hir ponytail as shi entered the office. The leonine chakat felt a twinge of déjà vu, an office covered in pictures by children, though the plants adorning the corners and the large bay window letting in light reminded hir that shi wasn't aboard the space station. The Russian Blue patterned chakat sat down behind hir desk, 'CHAKAT BLUEWATER, PERSONNEL' adorned a small name plaque at the front of the desk.

Gildy smiled softly, bowing hir head in greeting as shi sat on hir haunches before the desk. Bluewater was on a slightly raised dias, looking down at the newcommer, "So, you're looking for a teaching job here," Bluewater asked, looking over hir terminal. Shi sighed, leaning back, making Gildedtongue's ears splay. "It seems it's been a long time since your last time teaching, this isn't a job you can just drop and pick up again, you know."

'Well, during the interim I was teaching aboard an independent ore freighter during a clandestine Stellar Federation science experiment,' Gildedtongue would say truthfully if shi was looking to being locked up in an asylum, or worse. "It was a needed sabbatical, but I'm sure my credentials will more than make up for such a lapse in employment. My education alone should qualify me."

Bluewater looked back at hir terminal, shaking hir head, "I'm sorry, but, not really."

"What do you mean?" Gildedtongue looked shocked, "I spent over twenty years at the Federal Monastery, that should give me an equivalent of a Master's Degree at any Federation university."

"I'm afraid that 'should' doesn't mean 'does,'" Bluewater sighs, "I'm sorry, but the HCKNA Monasteries are not an officially accredited place of education in the Federation." Shi shrugged behind hir desk, "Technically, they are listed as places of worship, which is how a lot of their practices aren't questioned." Bluewater sighed quietly, "According to the Stellar Federation, you're completely uneducated, not even privately tutored."

Gildedtongue felt hir hearts sink down to the floor. Tears started welling up in hir eyes, but shi covered it with a brave face, "Very well, I can attend college, a proper university here, I've got a little money, maybe with some grants..." shi trailed off, looking at Bluewater shaking hir head still. The younger chakat steepled hir fingers, leaning on hir desk.

"Look, I'm sorry, but, I don't think that will work out either. Due to your... record, the school district is uncomfortable in your hiring." Bluewater gulped quietly, "They

aren't comfortable with someone of your violent history in a classroom."

Gildedtongue's jaw was slacked as shi sat there motionless. Finally shi managed to croak out a loud, "WHAT?" Shi looked down at the floor for a moment, "What? Because of the incident with Dreamweaver? That punk was trying to rape hir..."

Bluewater shook hir head, "We all know that chakats can't be raped beca..."

"Because of what? A little ring of muscle? That's really going to stop people from trying? Is that going to comfort a young chakat trapped in the back seat of a PTV with hir date trying to get some jollies? Jesus Christ, fine, if this school won't hire me..." Gildedtongue crossed hir arms.

"You obviously didn't hear me, Shir Gildedtongue. I said the board members of the school district said they weren't comfortable in hiring you. You won't find any other schools in the archipelago saying anything different." Bluewater sighed, "And I doubt it would be any different on the Finder's Continent or elsewhere. Look, I hear your reasoning, but, you tell the parents out there that one of their teachers is someone who most famously attacked a child, and you're going to see a very empty school. It's just better to not hire. I'm sorry." Bluewater stood up slowly, "I do hope you find your place somewhere here."

Gildedtongue wasn't sure if shi was closer to crying in despair or lashing out in anger, of course, the later would simply confirm what was said of hir. Shi got up, feeling hir legs slightly wobbly as shi thanked Bluewater for hir time before hieing to the PTV where Proud roar sat, watching the telly on the viewscreen.

"That was fast," Proud roar smiled, turning off the screen, "I'm guessing they hired you on the spot, right? Start at the beginning of the week?" Gildedtongue answered with silence, tossing hir saddlebag in the back seat after climbing in, crossing hir arms. Proud roar didn't need hir empathetic talent to know that things didn't turn out that way. The ride home was quiet, the dark lion letting the red one stew in hir thoughts.

Gildedtongue drug hir feet inside, broken and defeated. Thornbreaker and Steelfur were there to greet hir. The blood red kitten's mewls were sounding more like 'Ma! Ma!' every day. Hir grey sibling sounding more like 'Me! Me!' but it warmed the tired Gildedtongue's soul all the same as gathered them up in hir arms. With the immigrant smiling a little more, Proud roar took the time to ask what happened. Shi shook hir head at the explanation, "Really? You think they could get away with turning you down over that? Like you said, you were found innocent of the charges."

With a shrug, Gildy stroked the back of Steelfur's head, "If it isn't that, it's the lack of recognized credentials, and if not that, then it's my recent lapse of employment, and if not that... well, I'm sure my background working at a decidedly non progressive educat- erm, sorry, 'place of worship' would come into question." Shi shrugged.

Proudroar thought for a moment before smiling, "Hey, weren't you hired by the Federation to be a tutor aboard the [i]Purgatorio[/i]? I'd call that experience and credentials right there!"

"Heh, not quite," Gildedtongue smirked, "Chakat Wanderer was hired as a tutor aboard the ship. Gildedtongue was pretty much totally off the sensors for the last couple of years." Shi shrugged again, giving hir kittens' heads a gentle kiss each, smiling at their purrs.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

The two cubs had enough of being held, squirming their way out of Gildedtongue's arms as they went back to their play. The silver streaked lion smiled at Proudroar, "Well, you got the want-ad section?"

As a new and growing planet, Chakona had a number of jobs available in all fields. From agricultural engineering, to law enforcement, clerical work, education, longshoresman duties. However the number of jobs available to the un- and undereducated were more than slim pickings. Nepotism was high in small businesses as many families arrive on the planet with the purpose of starting a trade with their family. Gildedtongue momentarily considered a whirlwind romance with someone just to land a paycheck, but shrugged it off with a dark laugh.

Days turned to weeks. While Jadestripe insisted to board hir sister without question, Gildedtongue did hir best to help out with hir meagre pocketbook from the gift shi got from Peter Jacobs. The money shi made on the [i]Purgatorio[/i] was reinvested into the ship to help with repairs without a second thought. Shi had figured shi would be making hir own money by now.

"Next on BBC Chakona, a new Doctor Who. Will the Doctor and hir companion X-Ray figure out the mystery of the ancient Caitian pyramid before the Rani fulfils hir dastardly plan? Later, the news followed by..." the announcer droned on the viewscreen. Gildedtongue was only half-watching, most of hir attention glued on hir kittens. By now they had mastered quadrupedal motion, and were picking up some words, not being able to repeat them, but able to recognize them. Gildedtongue did hir best to teach them in Terranglo, English, Latin, Russian and Chinese, but shi had to admit hir Mandarin was considerably rusty.

"Qiú," Gildedtongue rolled the plush Chakkar ball to Thornbreaker, who giggled and batted the ball back to hir mother, doing the same to Steelfur. Jadestripe stepped in, sipping from a glass of juice from a local fruit.

"Find it a little amusing that you're teaching them different Terran languages. The

only one from there we speak here is Terranglo." Jadestripe reached to ruffle Thornbreaker's slowly growing black mane, "I'd imagine it'd be better if they learned Yatta or Ratarsk." Gildedtongue nodded a bit.

"Well, if you'd like to teach them that, I'd be thankful. I can't say I'm fluent in either enough to be a good teacher." Gildedtongue shrugged softly, playing with hir cubs a bit more.

"Suit yourself. Anyway, I'd best be off. Roary and I've got a Heritage meeting in a half hour. Would you like to come along?" Jadestripe asked, smiling at hir sister.

"Thanks, but I think I'm just gonna stay home. I've got an interview early tomorrow, and I know how late you seem to stay for those meetings. Have fun!" Shi blushed as Jadestripe kissed hir forehead before heading off. Gildy held on to the chakkar toy for a moment, glancing at the screen as the actors found themselves in some death trap. It was odd, Gildy thought, one would think that discovering aliens and faster than light speed travel would have killed the science fiction genre, but all it seemed to do was add new mythologies to the pot.

The musings were cut short as there was yelling outside. The three chakats scrambled to the window, the kittens peeking through the curtains curiously as Gildedtongue looked over them. They caught Jadestripe and Proud roar both slamming their car doors shut, and next door, the two pig children shi saw earlier were clutching the hands of a middle aged human woman, looking rather miffed.

"Definitely something to ask Jadestripe in the morning." Gildedtongue muttered before going to the kitchen to fix hirself something to eat. Shi was happy to see that despite the aversion to Terran items, shi found a slab of bacon in the crisper, taking a few rashers to prepare for a sandwich. Shi felt utterly lost in a proper kitchen, but managed to clobber together a fine enough sandwich.

Shi was cleaning the small mess shi had made on the countertop making the food when there was a knock on the door. Opening it up, Gildedtongue found a chakat in a police uniform, as well as a middle aged, pink porcine morph, undoubtedly the father of the two children next door. The pig rushed in, his eyes staring angrily at Gildedtongue as he screamed, "Écoutez vous quatre pattes de chat, I've had it up to HERE with you making complaints about me, my wife, and my children, and I'm not going to be taking your legal bullying any more!" his snorting words came through in a thick, Earthen French accent.

Gildedtongue fell over hir own feet in hir back-peddling, wincing softly, but hir attention remained primarily with the angry morph before hir. The officer grabbed his shoulder, pulling him back. As Gildy had less of hir field of view covered by an angry pig, shi looked at the cop, amazed at how many yellows can fit on one morph. The very golden cougar flicked an annoyed ear, "Heel, Jean-Claude. I'd imagine we've had enough calls here that you'd know who's the people making the complaints."

The pig's demeanour changed a little, a bit more cautious, as he leaned forward again, his snout sniffing at the chakat. He laughed softly, shaking his head, "Excusez-moi, I merely thought you were that Proud roar, dying your hair red. When I get angry... sometimes it's hard to think, you know?"

Gildedtongue nodded quietly, looking between the two, "Um, what's the meaning of this? Does this have to do with the yelling I heard earlier?" shi asked the officer, glancing at the badge, "Ah, officer Cornfield?"

The puma sighed and nodded, "According to our reports, the Champignon children were found trespassing on the Jadestripe-Proud roar residence after previous warnings of them not to."

Jean-Claude rolled his eyes, "They were just playing, Cornfield. You know kids, you tell them not to go past that tree, and they'll find any excuse to go to the tree after that. It's not like they're wrecking the house!" Cornfield shot the pig a look, which made him lift his hands in defence, "Okay, okay, last year they broke a window with the ball, but I paid for it!"

Gildedtongue watched the two as hir kittens slowly crept up behind their mother, watching the interlopers. "Look, you and I both know the reason they've been at this is because Bethany is human. You know those types at those meetings," Jean-Claude said, looking at Gildedtongue, "I mean, you, you think humans are all evil, right?"

The chakat's eyes went wide, shaking hir head, "What? I... no. Most of my friends on Earth were human. Look, I'm sorry about what my sister might have done, but, she's just really..." shi trailed off, looking for a word, "intense." Shi offered the best comforting smile shi could muster, "I'm sure this is just heated emotions getting the best of us, okay?" Gildy couldn't ever seem to get teenagers to stop bickering and fighting, shi had little faith in hir ability with full grown adults, but the boar seemed to have calmed down.

"Look, I'm not going to even file this complaint, but that's as long as you keep your kids on your side of the property, and not go flying off the handle when Jadestripe decides to be a grouch, okay? Just try to be the bigger guy, alright?" Jean-Claude nodded. Cornfield crossed hir arms, "Now, I want you to apologize to, I don't think I caught your name."

Gildedtongue nodded to the officer, "Chakat Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe." Shi had gone so long with introducing himself as an alias shi nearly gave them the 'Wanderer' spiel. Still, Jean-Claude bowed his head, offering his apologies before stepping out. Cornfield watched him momentarily, but stayed inside.

"Mind if we talk, Gildedtongue?" shi asked. The older chakat swallowed a lump of dread as shi nodded. Cornfield couldn't help but laugh, "Purely friendly conversation. I haven't seen you around before, so I wanted to get to know you, if that's okay with

you?"

Gildedtongue nodded again, "Ah, sure thing, officer, though, shouldn't you be out there?" shi nodded out to the street, sitting down on hir haunches.

Cornfield tapped hir comm-radio attached to the passant on hir uniform, "I'm still a call away. Besides, this call came in on route back to the station before I was heading home." Shi shrugged, putting hir hands on hir forehips, careful not to rest them on hir phaser or hir revolver.

Gildedtongue looked over the officer's uniform more closely, seeing the design of the SAPD on hir shoulder, as well as the pouches of items shi wore. Shi cocked hir head at both weapons, "I can't imagine the street here are that dangerous."

"Oh, the old firearm?" Cornfield chuckled, "Nah, it isn't that bad out here at all. Honestly, I've never had to open fire at all, and hopefully never will. But, growing up, my parents taught me the way around a revolver, so I'm a bit more comfortable with it." Shi smirked, "Besides, the click of a hammer sounds more like you mean business than the hum of a charging phaser." Shi shrugged, "But, nah, police work is mostly the COMM and the PADD, and the badge." Cornfield's stomach growled audibly as shi smirked, "oh, and the box of doughnuts, though I seem to have forgotten mine today."

"Heh, well, I was making a sandwich before you and Mister, Champignon, was it, came in. You can have half of it if you'd like." Shi said, going back to the kitchen for the almost forgotten meal.

"Bribing an officer, eh? Well, I think I'll have to remember this place when I get hungry again." shi snickered as shi took the offered half-sandwich graciously. "So, how long have you been on the archipelago? Going to stay here long, I hope?" shi asked before digging in.

"Not too long ago, just a couple of weeks, really. I've only recently come to Chakona from Terra." Gildedtongue sighed quietly, "Been looking for a job, though a lot of places seem to be looking for a lot that I can't offer." Shi explained hir predicament to Cornfield, who seemed interested in the new resident's plight.

Nodding, Cornfield finished off the rest of the sandwich, "That is a bit of a rock and a hard place. Tell you what, though, I'll keep my ear to the ground for you, maybe something that'll be up your alley, no?"

"Thanks. I've got a job interview in the morning, though, so, digits crossed and all that." Shi shrugged and offered a small smile.

Cornfield nodded, "Well, I certainly wish you luck on that." The officer's comm beeped again as shi sighed, "I'd better head back to the station. It was good meeting

you, chakat Gildedtongue, and good luck on the interview. What was it again?"

Looking sheepish, Gildedtongue coughed, "Ah, corner-store clerk and charging station attendant."

The officer blinked, wincing slightly, "Well, it's a paycheque at least, right?"

"If I'm lucky. But, thanks again. Hopefully this'll just be something transitory." Gildy mustered up a smile again, "Anyway, Vale, Cornfield!" Cornfield cocked his head curiously, "Ah, it means 'goodbye,' or, more literally, 'be strong.'"

Cornfield laughed and nodded, "Tail high, Gildedtongue."

Sphere Three – Venus

"... And seven credits are your change. Have a good day, shir, and I hope you come by again, soon!" Gildedtongue smiled to the young chakat, whose eyes were all but screwed shut, clutching onto his cup of coffee as a lifeline to consciousness. Early mornings were easy. Most people came in for something caffeinated on their way to work; the chakat just had to make sure that the various decanters were full and in their proper place. Coffee, Decaf, Voxxee, and never should they shift positions. A full milk dispenser and plenty of sweetener, typically needing to be refilled at least once before noon. Gildy adjusted his red top, nodding at his job.

An unfulfilling job, but at least it put some credits into his pockets. A bell chimed behind the register and Gildedtongue sighed, pulling out his coat and gloves, stepping out into the snow. The PTV was next to the charging station, shutting down. It was a public model, and Gildy took note of the plate number, so the store can debit the company before she opened up the bonnet. A warmth from the engine felt refreshing against the snow flurries as Gildedtongue disengaged the power core. Twisting it, she was able to slide the unit out easily, looking over all the labels, warning anyone that one shouldn't tamper with the device unless they're a 'qualified technician.' She installed the battery into the charging station, getting a new one to put back into the vehicle. With the cables in place, she dropped the bonnet, knocking on it twice, "You're good to go!" She called to the driver, who honked the horn before pulling out.

The rest of the shift followed the same routine, selling coffee, crisps and power. Luckily, she only had another quarter-hour until his time was over as she started to wipe clean the counter. Polestar walked past, carrying his lunch and homework to do in the back room before she took over for the afternoon shift. Gildy waved quietly, as the teenaged chakat never seemed particularly pleased to be in. The older chakat

swallowed back any kind of fear that it was directed to him as the door chimed again. "Colder than a Snow hare's tit out there," Cornfield muttered, brushing snow off of his lower back. The officer smiled back at Gildy, "Well, there you are, Goldentongue, right?"

"Gildedtongue, and yes, I am indeed here. How are you doing, Cornfield?" Gildy smiled, watching the police constable walk over to the decanters, grabbing a cup and getting some hot water and a green tea bag.

A golden hand rested on the palm reader as it scanned, piping up for a name to verify, "Chakat Cornfield," the machine hummed as it tried to verify the biometrics with the database and relay that back to the bank, "So, how do you like this place? Heh, any easier than teaching?" she asked, sipping his tea already.

"Easier, yes, if you can stand the boredom," she sighed, thumping the P.O.S. in front of him, "Sorry, the boss said that in bad weather this can take a little extra time." Shrugging, Gildedtongue leaned against the counter, "Still, it gets me out of the house, the cabin fever was driving me up the walls." The computer dinged and spat out a receipt, Cornfield waved it away and Gildy tossed it into a bin where it'd be reprocessed into paper or compost. "Still, haven't really gone out to do much else. So, I'm sure I'll be back on the path of crazy." she smirked.

Cornfield nodded, smiling back, "Well, when are you off shift?" Gildy checked the clock, glad to see time started to speed up when talking with his friend, having only a few minutes. "Well, when you get done, hop on out to the squad car, I'll take you to lunch!" She checked the time again, surely a half-hour or an hour from home would be okay, and she nodded in agreement. "Excellent. There anyone you need to call to say you'll be late or won't need picking up?"

"Ah, no, I walked here," Gildy said as Cornfield smiled and waved, heading back to the Police Transportation Vehicle to start on his tea. Gildedtongue smiled softly, watching him go, unable to help himself at a glance at those muscular haunches.

"She your mate?"

The young voice nearly caused Gildedtongue to jump out of his skin as she saw Polestar standing behind him, reading out of a PADD. "What? No! I mean, we just met once before. She just wanted to take me to lunch, as friends, you know." she fumed, his tail bristling.

Nonplussed, Polestar tapped on something on his device, "Well, if you're 'just friends,' I'd recommend rolling in the snow, since you've got someone else that wants to tag along." Gildy had a blank look, glancing back at his relief who nodded down towards his crotch. She looked back down and saw his full blown erection, making him curse aloud as she made a hasty retreat to the break room. "Don't forget to punch out! Boss ain't paying you to squirt one out!" Polestar smirked to himself, going back to his

electronic magazine.

The computer in the back accepted his clock out and after a couple minutes of relaxing himself, Gildedtongue stepped back out into the cold. Cornfield's vehicle was easy enough to find as the passenger side opened up, letting him in. "Ah, thank you. Are you sure the Police will be okay with you doing this?"

Cornfield looked over his shoulder as the vehicle pulled out of the store, despite the on board A.I.'s programming to not run into anything, the cop didn't leave much to chance. "Yeah, it's fine," she smiled back at Gildedtongue, "It's about my lunch, anyway, and as long as I'm in my beat the worse they'll do is harrumph at me." The streets were largely clear of other vehicles as the white dusting of snow danced in the gentle breeze. Less than two kilometres passed when the vehicle pulled into another parking lot. The building stuck out from the other "hobbit holes" as it was a free-standing wooden cabin like building. On top, a young chakat was brushing off the snow accumulating on the solar panels, and a skunk'taur was shovelling off the flat roof to the side. The sign in front read "Home of the Islands' Famous Foxy Fritters" and painted above the door was simply "Hannah's Café."

It looked like a typical dive inside. Gildedtongue counted seven people inside, mostly skunk'taurs, but another chakat and a couple morphs were mostly sipping some warm drinks, and eating some sandwiches, they just screamed 'regulars.' Cornfield sat down in a booth without a word, making Gildedtongue smile, "Your usual seat?" Cornfield only smiled like a kitten in response. "So, what do you recommend?"

Before the puma could respond, a middle aged skunk morph, her slowly greying hair pulled up in a tight bun and a stained apron down in front of her front smiled toothfully at the 'taurs, "Hey, C.F., coffee as usual?"

"Ah, no, Hannah, not today. I'd like some Hot Heat Tea, with a bit of honey and twist of lemon. You, Gildedtongue?"

"Just some black tea, thanks," she smiled back at Hannah who wrote down their orders before retreating to the back. Gildedtongue coughed softly, trying to hide his blush from the younger chakat. Of course she was in heat, the deodorants masked the overt scent of the condition, but those pheromones were playing with his mind, and other places.

"Anyway, I think I'm going to have the chicken-and-waffles. Haven't had that here and, well, have been curious," Cornfield said, glancing outside. Gildedtongue shrugged with his forelegs under the booth's table, not like she ever had it before, so agreed with the adventure.

Hannah came back to deliver the drinks and take their orders, giving an extra warm smile at Gildedtongue. The blushing lion made Cornfield laugh, "Don't worry about her. She's just fishing for more patrons!" She smiled, leaning back in the plush back

rest, "So, what have you been doing, Gildy? Keeping out of trouble, right?" Shi asked, flashing a predatory grin.

"Of course!" Gildy blushed, then sighed softly, "Oh, not much, really. Work, cubs, sleep. Work, cubs, sleep." Shrugging, Gildy rolled his eyes upward, "I dunno, I guess I'm enjoying having some boredom, but I don't think I can swallow much more of it."

"Well, what did you do back on Terra?" C.F. asked, bringing his cup to his lips and blew the steam off.

Laughing, Gildedtongue squeaked his fingertip over the top of the table, "Oh, that's easy. Teach, grade, sleep. Teach, grade, sleep, Church, sleep, teach..." shi trailed off, rolling his hand.

"Do you want to go back to church?" Cornfield asked, smiling back at Hannah as the skunk put down two massive platters. The fried chicken seated on a basket of wedge-cut waffles, and warm cups of syrup seated between the two plates. The two chakats gave their hearty thanks to the skunk whom bowed his head before leaving them to their meal.

"Yeah, I think I'd like to. I don't know, it's been over a couple of years, but I guess I would like to get back into the swing of things." Shi said, looking around, "But, I wouldn't imagine there would be any around here."

"Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, Terran, Caitian, Rakshani... You can pray to whatever you'd like here if you know the place," Cornfield smiled, digging into his chicken. "Now, I can't exactly guarantee that we'll have every subset of each church, but if you're looking for a Christian church, I can point you to the nearest one," shi thought for a moment, "Which would happen to be on the northern side of the island, but that's not too far away, really."

"Well, I've got a day off in a couple of days, so maybe I'll head over then," Gildy said, munching lightly on the pastry squares dripping with a local syrup, that wasn't quite Maple, but had a slightly sour tang under the sweetness. "And you, Cornfield? Aside from work, what do you do?"

The puma chuckled, "Oh, I'm sure a bit like yourself, no rest for the wicked. But, on my vacations I head back to my parents' place. They've got a ranch north of here on Nova Belarus, just to the east of Curtisport. Pretty big tract of land, since they raise Levis there."

Gildedtongue cocked his head to one side, "Levis?"

"The Chakonan Levi'than. Enormous marsupial," Cornfield lifted up his hands in a 'this big' gesture, "bigger than the PTV we drove in on. Anyway, it's mostly a dairy farm, as they're pretty good milkers, even considering the size, and relatively docile."

Shi grinned, "They aren't doing too bad either, having big contracts with most of the markets and restaurants in western Belarus, and a number of the islands, including this one."

"Interesting. Though, why not just get cows from Terra or, heck, I've put milkwater in cereal before," Gildy asked.

With a shrug, Cornfield went back to hir tea, "Well, for the first part, most of the people here want to use as much local flora and fauna as possible on Chakona. Yeah, you'll have your occasional sheep or pig farm in places, but for the most part, it's Chakonans for Chakona." Cornfield glanced over at the kitchen, "As for, well, other, personal sources. There aren't just chakats living here, obviously, and whereas a single chakat can maybe, maybe produce enough for just himself, it's just not nutritionally sound. Besides, the wouldn't be able to produce enough for a restaurant like this." Shi shrugged gently, "Most restaurants like Levi milk since it's very fatty and they can reduce it to whatever percentage they need it to be."

Another mouthful of food passed into Gildedtongue's mouth as shi considered the fact that Cornfield's family had something to do with it. A smile etched itself over Gildedtongue's lips as shi soaked in the information, the diner meal tasting more homey.

Food and talking continued, sponging up minutes until two hours had passed. Cornfield grumbled, checking hir datapad, shaking hir head, "Sorry, Gildy, as fun as this was, I think we'd better call it a day. I'm sure I'd better be out patrolling a bit more seriously." Shi got up, offering Gildedtongue a hand out of the booth. The older chakat accepted it and Cornfield went to pay for the meal. "And, best I get you home," Shi chuckled, getting into the PTV, Gildedtongue climbing in on the other side. C.F. smiled in the drive back, telling Gildedtongue all about a chakker game shi attended last week. The leonine chakat had no clue what game Cornfield was talking about, but the excitement in the story was infectious.

"Anyway, I've been shooting off my mouth off all day this day, so, next time, you're gonna have to talk my ear off, y'hear?" Cornfield laughed, pulling in front of Gildedtongue's residence. Gildy stepped out of the door, but a wayward thought tugged the back of hir head.

"Oh, could you give me the address of that church you mentioned?" Gildy asked. The officer och'ed, typing something in hir console terminal. A small tab of paper printed out, Cornfield handing it over to Gildedtongue who pocketed it. With a beep of the horn, Cornfield took off.

Springy footsteps danced along the cobblestone to the front door as Gildedtongue's tail couldn't be any more higher. Shi had a job, a family and home, and shi just came home from a date with a handsome constable. Hir next step was heavier. Was it a date? Cornfield did take hir out, and shi did pay for it. Though, it could have just

been a friendly welcome. Still, shi was handsome, maybe it wasn't a bad idea to at least pretend it was a date, at least for a little while.

Gildy was greeted with hungry mewling as shi opened the door. Jadestripe was holding onto the two kittens in hir arms, the twins looking over at their mother, squirming out of their aunt's arm to mewl at their mother. Gildy gathered them up, lifting up hir top as the hungry cubs moved to feed. "We ran out of your bottled milk an hour ago, where were you, Gildedtongue?" Jade asked, hir tailtip flicking in annoyance.

Hir ears became as red as hir hair as Gildy gulped, walking to the den, "Sorry, sorry. Cornfield came into the store, and shi asked me to lunch. I didn't think I'd be this long." shi admitted, letting the cubs feed.

"It's okay, though, if you intend to step out, I'm going to need a contingency plan. I'd really like it if I could produce as well," Jade said, shrugging slightly, reaching to stroke Gildedtongue's shoulder. The younger chakat nodded softly.

"Ah, yeah. I think tonight I should be able to have enough to give you something," Gildy said, stroking Thornbreaker's back. Jadestripe nodded, stepping into the kitchen, leaving Gildedtongue with hir cubs. Shi looked down at the two as they suckled, "Sorry I was gone today. Work was boring, but I did get to see a friend today..." shi smiled, starting to relate hir day to the infants.

The address on the print out was punched into Gildedtongue's PADD after dinner, and after a moment to ping the network, the frontpage of "The Church of Eden" popped up. The smiling mugshot of a jaguar greeted Gildedtongue, with the subtitle of "Rev. Chakat Westwind, Pastor" beneath it. Mass was being held on Eighthday, with the typical sunrise, morning, midday, and evening masses.

Shi mentally scheduled to attend a midday mass, hoping that afterwards shi could talk with the other people attending and the priest, if shi could. A knock on the door startled hir before shi started to look through any of the pictures. Jadestripe was at the door, smiling down at hir younger sister, "Why so nervous? Doing something you shouldn't be?" shi chuckled.

"No," Gildy managed to squeak out, "Sorry, I just wasn't paying attention to what was going on around me." Shi cocked hir head, "Something I can do for you, sis?" Shi asked, putting the datapad to one side, rolling on hir backs to look up at Jadestripe. The tiger smiled and chuckled, settling herself down next to hir sister, making Gildy gasp at the sudden contact.

Jadestripe's soft breath brushed through Gildedtongue's whiskers, "I think you

promised me a drink." The large head slowly moved its way down to Gildedtongue's naked chest. Hir once misshapen bosom filled out slightly, at least looking more even, even if hir right nipple never pointed in the right way. Still, Gildy at least appreciated that shi didn't have to cushion hir tops to look right.

"Yeah," the lion finally muttered, "I guess I di..." Shi was cut off by Jadestripe's lips wrapped around hir nipple and started to suckle. Not like a cub, but gentle and soft at first. The slightly textured tongue running over the tip of hir nipple as shi felt hir sister drink hir milk. Gildedtongue's body felt completely wound up and utterly relaxed at the same time.

Jadestripe nursed from the milky nipple of hir younger sister, the CKF laced fluid passing into hir mouth, ready to instill hir own lactation, but it seemed like shi was looking for more than just a simple drink. Gildedtongue mewled helplessly as the waves of pleasure ran through hir body, hir tailtip lashing around, and just as shi felt that shi couldn't take it any more, the white tiger's lips left the nub, but not before vibrating it with hir purring.

"Mmmm, thank you, Gildy. That was quite tasty indeed," Jade smiled, looking down at hir pleasure-addled sibling. Shi said some other things, but there was far too much pounding in hir ears for Gildy to understand any of it, but eventually Jadestripe turned around and left the room. Gildedtongue whimpered in hir state, biting hir lower lip as shi moved to finish herself off, thankful that hir cub were asleep. It didn't take long before shi herself was out like a light.

Two days had passed, and aside from the monotony of the job, things were going rather well. The cubs were healthy and active, and even Jadestripe seemed to be more interested in Gildedtongue. Still, shi was quiet when shi decided to take the cubs out for a walkabout the island on Eighthday in hir best clothing. Proud roar gave Gildedtongue a smile and a 'tail high,' however, making the younger chakat feel overly paranoid.

It was a few blocks to the nearest Public Personal Transportation Vehicle (PPTV) stop, but the snowing had stopped after sunrise, covering the island in a white blanket. Gildy adjusted the lines attached to hir kittens, letting them romp around in the snow, which consisted of their pouncing on anything remotely shiny, and then rushing back to Gildedtongue to warm back up, and then back to romping. The line kept them from getting too far away from their mother, but gave enough leeway to explore. By the time the PPTV arrived, however, Gildedtongue's coat was soaked from warming up and drying off the cubs.

The vehicle itself was entirely empty when it arrived to pick up the chakat. No other

passengers, nor a driver. The whole thing was automated as Gildy and the cubs watched the sun peeking carefully around Hume mountain as the large vehicle trucked itself down the plowed roads. Children of all kinds were outside, most were shovelling the walkways, but a few were already engaged in constructing snowcreatures and fortresses where the epic battles of the day will be held.

Gildy stepped off a couple hours later, hir new watch, purchased locally as to have proper Chakonan time on it, said that shi had arrived very early. The mountain didn't buffer against the winds on the north face of the island as Gildedtongue made hir way to the address, the cubs gathered in Gildedtongue's arms as shi saw an open strip-mall. One of the boutiques had a small sign, reading "The Church of Eden." Had Gildy not known of the place before hand, shi would have completely missed it. Still, it offered sanctuary from the cold as shi, Steelfur, and Thornbreaker went through the main doors. Through the rectory, shi could hear some singing, so the previous mass wasn't finished yet.

The door opened up, drowned out by the congregation as Gildedtongue stepped inside, reaching for some holy water as shi glanced around. There was forty some odd people gathered, mostly morphs, a few various centauroids, but shi couldn't finger out any other chakats or skunk'taurs, with a number of humans as well. Through the singing shi could hear the voices of the old and the young, and at the altar, Westwind was leading the singing. What caught Gildedtongue was the vestments shi wore.

Or rather, the lack of them. Aside from what seemed to be the shoulders and neck of a cassock holding onto the iconic white collar, the chakat at the forefront was completely unadorned. As Gildedtongue looked around the mass, shi noticed that shi was by far the most overdressed person there. Aside from the occasional hat or jewellery, everyone else was praying to God as naked as the day they came into the universe.

'The Church of Eden,' Gildedtongue reminded himself. A paradise before people discovered sin, and where the immodesty of nudity was yet to be discovered. Shi kept in the back, and despite a few odd looks, wasn't asked to leave. 'At least clothing optional still leaves clothing an option.'

It was the last song of the mass and when the song was over, the attendants went back to the rectory. Gildedtongue glanced back, what shi figured was just piles of coats was in fact these people's full wardrobes. Keeping out of the way, shi kept to the walls, glancing over the location. Churches, to hir, meant huge, stained-glassed windows, gilded and bronzed candlesticks and statues, rows of hand made oaken pews. This looked more like a church-on-the-go. Pews were replaced with rows of folding chairs, which the ushers and altar servers were busy collapsing and putting away. The pulpit was a metal stand, and a bare wooden altar in the middle. The most ornate item was the tabernacle box at the rear.

Approaching a row of prayer candles, Gildy stuffed a coin in the collection box before catching a flame and using the stick to light another candle. Holding Frank's cross, shi began to pray, first offering hir basic prayers before tears started to well up in hir eyes. "I want to thank you for bringing me here, for helping me find strength when everything around me was bleak. Wherever my friends are, I beseech you to watch over them and protect them, especially Frank, and even if I don't hear from him again, I ask if you could somehow tell him that I love him and pray that he finds as much happiness and fulfilment as he deserves. And I humbly ask for guidance in this strange and alien world, what seems to be a paradise in your creation, and yet, I don't know. This place is strange to me."

Gildedtongue went quiet, unsure what to say next. Steelfur crawled around behind hir mother's tail, and Gildy could hear Thornbreaker's gurgled giggling. The next thing shi knew, a hand rested on hir shoulder. Turning around, shi came face to face with the pastor. "Hello, I saw you come in earlier. I know I haven't seen you around here before. I'm Reverend chakat Westwind, child of Moonbeam and Gregory Foreman, a pleasure to meet you."

Gildedtongue nodded, taking the offered hug and embraced the priest. It felt a little odd, not that shi had ever had such a friendly greeting from a priest before, aside from Frank, but it was often hard for hir to think of hir childhood friend as a man of the cloth. "Ah, yeah, I'm new here. Very new, to the planet, even. Chakat Gildedtongue, child of Gladelong and Creekstripe, the pleasure's all mine, Reverend."

With a tsk, the priest shook hir head, "Please, Westwind is fine. We're all equal in the eyes of the Lord." The spotted cat smiled more, looking at the twins playing with hir handpaws, "And who are these precious cubs?" Gildedtongue nodded and introduced hir children as well.

"That does remind me, I know they're a bit older than most infants are when they're baptised, but I really would like that done at some point, heh, sooner rather than later." Gildedtongue smiled.

Westwind smiled and clapped hir hands, "Wonderful! Perhaps we'll set something up, then. Do you have any Godparents lined up?" That made Gildy's jaw slack, thinking for a moment. Jadestripe would definitely be out, and shi didn't think Proud roar would be all that interested. Babel was all the way over on Flinder's and, well, Matilda and the rest of the crew were somewhere out in the stars. Still, a name did come up to hir.

"Yeah, I think I've got someone. I'll see if I can talk with hir." Gildedtongue looked around, "Um, I know nudity laws are, well, very open on Chakona, but I have to admit, I didn't see this coming." Shi blushed, pointing at hir own clothing, then at Westwind's.

Laughing, Westwind crossed hir arms under hir chest, "God made all the animals and

people as they are, unadorned, save for the beauty of the body, and same when we're all born into this world." Shi shrugs a little, "Clothing was the first thing that Adam fashioned after eating the fruit, so, we're trying to return to a more innocent time."

Shi had to admit that there was some logic to that line of thought, but shi wasn't about to strip down just then and there. Westwind bade Gildedtongue farewell as shi had some preparations to do, but promised to speak with hir again later. Gildy smiled a little, this was different, but it felt right.

Sphere Four – The Sun

Mass was a swift ordeal at the Church of Eden, but that simply opened more time for talking and socializing afterwards. Gildedtongue had sat next to a family of cougar-morphs who had been in the area for a little while. The cougars, surnamed uncreatively as Puma, had attended the parish for almost seven years, and their youngest, a toddler named Tobias, had joined Thornbreaker and Steelfur in the nursery in the next room.

"Don't often see chakats in here. Just visiting the island or have you moved in?" Mrs. Jennifer Puma asked as she leaned against her husband, every position looking like she had just been poured in, making proud her feline heritage.

Gildedtongue, on the other hand, was trying hir best to relax in hir naked state in front of the slew of strangers, "Ah, I'm rather new around here. Moved in about six months ago. I didn't know about this place until Officer Cornfield mentioned it." Gildedtongue offered a genuine smile, trying to keep hir eyes above Jennifer's shoulders, though the golden bosom demanded visual attention. Mr. Kenneth Puma's arm was stretched over the back of Jennifer's chair, his digitigrade legs crossed openly. Their teenaged daughter, Yolinda, had the look of deathly boredom under her long blonde bangs.

"Well, we certainly do hope to see you more around here. Heh, ought to give the place more legitimacy having some chakats or skunk'taurs here," the deep bass voice of the male cougar reverberated with a chuckle. "With obvious exception of the good Reverend."

Gildedtongue nodded, looking around, "Yeah, I noticed a distinct lack of other chakats around here. I mean, I guess I figured I might have been in the minority, but -" shi trailed off with a shrug, taking in a deep breath, "I didn't expect to be the only one on this side."

"I'm sure other places there would be some major differences," Jennifer started, nestling her shoulders into her husband's strong chest, "But there's an unofficial motto around this island – *Hume is not for humans*. That goes for a number of things that are deemed too... human natured."

Before Gildedtongue could inquire more, Yolinda mewled in annoyance, "Mum! Can we go home now? I've got my studies for tomorrow still!" Jennifer clicked her tongue against her teeth in her own annoyance, the rumble of a growl silent to anyone but Gildedtongue's ears, and Kenneth's chest. Still, the middle aged mountain lion stood up.

"You'll have to excuse us, Gildedtongue. It was good meeting you, but it seems that we're needed elsewhere." She shot her daughter an annoyed look, whom returned it doubly. "I suppose you'll have to ask around for more information, but if you want the general idea, I'd recommend starting with the Chakonan Heritage Society." Jennifer's fur raised at a tug on her tail, "All right! We're going! Go get your clothes on, I don't want brush icicles off your fur or have you catch your death out there! Kenneth, would you be a dear and get Tobias?"

The male cougar stood up once he was allowed to, nodding to his wife, "I don't know about being a deer, but I'll certainly eat one." He wagged his eyebrows to Jennifer, who just rolled her eyes. Kenneth and Gildedtongue stepped to the day care. A young calico chakat was tending to the juveniles, nodding to the two arrivals. With chakats not keeping their parents' physical traits, it was difficult to pinpoint lineage, but the way shi held himself certainly made Gildy think of Westwind, if not a child, most certainly a close cousin.

Gathering hir cubs, Gildedtongue glanced over at a clock on the wall, groaning. Shi missed the PPTV by ten minutes, and the next one wouldn't be around for another hour. It was far too cold to hoof it and shi hadn't budgeted for a cab. "I'll be sure to find you before the next one comes by," the baby sitter smiled, either knowing psychically, or just having seen this a number of times.

"Thanks," Gildedtongue thought for a moment, "you wouldn't happen to know if Rev. Westwind would be free for a talk, shir...?" Gildedtongue trailed off, hoping that the teenaged chakat would catch the hint and offer hir name.

"Chakat Patchwork, daughter of Westwind and Kol'thurr Redpaw, and yes, I can, and no, I haven't been," the chakat, who couldn't have been more than eighteen, smiled back at Gildedtongue. The lion chakat peered closer at Patchwork's chest, just barely making out the tell-tale red pawprint on hir right bosom against the maroon patch of fur on the breast. "As far as your question is concerned, I do think my mother should be free right now. Shi'll probably be in hir office, to the rectory, head right, and in the next room." Gildedtongue thanked the calico before following the directions.

Westwind was at hir computer, a disappointed expression plastered to hir face as shi

sighed quietly. Gildedtongue knocked on the open door, as Thornbreaker and Steelfur let themselves in, exploring the new office. The priest was surprised by the scampering kittens, but saw their mother close in tow, "Ah, Gildedtongue, right? I hope that my mass was suitable for you. I'm guessing it isn't quite orthodox."

"It was fine enough, I'd say," Gildedtongue smiled, flicking his tail behind him. "I'd like to thank you, though. It certainly was nice to have something familiar around, even if it is a little different," she smiled softly, "Um, so, I met your daughter, Patchwork, I guess you're married or mated, then?" She asked curiously.

"Was, yes," Westwind frowned, crossing his arms over his chest, "Kol'thurr passed away not long after Patchwork was born. He was on a fishing boat when a storm hit. Was knocked out hitting the side of the ship and fell overboard, and his family couldn't find him." She sighed, shaking his head, seeing Gildedtongue's sad face, "It's okay, you didn't know. Nothing anyone could do." Westwind rolled his shoulders, putting on a braver face, "Anyway, it's good seeing another chakat around here interested in the Faith."

"Yeah, I was talking to the Puma family, they mentioned something about this island not human-friendly or something?" she asked, cocking his head to one side.

"I'd say the whole stretch of islands on the archipelago are notably distrusting of humans, but I would chalk that up to the history of the skunk'taurs and their shady creation by the corporations." She looked out the window momentarily, "But, yes, Hume island is very unique in that mentality. People here are eager to sever their whole connection with Earth, distancing themselves from it in each way." she looked back at Gildedtongue, "I managed to get this place of worship scrapped together just barely by making enough noise at the SA government centre, but that was after a Caitian temple was built on the southern end of the island. I don't dare even put any symbols outside since I figure they'll be vandalized."

"That's horrible," Gildy frowned, walking around the desk to offer a comforting hug to the priest. "I'll do my best to help you out, at least, as much as I can." She sat down again, sitting before Westwind, "Jennifer mentioned something about the Chakonan Heritage Society. I'm pretty sure my sister Jadestripe and his mate mentioned something about attending meetings there. What are they about?"

"I'd love to call them the biggest crock on the planet, but they've got enough support that they've become a notable presence here. Far from a majority, but a couple percent of very vocal, and very active citizens." Westwind snorted a bit, "'Heritage' is a strange word for their group, since they seem to be trying to erase or alter anything in their history that doesn't mesh with their worldview." She sighed, "They focus a lot on the superiority of morphs and aliens over humans, treating the latter as barely sentient, violent bottom dwellers, save for some."

"Yeah, well, aren't we all made by humans? I mean, certainly the Turners shouldn't be

lumped with the like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, or, Hell, the last American President, O'Keefe."

"Like I said, 'save for some.' But to most of them, they pretty much should all be lumped with those that caused the deaths of millions, or even billions like the last one." Westwind sighed again, "But, yes, they do recognize that morphs came from humans, but I suppose it is with the idea that morphs had evolved, perhaps not in a classic Darwin sense, but as the next step of Terran biological hierarchy." shi looked at hir left hand, extending hir claws checking their cleanliness, "In many ways it's hard to fault their mind set. Physical superiority is easy to see, and mentally, we're at least equal, and in some ways even better, considering the rarity of Talents in humans."

"I guess so, but I never really understood that," Gildy shrugged, "Then again, growing up I heard mostly the opposite, so, I suppose it depends on who you talk to." Gildy's hand unconsciously moved to rub over Westwind's shoulder, making the spotted chakat purr. They found themselves in a silent eye lock, Gildy's blue eyes studying the golden ones of the younger, pious centauroid.

"Shir? If you'd like to make the next bus, then I'd recommend you guys get ready to go," Patchwork's head peeked from around the doorway. Like a fire was ignited under Gildy's chin, shi felt hir face burn, turning hir head away quickly. From the corner of hir eye, shi saw Westwind taking a moment to compose himself as well, muttering an acknowledgement to hir daughter. Gildy gathered hir things and hir cubs' items, offering hir hand to shake the Reverend's. Westwind smiled and shook hir head, going around the desk to give Gidedtongue a hug.

"Like I said, if there's anything you'll need, don't hesitate to call, Gildedtongue. Our doors are always open," Westwind smiled at Gildedtongue as shi left. Thornbreaker and Steelfur, exhausted from their play and travel, nestled in the flank-carriers at their mother's sides as shi braved the fresh snow falling on Hume island.

Lightning and snow fell upon the small island the next Fifthday. Proud roar was pulling out the thick, hooded parkas for Jadestripe and himself, getting bundled up before their next meeting when Gildedtongue knocked on their door. "Oh, hey Gildy. Is there something you need? Your sister and I will be heading out soon, though." the dark lion asked, cocking hir head to one side.

"No, no, but that's what I wanted to ask you both about," Gildy's tail flicked in a shy, kittenish flit, "I guess I was wondering if I could come along with you both." Proud roar raised a curious brow at that. "I know I haven't been interested in it before, but, well, I suppose it's the least I could do for all you've done for me, to see the

things you guys are involved with."

The dark gold eyes of the older chakat appraised Gildy for a moment before calling out for Jadestripe, who peeked inside. "Seems your little sister wants to 'see the things we are involved,'" Jade smiled, giving Gildedtongue a hug as Proud roar chuckled loudly. Gildy himself meeped in the embrace as his sister purred loudly.

"I knew you'd be coming around some time!" Jadestripe smiled, "Don't worry, I assure you, you're gonna love this." Gildy was given another large coat.

Bundling the cubs was a lesson in folly. As soon as Steel fur was buttoned up in his coverings, Thornbreaker managed to squirm out of his to run around streaking in the house. When Thorny was redressed, Steel fur decided it was time to use the box, and then had to be cleaned up again, which gave Thornbreaker time to ditch his coat once again.

The five arrived a quarter-hour late, and the meeting was just finishing reading the minutes of the last session. Jadestripe and Proud roar strode in towards the front of the gathering, taking their seats at a table at the head of the room. An old siamese chakat, hair and muzzle long gone silver and white, turned a blue eye to the late comers, "We're glad you could grace us with your presence, Jadestripe, Proud roar." The siamese's voice was strong, dark, and reverberated in the whole room.

Jadestripe, for once since Gildy had known him, splayed his ears submissively, "I'm sorry, his Whitegold. My sister, Gildedtongue, decided to come with us at the last minute, and the cubs were a handful to get here."

The commanding chakat looked around, seeing the shy mother in the back of the meeting hall, "Gildedtongue? The one from Terra, correct? From the Kingdom?" Jadestripe nodded to the questions as Whitegold's muzzle curled to a smile, "Interesting. Very good." Shi laid back in his thick cushion, clearing his throat, "All right then. The first order of business is to congratulate Ester and Conrad Yelsin for their new child." the gathering rapped knuckles or stomped on the floor in their applause, where Conrad, a rabbit morph, stood and bowed his head. Gildedtongue looked around the gathering. From his vantage point, shi figured there was at least a couple dozen over a hundred attendees in the large meeting room, probably more members in this room than in Westwind's whole parish, a little less than half were skunk'taurs or chakats, and the rest morphs of various morphs.

The council discussed the news of the island and the whole archipelago. Location of new housing and business. Task force committees came up to discuss their operations. One thing that lifted Gildy's ears was a park that was going to begin plotting and landscaping in the spring weeks just a few kilometres from Jadestripe's home. Several speakers were members of the Skunk'taur Archipelago's government council, Representatives from Hume island, informing the Society about the various bills and motions being discussed.

"Bill 3470 has been approved by the council, and will be put to vote in the Archipelago next month," Representative Gurther Blackpaw started to speak. The low murmur of attendant whispering ceased when that number was read out. "As you know, with this piece of legislature in place, any new business license must be approved not just by the Economic committee, but also by a simple majority vote of an island town meeting. This will let the public have control of the businesses that are placed in their neighbourhoods. As a growing world, we need to be more careful of how we cultivate every part of this planet, 'lest we fall into the toxic mire Terra became as companies and businesses ruled, raping the lands and exploiting the citizens.

"We are not hampering entrepreneurs from making new jobs that this world needs, but we are curbing the control of presence of those that will rob our world of its resources for their own gain. Who better to determine what is needed in a town than its citizenry? A new store or restaurant, factory or dock, places of service or production. The People know what they need, and putting the power into the hands of the People is what is right for the Skunk'taur Archipelago and for Chakona. To gain more power over your own destinies, I urge you all to vote yes on 3470."

Whitegold nodded, "Passionate words from Representative Blackpaw. And with such great passion, great truths. I agree with the council-member, that there needs to be some action to save our island, and by our example, continue to save our whole world." The longtail stood up to address the Society, "We need to get the word out to help this initiative to pass into law. With this, we can continue to make Chakona the homeworld that the morphs deserve to live in!" Whitegold's continued calls for action were drowned out by the growing roar of applause by the Society.

The excitement was infectious, literally. Gildedtongue had never been surrounded by so many chakats, but the empathic force of the attendees filled up his very soul. Thornbreaker and Steelfur's mews joined in with the group, jumping at Gildedtongue's forelegs. The elation in Gildy's head was seasoned with doubt. Chakona was, indeed a planet made for Terran morphs, but there certainly was a population of aliens, as well as humans around. The Puma family's words and Westwind's warnings were sounding more and more founded in reality.

Whitegold's charisma had beat upon the drums of war as the CHS members started to file out of the ballroom and into the lobby for refreshments and building their plans of attack. Gildedtongue held his ground in the corner, gathering up the cubs into his arms to keep them from getting swept into the crowd. Jadestripe and the rest of the chairpersons (They probably would prefer 'chairfurs' or something, but Gildy couldn't bring himself to say such a thing) remained at the table, wrapping up the meeting. Jade caught sight of his sister, waving him over, "Everyone, this is my sister, Gildedtongue, from Terra. She's seen what the humans there are capable of, and how they treat morphs and other members of this galaxy," Jade looked about at the other chakats and furs remaining before addressing Gildedtongue again, "So, you'd agree that we do

need to curb that kind of influence here."

"Yes, I'd say we do need to avoid that kind of mentality here in Chakona," Gildy bit hir tongue, not wanting to sound ungrateful to hir sister, or embarrass hir and hir mate in front of their friends.

"Very good, very good," Whitegold smiled, circling the table to drape an arm around Gildedtongue's shoulder. The older lion wore a perfume of some exotic flower, probably common from this planet, still, it smelled rather nice. "I was thinking, Gildedtongue, perhaps you could help be the face of our project. A chakat from that particular Kingdom, I'm sure you could certainly help explain to some of those that have been born on this planet, or others, not familiar with the actions on Terra or its closer colonies."

Gildedtongue cocked hir head, "Um, you realize that we're on one of the 'close colonies' of Terra?"

Whitegold laughed, "My dear Gildedtongue, no no no. Chakona has signed its emancipation, and severed its ties with Terra. I'm certainly speaking not of any treason." Whitegold sighed softly, "I understand your hesitation. Just relax, and you can talk with Jadestripe." Whitegold gave another hug as Gildedtongue pulled away, holding hir cubs close.

"Ah, thank you," Gildy covered a yawn, "But, ah, Jadestripe, Proud roar, the cubs are getting a little tired. Would it be okay if we go to the PTV to settle down. Should be okay if we run the heater, right?" Jadestripe nodded to hir sister.

"Okay, Gildy. Don't worry, we won't be too much longer." Proud roar smiled, waving as Gildy and the cubs started to head out. Making a bee-line towards the exit, Gildy did hir best to avoid getting caught in any conversational traps, avoiding eye-contact, moving briskly and with purpose, shi thanked God for learning about interpersonal communication, not just to engage it, but also to bypass it. Out of the door, the cold nipped at the chakats' noses. Winds picked up, kicking around the fallen snow from the rooftops. Due to their tardiness, Proud roar had to park in the back of the lot, the lights bouncing off of the white snow almost blindingly as Gildy made it to the vehicle. Luckily, shi could get in with a handprint, even if it involved taking off that warm mitten.

Shaking off the snow off of hir lower back, Gildy crawled in, putting on the heat as shi cuddled hir cubs close to hir body to offer them hir own warmth. With joining yawns, the three chakats continued to cuddle in the car seat, snuggling up warmly and slowly fell asleep.

The PTV was in front of Jadestripe's home when Gildy woke up. The two older 'kats were unbuckling themselves from the front seats. Steelfur woke himself up first, looking for something to eat, which in turn roused up hir sister, feeling much the

same. They would have to wait a little longer as Gildy went into the house and unbundle the three out of their winter clothing.

"So, what do you think, Gil?" Proudroar asked, collecting the coats and went to put them in the laundry room to dry. Free of their downy confines, Thornbreaker and Steelfur mewed happily and proceeded to pounce and tussle with one another at Gildy's feet.

"It certainly was, well, eye-opening to say the least," hir handpaws ruffled Steelfur's headfur, petting hir fur. "I mean, I didn't expect such a group."

Laughing, Proudroar nodded, "I'm guessing what you've heard back on Terra is how pussyfooted chakats are," shi gave a smile as defining as hir name, "But, we aren't some declawed kittens, and we will make sure that we keep ahold of what we've carved for ourselves." Proudroar unsheathed and examined the claws on hir hand, emphasising hir ability to carve.

"Ah, yes. Anyway, I think I'm going to head to bed. It's late, and, well, I'd like to keep my daily rhythm and all," the younger leonine chakat said, gathering hir cubs, "Besides, I'm still getting used to the extra hours on this planet." Roary gave hir goodnights to Gildy and the kittens as shi went upstairs to sleep.

A ray of sunshine bounced from the reflective interior of the skylight and shone brightly down upon Gildy's bed, dragging the chakat from hir dreamless slumber. Thornbreaker and Steelfur were over on one corner of the cushion, curled up with one another in their continued dozing, letting their mother start hir day without them.

A wet slap graced Gildedtongue's belly, hir morning wood greeting its owner with its usual tact. Blushing, Gildy gently ran a foreleg paw over the head, feeling an electrical jolt of pleasure coursing through hir. The familiar sensation causing some of the cobwebs to clear out of hir head. Glancing back at the cubs, Gildy thought it best to make hir withdraw from the room. Shi wasn't about to go about dealing with this in the same room as them!

Shi was definitely in rut. It had been a long time since shi felt one like this, but after hir pregnancy and a few subdued cycles, the male half of hir body was making its presence known. The door to the bathroom was closed, and Gildy could pick up the sound of the running shower, either Proudroar or Jadestripe (or both), but that made that room unusable. Peeking into the communal sleeping den, shi found it empty and slowly made hir way inside. A box of tissue was on the nightstand, letting Gildy grab a few sheets before getting down to work.

Jadestripe's home was always neat and orderly, but just this once Gildy was hoping

that some discarded naughty vid-disc was laying about. Hir datapad was back in hir room and shi didn't want to disturb the kittens, so it was back to hir imagination. A smile plastered itself on hir face, mixing lust and slight embarrassment as shi recalled how both hir mates would pleasure hir, Thallon especially. The folftaur was always eager to work on hir penis and male urges, almost more accommodating of them than Saldura, not that the badger herm didn't, but it was obvious that the badger had hir preferences.

Wrapped up in lustful reminiscence, Gildy didn't hear the door opening or the quiet steps leading up to hir, "Guess you're not going to be down to breakfast soon?" Gildedtongue's eyes shot open, hir dull blue eyes looking directly into the golden ones of hir sister, arms crossed under hir breasts and with the grin of the kitten-who-caught-the-mouse. The younger sister rolled back in surprise, exposing more of herself to Jadestripe who chuckled quietly. "Well, with the sound of heavy breathing coming from the room, of course I'd get curious. Besides the amount of horniness you're radiating."

Gildedtongue watched dumbly, feeling as if hir whole body was unresponsive, save for the pulsating spire between hir hindlegs. Jadestripe gave a soft chuckle, reaching down and wrapping hir hand around hir sister's penis. Slow, even, deliberate motions made Gildedtongue's toes curl, a purr boiling deep in hir throat. Eyes locked in a perverse staring contest that eventually was lost by Gildy, closing hir eyes to moan. Jadestripe quickly claimed hir prize and before shi could open hir eyes again, shi felt the warm, wet mouth of the white tiger slurping wantonly over hir spire.

The expertise Jade shown made short work of the groggy lion and soon Gildy bit back a snarling roar, feeling hir whole body tense up once more, surrendering hir essences to the suckling maw. A deft hand took the tissues out of Gildedtongue's grasp, bringing them to Jade's lips as shi coughed and politely spat unseen. "Well, then. You know, if you would continue to not wear that, you can expect more mornings like this," Jadestripe smiled. "Anyway, I'd best be down for breakfast. You might want to wash up." With that, Jadestripe tossed the tissue into the bin before walking off.

Satisfied, yet confused, Gildedtongue slowly stood back up, wobbly legs bringing hir back to hir room. Both of the kittens were awake by now and crying for breakfast, jumping into Gildy's arms and latching onto their respective nipple. Going from getting a blowjob to nursing cubs gave the chakat a moment of gender whiplash, but as shi watched the cubs feed, shi noticed Frank's cross missing. A moment of panic passed as shi found it in the blankets. Picking it up with hir tail, shi held onto it, letting hir children have their fill. 'Continue to not wear that,' echoed in Gildy's head as hir tailtip stroked the flaking front of the necklace's talisman. Hir tail tightened around the chain. It was going to be a long morning.

SPHERE FIVE: MARS

Steelfur and Thornbreaker squirmed in the baptismal font as Reverend Westwind anointed their foreheads with blessed oils. Gildedtongue was beaming with pride, gently holding the infants' heads out of the water as they were both blessed. "I baptise you, Thornbreaker, child of Gildedtongue and Thallon Rosefur, and you, Steelfur, child of Gildedtongue and Thallon Rosefur in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. May they guide you in your paths towards righteousness and compassion, and the teachings of Jesus Christ and his Apostles."

Cornfield was quiet, holding hir hands behind hir back, watching the ritual going on around hir. The baptism was a quiet affair, merely Gildedtongue, hir children, and Cornfield acting as witness and Godparent, with Westwind's approval. Patchwork was on hand as well, ready to help hir mother with hir duties.

Steelfur was passed to Patches easily enough as the teen dried off the cub, giving hir belly a playful tickle to make the grey chakat giggle happily. Thornbreaker, however, had mischief in hir mind. A chakat kitten not wishing to be caught was a difficult prey on its own, but the adults quickly learned a new lesson that day: there was little more evasive than a kitten covered in oil and water. Thorny had leapt out of Westwind's hands and onto the floor before scrambling to the back of the room. Hir tiny, sharp claws dug into a banner as shi mewled in playful defiance of the recent ritual.

Flanking the cub, Gildedtongue managed to grab the leaping kitten whilst Cornfield took the direct charge. The mother managed to wrap hir good top that Dreamweaver's parents gave hir around the cub, letting hir have enough grip on the oily fur to keep hir still for Patchwork to come in and dry hir off. Gildy sighed, looking over hir top, claw holes through the fabric, anointing oils soaked into the weave, and a final defiant urination saturating the outfit certainly rendered the item useless. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Gildedtongue," Westwind said, frowning at the death of the top.

"No, no, it's okay," Gildy said, taking off the light cotton fabric, blushing hotly at hir exposed nudity to hir friends, "I mean, I guess this is one of the advantages of the clothing optional nature of the planet; at least less things are ruined."

The four started to laugh, Patchwork offering Gildedtongue hir cubs back, who, after their strange bath, were content to be back in their mother's arms, especially with hir bare bosom leaving easy access to a meal. Westwind nodded to the group, leading them to hir office. Patchwork arrived with a kettle and some mugs for tea. "So, how are things going, Gildy? I mean, don't see you too much outside of Eighth Days," Westwind asked, nodding to hir daughter.

"I guess okay," Gildedtongue replied, seeing Westwind pull a bag of biscuits out of hir desk, giving a couple to each of the people. "Work is, well, it's income," shi started, looking out of the window, "Can't say that it is at all fulfilling. God,

honestly, at this point I'd welcome the inane prattling of know-it-all teenagers too thick to let any lesson sink in rather than asking people all the time 'will that be chip or credit?'"

Cornfield put a hand on the older chakat's shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze of his shoulder, "Look, I think you need to have a bit of fun. I've got Year's End off; how about I take you and the kittens to the park, see the fireworks and enjoy the celebration?"

The youngest adult chakat shook his head, "Oh, no. That isn't possibly a relaxing evening. I'll meet you all over there, and I'll take a look after Thornbreaker and Steelfur." Patchwork smiled, nibbling on a chocolate biscuit before drinking his tea.

"Um, thank you, I'll certainly get you some credits for your time, of course," Gildedtongue offered, though Patchwork shook his head, declining it fully. Gildy sighed, defeated into having to accept the charity wholeheartedly, much to the chuckling of his friends.

"Well, if you insist, Gildy, I'll let you buy me a drink or two," Cornfield smiled. It did make the leonine chakat feel a load better, and less like a beggar. The group continued to drink their tea whilst Thornbreaker and Steelfur curled up to sleep.

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"So, you were out all day, I see," Jadestripe commented when Gildedtongue came inside, "Missing your top as well." The tiger's tone was more observational than accusatory. Gildy gave a grunt of agreement to his sister, heading upstairs to his room. Shi wasn't quite in the mood to talk with his sister, not that shi'd have much to discuss that wasn't a forbidden topic. The cubs were squirming in their mother's arms in Gildy's bedroom, their nap had re-invigorated them for more play, which Gildy didn't hamper, but was too exhausted to help, opting to be the perfect mountain for the children's imagination.

Year's End was around the corner, and the town was already decorated heavily. The alien planet operated under a different time measurement than Terra, longer days, more rotations of the planet per longer revolution. However, this didn't stop the primarily Terran population's desires for familiar holidays. Year's End became a sort of amalgamation of Christmas and New Year's. It was a time of merriment and gift-giving, quickly commercialized by the merchant class. Still, not one mascot had been chosen for the holiday, many opting for a chakat in Father Christmas garb.

Such iconography were absent in the streets of Hume. Of course there were lights

and tinsel in the shops and around the doors of homes, but the gaudy twinkling lightshows of the late 20th and early 21st centuries became largely a thing remaining on Earth. The shops' soundtracks kept up the usual Pop music, save for the occasional attempt at Year's End carols, which came off as forgettable. Despite all that, Gildedtongue had to remind himself to not wish people a Happy Christmas, feeling the siren's call of the Yule.

Getting such an importantly lucrative night off would not be easy. The store owner, Mr. Ichario wanted most of his manpower when people would want quick access to snacks, soda, liquor and contraceptives. "You're a good worker, Gildedtongue. I'm not sure how I'd feel with you not on the floor. I can keep the kids outside changing powercells, but you'll work fine in here at the register."

Taking a deep breath, the chakat responded to the ferret, "I understand that, however you must have noticed I work better in the mornings. I think you'll find that if I worked both the morning of Year's End, as well as First Landing, where we'll have the mostly hung-over and otherwise under-the-weather customers things would work out better for you, since they'd be promptly served and happy in times when they'd otherwise not be happy at all. This would also allow for you and the rest of the crew to sleep in that day." The proprietor ran the numbers in his head for a moment, the lanky critter contorting his spine slowly before sighing.

"I'll think about it. Don't say I've never done anything for you," he said to the older employee, who couldn't help but smile and nod. Gildedtongue stepped out of his workplace, a small spring in his step that didn't stop when his toes crushed the fallen snow heaped around the station.

As the front door opened, Gildy saw Jadestripe in the den, playing with Steelfur as Thornbreaker was taking a nap on one of the cushions. "Well, you're in high spirits today," the white tiger smiled, "What's got your tail touching the clouds?"

"Oh, it's nothing, I've got time off for Last Day's evening, and, well, I think I've been asked out on a date."

Jadestripe smiled, cocking his head, "Oh, a date? Well, didn't take you too long, I see. So, who's the lucky one?"

Gildedtongue blushed again, stroking some of the red and silver hairs out of his face, frizzled from the melting snowflakes near his scalp, "Cornfield, he's an officer of the police department."

"Hmmm, a police officer? Well, it is certainly a useful member of society, and glad that you're courting a chakat. Was getting worried with you being with badgers and fox'taurs and humans all the time."

"Is there something wrong with other Terrans?"

Jadestripe gave a diplomatic laugh, “Oh, of course not, for the most part. But, you and I both know that chakats do need other chakats and chakat-kin to survive. You should know more than anyone else, aren't I right?”

Gildedtongue paused, hir ears flicking as shi crossed hir arms, “Jadestripe? How much do you know about the way I got here?”

By this time, Steelfur had run out of hir own steam as Jadestripe set hir with hir twin to sleep, “I was approached by one of my co-workers in Immigration. Your name had been brought up at prospected candidate for a political refugee, and Karole asked if I would be your sponsor. Well, that wasn't a hard decision. Though, did take you a long while to get here.”

The younger chakat nodded, the conversation having gone into the kitchen as Jadestripe poured himself another steaming glass of voxxee. “I see. And sorry about the wait, but, as you know, pirates tend to put dampers on anyone's trips.” Gildedtongue was satisfied that Jadestripe was just another pawn in this whole mess.

“Was there something I was supposed to know?” Jade asked, hir own curiosity piqued.

Gildedtongue shook hir head, “No, no, not really. I guess I was just wondering how you reacted when my name came up, I guess.”

“Just happy that you were leaving that awful place and coming home.” Jadestripe smiled wide, putting hir hand on Gildedtongue's, squeezing it.

“Yeah, thanks. Anyway, Jade, I think I'm gonna take a nap. See you later this evening.” Gildy made hir way upstairs to hir room. Shi wondered about the scientists that were going over what little data they had from the ship, and shi got worried about what they found, if hir friends aboard the *Purgatorio* were safe.

“Yeah, because of you, Matilda, Saldura and Thallon, Susan, Zajac and the rest are probably on a Federation Gulag, and it's just a matter of time before they come for you,” Creekstripe chuckled in Gildedtongue's ear.

“If they did, wouldn't they have come for me first? They know exactly where I am. Living with a government official doesn't make me inconspicuous.” Gildedtongue told hir personal spectre.

“They might be biding their time, finding out what you know.”

Gildedtongue was momentarily worried as shi scared hirself, then shook hir head, “Why waste time? They can probably forcibly glean whatever's in my head if they really wanted to. We've seen how... grey the Federation can be.”

Whether it was true or not, it did seem to shut up Gildedtongue's subconscious, letting the leonine chakat curl up to sleep.

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Gildedtongue took the long way around Hume island to Mephidae park. Stopping at the Church of Eden with Thornbreaker and Steelfur in toe. Patchwork was there as the cubs gurgled at the sight of their frequent Eighth Day cubsitter. "Thank you again, Patches. Though, why aren't you out celebrating today?"

Patchwork smiled, taking Gildedtongue's shoulder bag as the two made their way inside, leaving the cubs in their warm flank-pack home before they crawled themselves out. "It's not a problem, really. Heh, I know it's boring, but, honestly a bit of a homebody, I guess. Besides, I've got a lot of studying to do. University acceptance exams are next week and I better have all of my Ts crossed and Is dotted."

Nodding, Gildedtongue smiled, giving Patchwork a hug, "Well, I know getting into the Federal Monastery was a bugger, but I'm more than confident you'll do well!"

"Thanks!" Patches smiled, "But, you'd better get your butt back to the PPTV. The AI isn't gonna sit around forever! I'll see you in the morning! 0900!"

Gildedtongue nodded as shi heard the transport give a warning honk of its horn, bidding Patches, Thorny, and Steel a good evening before jogging hir way back to the stop and back on.

Cornfield was in hir civilian outfit, waiting by the stop as Gildedtongue stepped out. Shi gave the red-haired chakat a hug and it made Gildy almost melt in those strong, powerful arms. "Glad you made it. I think you had the right idea, I think my parking space is further away than my house is from here."

Gildy laughed, "Well, I'm glad to see you too, Cornfield." Shi purred as the hug was disengaged, looking around the snowy hills behind the waist-high wrought-iron fence.

The park was full of bustling activity. Vendors at booths were calling out to sell drinks, food, and trinkets. Entertainers danced and played music with some acrobats performing feats of agility and grace. Cornfield held onto Gildedtongue's hand, chuckling at the older 'kat's look of awe and wonder. "Did they not have any festivals in the Kingdom?"

"Oh, several," Gildedtongue blinked back to reality, looking back at the off-duty

police officer, “but, I guess it’s still rather new to me to see so many other chakats and other morphs.” Gildedtongue paused as shi looked around, “Well, morphs engaged in the festivities. Most of the time they're the ones cleaning or the target of games.”

“Target?”

Gildedtongue shrugged, “I mean, nothing horrible. Dunk booths, paintball galleries, that sort.”

The officer shook hir head, “Seems our definitions of horrible aren't quite the same.” They stopped in front of a food booth, and as was promised, Cornfield let Gildedtongue buy the two chakats a beer. “Thanks, mate.”

“No, thank you, Cornfield. Seriously, I've been helped and supported and almost coddled my entire time here, that I was feeling as useless as a newborn cub,” Gildedtongue looked down at hir plastic 'stein' of amber, “Just need a few things to say that I'm not totally helpless.”

Laughing, Cornfield patted the older chakat's shoulder, “Well, I'm certainly not one to turn down a perfectly good beer, no matter who it's from. But, I understand, and I know you're not just some helpless cub. Time are just tough.”

Gildedtongue nodded as they walked through the crowd. A stage was set up in one part of the park for several bands to play for the crowds. Checking hir watch, it was only 17:65, the night still was relatively young. “So, Cornfield, I'm glad you invited me to this, but, don't you have any mates that would want to be here with you?”

Cornfield blushed, taking another drink of hir beer, “Ah, no, you've caught me between companions, really. So, I'm kinda single right now. Not that that's too odd, really. Heh, the Force doesn't leave too much time for dating.”

Gildedtongue nodded, “And, well, my mates are off in space right now...”

“Yeah...” Cornfield trailed off. Gildy looked around for a moment, moving closer to the officer. It was hard to pick up hir emotions empathically, with how untrained shi was. The number of people surrounding them didn't help either. Shi reached to hold Cornfield's free hand, the officer looked back into Gildedtongue's face as they stood in silence for a moment, Gildedtongue taking in a deep breath.

“LA LA LA TA DEE de Tee DA DOO YATTA VATTA WATTA!” echoed loudly inside of Gildedtongue's head, making hir clutch hir skull. Cornfield also faltered, splaying hir ears as the remainder of hir beer was crushed in hir palm.

“Jesu, Maria et Josef! What the hell is that?” Gildedtongue asked as hir ears splayed some more. Many of the other people were stopped dead in their tracks as the

psychic noise rang through their brains.

“Some jag-off telepath is probably utterly smashed and 'singing' at the top of their projection...” growled Cornfield. This continued for several more minutes that masqueraded as eternities when it was stopped as suddenly as it began. “Ugh, I think our people found them.”

“That must be difficult,” Gildedtongue said, flicking his ears despite the original annoyance not having passed through them.

Cornfield shrugged, “For a non-telepath, yeah, but if you've got even an inkling of the talent, you can learn to recognize and follow a source. Still, takes some practice.” Cornfield looked over his top, covered in beer, “Well, I'd say this top has seen better days.”

Gildedtongue nodded, chuckling, “Well, an old Terran proverb says that a party that doesn't send you home ragged and dripping wasn't much of a party at all.”

Laughing, Cornfield ruffled Gildedtongue's mane as the two resumed their walk. Stopping at a skunk'aur's booth, they tried their chance on a ring toss. Both cut their losses after a small handful of FedCred coins were lost and they had a keychain to their spoils. “I think he dyed his paw-mark black to hide his telekinesis...” grumbled Cornfield, but neither pushed the topic.

“ATTENTION ATTENDANTS! THE FIREWORK DISPLAY WILL BEGIN IN TEN MINUTES!” another 'voice' rang through both chakat's ears, making them both grumble.

Growling, Gildedtongue flicked his ears gently, “I'm going to assume that would be an authorized use of a mass telepath message?”

“Probably,” Cornfield said, sighing softly.

“Still annoying, Cornfield.” Gildedtongue said, looking around for a moment as they made their way up the nearest hill to watch the display. “So, um, should I just keep with 'Cornfield, or is there any nickname I should know about?”

“Oh, around the station, I'm often called C.F. or 'Fie.” she smirks close to Gildedtongue, “Call me Corny and you'll get a stunner shoved so far up your tailhole I'll be zapping your tonsils.”

Gildedtongue meeped quietly, but the officer started to laugh, letting Gildedtongue chuckle as well. The first boom started the firework display. Bright flowers of red, gold, green and indigo became a bouquet in the sky. Gildedtongue looked over at Cornfield, the explosions in the air illuminating his golden fur.

Shi had to act. The mood was right, there wasn't any other distractions. Gildedtongue took in a deep breath and leaned against Cornfield, getting the officer's attention as shi turned to look at Gildedtongue. The older chakat closed hir eyes pursed hir lips and pressed them against Cornfield's.

Shi could feel Cornfield's shock. It didn't dissipate, but rather filled with awkwardness as Gildedtongue pulled back. Cornfield's face was flushed as hir blue eyes looked away. Gildedtongue's ears splayed, slumping forward like a released marionette, "Sorry," shi could only mutter.

Shaking hir head, Cornfield petted hir friend's shoulder, "No, no, it's not your fault, Gildedtongue. I just, well, I don't quite feel that way. I'm sorry if I was leading you on."

"I guess I should have figured. I mean, well..." Gildedtongue stammered, barely hearing anything else under the cackling of Creekstripe as hir long tail drooped onto the cold, wet dead grass.

Taking Gildedtongue's hands, Cornfield shook hir head, "Gildy, you're a good and pretty chakat. I just, well, I just, I'm not much for parenting, really." Cornfield sighed quietly, looking away, "Not that I don't like you, and not that I hate Thornbreaker or Steelfur, but, I just really don't see kittens as a part of my future."

Gildedtongue opened up hir mouth for a moment, about to respond with 'give it time, you might feel differently later,' but shi managed to catch hirself in time. It's the same sort of dismissive platitude that Jadestripe would say about Gildy's faith, the same sort of thing that the child-free chakat must hear all the time hirself. Taking in another breath, Gildy smiled to Cornfield, "I understand. I hope at least we can still be friends, though?"

The light in the officer's eyes grew brighter than the fireworks going off nearby, "I'd really like that." The two stood quietly, watching the end of the fireworks show. The chakat felt a rumble in hir pocket as shi pulled out hir mini datapad. Jadestripe was calling as Gildedtongue blinked, answering it.

A rather peeved face was on the other line, Jade's stripes were screwed to a scowl as shi growled quietly, "Come home. We need to talk." With that, the image was blipped out. The two chakats on the other line remained dumbfounded for a few moments.

"Well, I guess it's been a good evening," C.F. said to hir feet, feeling more awkward than earlier. "I mean, I'm sure things should be okay, right?"

Gildedtongue shrugged, "I guess things should be okay. I mean, I certainly didn't leave a mess or anything." Shi and Cornfield hugged tightly, smiling a little, "Still, I'm glad we shared this, Cornfield. I'll talk with you later?" Cornfield nodded as

Gildedtongue took off.

The ride home was interesting, to say the least. The PPTV was more or less a drunk-tank, ferrying people back home less than able to do so under their own volition. At least people tended to not try to lean on the chakat as they kept to themselves in their parts of the vehicle. Shi thought of going to the church to pick up hir children, but Patches wasn't expecting hir until the morning. If things weren't going poorly, shi didn't want to worry Patchwork, and if they weren't going well, shi didn't want hir children nearby.

The lights were still on when Gildedtongue got back to Jadestripe's home. Hir hearts were both pounding as shi walked the stone pathway to the front door. "Hello? I'm back. What's wrong, Jade?"

Jadestripe was in the den, looking up at hir younger sister, "I received a call earlier. A call from a church that said they were looking after your children tonight." Jade started to approach Gildedtongue, "Really, a church? Are you trying to get your children as fucked up as you are?"

Gildy realized shi was caught, that shi was expecting this, but it still felt like a slap in the face. "I really don't think that the church is going to fuck them up. The Reverend is a good person!"

Jadestripe grumbled, starting to pace around, "I can't believe it. I really can't. I swear, you staying there so long has utterly corrupted you, thinking that some human blight would possibly do anything but horrid things!" shi sighed, "As your sponsor, I'm to report back that you are becoming more rehabilitated and suited to live here. I honestly can't, in good conscious, report that if you're doing things like this!"

Gildedtongue's claws dug into the carpeting beneath hir, "You don't bitch about the Caitian faiths, you don't complain about the Rakshani's, the Voxan's. But if there's a Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist, a Muslim out there, then you come out claws bared! What the fuck?"

Rolling hir eyes, Jadestripe grumbled, "Because have you seen what humans have done? The wars, the killing, the hatred? You of all people should know this more than anyone!"

"And everyone else in this galaxy, their hands are clean? You're more delusional than you think I am if you think that!"

"Of course not, but they're so much older than humans, they have more to teach than Earthlings could even comprehend." Jadestripe sighed, "Humans just don't have the drive to better themselves like that, especially ones who cling hopelessly to such... fairy tales." The white tiger folded hir arms, "Proudroar is en route now to save your cubs, and tomorrow the Society is going to try and stamp out this blemish on our

island. It had its time coming, but this expedites our plans.”

Gildedtongue was gobsmacked, blinking as shi felt like shi was listening to the mad ravings of one of Saldura's crappy B-movies, “P-plans? You're sounding insane! What the Hell do you mean by 'plans?' The church isn't doing anything malicious, and take it from me, it's certainly the most liberal church I've been to. Why are you doing this?”

“Because,” Jade started, putting a hand on Gildedtongue's shoulder, “Sometimes educating people requires a firmer hand than others.” The sound of Proudroar's PTV crunching snow came from the door as Gildedtongue's ears drooped. “We will discuss this further later.” The black maned chakat came in, both of the twins were sleeping in hir arms as Gildedtongue reached out for them.

“I think,” Proudroar looked down at the sleeping cubs, “It might be better if they slept in the communal room. They should start getting acquainted with such practices.” Jadestripe nodded in agreement, putting hir hand on hir mate's shoulder. Gildy's arms felt like lead weights as they came crashing to hir sides.

Jadestripe smiled to hir younger sister, “Of course, you can join us, Gildedtongue.” the older chakats made their way upstairs as shortly after, Gildedtongue plodded hir way up as well. When shi made it to the sleeping chambers, shi saw hir sister and hir mate already naked and cuddled with each other, the twins between them. Taking a few steps forward, shi caught Jadestripe's glance to Gildy's top, then back to hir sister's face. Gulping, Gildedtongue slowly shucked hir shirt, crawling onto the mass of cushions.

Despite the body warmth all around hir, a cold chill ran through Gildy's spine.