

Courtship

By Terinas Tiger

Part 9: The Breaking Point

-Before-

The bus was dingy and dirty. and the thought of having to ride in it for hours made me cringe. But then, I'd ridden in worse before. With a long, pronounced sigh, I paid my fare and passed the bus driver, a surly possum, and turned to gaze at my seating choices. There were a few open seats, but the idea of sitting alone didn't carry much appeal. Eventually, I walked over to take a seat next to a large bull who was staring out of a window at the sunrise with a scowl. "Heya! My name's Teri. Mind if I sit here?"

The bull looked back, snorted at me, shrugged, and then went back to his window gazing. I took it as an affirmation, and sat down. Reclining against the back of my seat, I looked up at the dingy green ceiling of the bus. The past few months had seen me get stressed out over and over again. Between everything that had happened with my dad, and Xavier, and my lousy job, and... Kristoph... I felt at my wits end. It was actually kind of nice to get away from it all for a few days. I was already feeling a bit more chipper. A bit happier. "So, what's your name?" I looked over at my partner on the seat. It'd been a few days since I'd struck up a conversation with a stranger. I missed the thrill of the discovery that came with it. People were the most interesting things I'd ever discovered, and it was a delight to learn more about them.

"Name's Paul." He slurred out, without even looking over at me.

"Nice to meet you, Paul!" I purred, pushing an elbow into the spongy seat of the bus and resting my head on it. "So, where you going to? I'm heading to Ashton University!"

After a moment of silence, he turned to look at me. "Look, cat. Ashton's four hours away. I'm sure you've got better things to do with your time than listen to an old bull flapping his gums about his problems. Get out your cellphone or whatever."

My ears twitched. I didn't like the dismissive attitude he had going on about himself. "I didn't actually ask about your problems, but I'd love to listen. I don't want to drain my cell phone's battery, and I didn't bring anything else to do with me. So I wouldn't mind a nice chat, if you've got it in you." I decided, with a friendly smile, that Paul was going to be my new friend by the end of the bus ride. "So come on, what's got you down? I'm a good listener." I imagined him as the stoic type, probably brooding about some business deal gone south, or some disagreement with his kids. He had a sort of grizzled appearance to him, and I bet he had some stories to tell.

He snorted. "I don't even know you."

"Even better!" I chuckled. "I'm a total stranger! No risk of any emotional attachment if what you tell me scares me off. I'm not on anyone's side, and I can listen to your problems with total impartiality." My tail was swishing eagerly.

With a long, drawn out sigh, Paul the bull turned to gaze at me, his brown eyes locking with my green ones. "I'm going to Winchester. To apologize."

My ears perked up. "Ah! Winchester! That's like, a bit over six hours away, huh? Lotta time to spend just to apologize. So tell me, is it to someone special?"

"...something like that. I guess you could almost call her an ex, except we never really dated." Paul looked down at his feet.

"Ooo! A sweet cow lady?" My eyes lit up.

He made a fist. "Yeah. She was always doing nice things for me. Bringing me food at work, listening to my problems, wearing bikinis to the beach and bringing me along..." He sighed. "But I pushed her away. Didn't think she deserved someone older than herself, with as many mistakes as I'd made in life. I didn't want her to have to deal with my problems. With my messed up life."

"Oh." I reached over and put a paw on his shoulder. "I can't quite relate to lady troubles, but I think you might have the right idea with apologizing."

"If I can even work up the courage to do it." He buried his head in his hands. "I shoved her away and shoved her away and ignored all the signs of affection she gave me. I made her hate me for how neglectful and insensitive I was. All the while tearing my heart in twain to do it!"

I looked over at the other seats on the bus, giving Paul a few gentle pats. "Wow. That is not at all what I expected to hear when I woke up this morning. But I think it's good that you are getting this all out?" For just a moment, I contemplated switching seats. But I couldn't. I'd poked my nose into someone else's life. I had to live with the consequences now. Besides, I couldn't abandon my new friend Paul when he was so low.

A muffled sob escaped his hands. He looked up at me with tear-stained eyes. "I was such a jerk!"

"There... there..." I said, patting his shoulder and letting him cry. It was shaping up to be a long bus ride.

“-and then, once they bring out the cake, you can apologize to her in style.” I said, smiling at Paul.

He wiped his tears away. “Teri, you’ve been so kind to listen to me this whole ride. You think she’ll listen?”

I leaned in and hugged the sappy old bull. “She will. Trust in her good heart.” The bus jerked to a stop, as I saw the sign at the front shift to read “Ashton Stop.” Clicking my tongue, I pulled my backpack up from between my legs and stood up. “Well, Paul. It’s been a wonderful few hours, talking to you. But I have to go see an old friend. Good luck with Clara! Text me how she takes it! Bye!” I smiled, waving at my new friend as I walked to the exit of the bus. It had been a long bus ride. But I think I really had a chance to help someone there.

Paul waved a few too many times at me as I disembarked. Looking around the crowd of people waiting to board, I eventually saw a flash of familiar fur. Turning to walk towards the white floofy tail, I saw that he had his back turned to me. With a light pounce, I grabbed his tail and hugged into it, the fluffy fur caressing my cheeks like the soft kiss of cotton seeds drifting through the air. For just a moment, it really did feel like back at our High School days.

Samson’s body froze, before relaxing. Turning his head around, he saw me nuzzling his tail, and chuckled. “Is there ever going to be a time when you greet me like a normal person, Teri?”

“Nuh-uh.” I purred, giving his fuzzy tail one last affectionate snuggle before letting go. Putting my paws in the pockets of my jeans, I smiled at him. “Nice to see you again, Samson.”

A small smirk crossed his face. “You too, Teri. So, up for a tour of the campus?”

I chuckled. “Can I hold your paw while we wander around?” I held out my paw to him.

He narrowed his eyes. “That depends. Are we skipping off to the chapel to get married?”

“Oh ICK.” I pulled my hand away, waving it as if it’d suddenly gotten unclean. We stared at each other for a moment, before breaking into laughter. “I’d love a tour. Lead on, Mr. Queenstone!”

Samson visibly winced. “Please don’t call me by my last name.”

“Wait, why?” I frowned, raising an eyebrow. “Last I checked, between the two of us, YOU were the one on speaking terms with your family still. What’s with that reaction to your family’s esteemed name?”

Samson sighed, looking away from me. “It’s... a long story. Let’s just get to the tour, ok?”

By the end of the day, after a long tour, a luxurious soak in the hot tub at the school gym (Samson snuck me in using his badge) and a pleasant dinner, Samson and I returned to his dorm room. His roommate was out for the break, so we had some alone time. Nuzzled up against his right shoulder, I sighed, stroking his chest with a paw. "I missed this."

The comment was enough to get him to turn his head. "This what? You missed me? Or cuddling like this? Or what?"

"Well, I guess I missed feeling like I could relax. Letting my guard down. Not having to keep myself on my best behavior." I rolled away from him, staring over at a boy band poster Samson had hung on his wall. "Xavier and I have this new roommate, and he and I have a bit of a history, and I kinda did something cruel to him. He forgives me, but ever since he moved in, he's been doing all this stuff like dancing around in his boxers, or making food he KNOWS I'd like, or doing my laundry for me because he was already in the laundry room anyway. And it's making it difficult for me to live with him."

Samson chuckled. "Let me guess. You really want to jump his bones after all that, but you don't want to repeat any past mistakes and hurt him again?"

I bit into a nearby pillow. "He's making it REALLY hard to keep from seducing him. I promised myself I wouldn't." Covering my face with my paws, I let out a dejected sigh.

"If you want him so bad, why don't you put the moves on him?" Samson sat up and crossed his legs, staring at his nails. "I mean, I don't see what's so good about him, but I've never known you not to pounce on an opportunity. So you hurt him once. If he doesn't care, why should you?"

Rolling over, I sat up to lock eyes with the squirrel. "It's not just the fact that I hurt him. It's that the reasons why I hurt him haven't gone away. I'm still messed up, Samson. I might act more like my shit's together now, but I'm just better at covering up how broken I sometimes feel." Flopping back onto the bed, I stared up at the speckled ceiling. "I still hate how jealous I feel when I think about how perfect his family seems. I still feel envious that he didn't have to deal with being alone with no home, no guarantee of food or safety. The things that led me to hurt him are still there, Samson. Kristoph is kind. He's sweet. So flipping pure and unspoiled. I don't deserve someone like that. And I'd just drag him down to my level. He doesn't deserve that to happen to him." I felt the muscles in my arms protest as I pointed a finger up towards the ceiling, tracing circles in it idly. "But he's pushing all my buttons, and I don't know what to do about it. I've felt so stressed out about all the sweet and sexy stuff he's doing and I can't reciprocate. It's almost like he's doing it on purpose."

Samson sat up, folding his legs. "Maybe he is."

I sat up and looked at the squirrel. "I don't really think Kristoph is like that. He doesn't have a deceitful bone in his body."

Samson chuckled. "Uh huh. Suuuuuure. If you say so."

I glared at him, and he fell silent. After a moment, he turned to stare out the window. "Hey Teri. Would you ever consider talking to your dad again?"

My eyes rolled, purely on instinct. "Not gonna happen. That man and I cannot coexist. There would be blood, and I will NOT get my nice outfits stained with it."

"I'm just saying, you don't know what's going on with him now. Maybe he'd be more willing to try and bury the hatchet now. And don't you owe it to yourself to try and work things out with him? If this Kristoph guy's able to work things out with his parents, maybe there's hope for you two? I mean, you're going to have a half-sibling soon. Wouldn't you want to meet them?"

Samson turned to look at me, and what he saw was a silently snarling striped beast. He fell silent. Once I was sure he wasn't going to press the issue, I turned off the venom. "Samson, I understand what you are trying to do. Its nice that you believe a reconciliation is possible. But the only thing I believe he would be willing to listen to from ME is a full, groveling apology and recanting of the various sins he believes I to be guilty of."

"I-I guess you'd know better than I would." Samson's face fell, his expression despondent.

"Don't look so sad. He and I are both happier this way." I shot him an incredulous look. "Why do you even care, anyway?" I waved a paw, making a show of indifference. I wanted to make sure he knew I wasn't mad at him.

"It- well, it's just been on my mind lately." He stretched his arms over his head, yawning. "Welp, I think we've spent enough time cuddling. I'm gonna turn in for the night." He stood up and started taking his clothing off. "You're sure you're ok using my roommates bed?"

I watched him strip to his underwear, purring, as I ogled his crotch. "Oh, what was that now? I was distracted, looking at the package you got in the mail."

This provoked a snerk of laughter from the squirrel, who groped his crotch just to spite me. "Alright. None of that now." He waved me off his bed, and then walked into his private bathroom to brush his teeth. In the meantime, I got ready for bed on my own.

And then, as we both crawled into separate beds, Samson flipped out the lights. Resting my head against a stranger's pillow, I sighed and closed my eyes.

"Hey, Teri?"

I turned my head to face Samson, and slowly opened my eyes. "Yeah?"

"We... we were a good couple, back when we were together, right?"

I rolled over to stare at the wall. "Yeah. Up until the end."

He fell silent. After another few minutes, he coughed. "Do you ever miss... 'us'?"

I could feel the tip of my tail twitching under the covers of the bed. "...sometimes."

"You were the only person I've ever felt like I've had that deep a connection with." Samson's voice was dry. Almost sober. "I swear, the night I broke up with you, I cried and cried and cried until I couldn't cry anymore. I know I wronged you. I know I hurt you. But I want you to know I hurt myself too."

I rolled my eyes. I really didn't want to have this conversation. "I thought you'd moved on."

"I tried." He gave a long, pronounced sigh.

I met it with a sigh of my own. "I don't know what to tell you, Samson. Do you want me to say that I miss you too? That I want to run into your arms, tell you all's forgiven, and make out with you hungrily?" I sat up, turning to gaze at him. "I do miss what we had. And I still do really like you. But you broke my heart. I think friends is all I can manage right now."

There was another bout of silence between the two of us. "Yeah. I guess I should have expected that." He sighed. "At least I can help you get away from your problems for a bit."

"Yeah." I nodded. "Thanks for that. For being a safe refuge. I really needed some time away from my life, you know?"

"Yeah." More silence between us. "Must be nice to escape your problems for a little while. But..." He cleared his throat. "You know, I was thinking. If you want that roommate of yours to tone it down, maybe I can help with that. If we both come to your place at the end of the week and act all lovey-dovey, maybe we can get him to back off out of fear of your jealous boyfriend. You can say you broke things off with me later."

It was a ridiculous plan, rife with shenanigans and fraught with potential to go wrong. I knew it was from the second he proposed it.

And yet I said yes anyway.

-And After-

And that lapse of judgement was why I was in the bathroom with Kristoph, the hunky husky I was living with, a snarl on my face, my fangs bared. "Ok, WHAT THE HELL." I growled, tail lashing behind me with the force of a cracking whip.

He was taller than me, and a good deal stronger. It didn't seem to be giving him much confidence. "H-How much did you hear?" he stuttered. Kristoph only stuttered when something was making him really nervous. Which was exactly how I wanted him to feel.

"Enough." I narrowed my eyes. "And even if I hadn't, you've been acting like a snot to Samson all night. "

"Um, w-well, you see-" He folded his arms behind his back.

"I want the truth, dog!" I pointed a finger up at him. "How did you know about me and Samson, and are you really DELIBERATELY trying to be nice to me just to get into my pants, and-"

He thrust his hands in front of him, backing away. "Teri!" He interrupted me, before putting a paw over his face and sighing. "Alright. Fine. Yeah. You deserve to know. Yeah, I've been trying to tempt you into making a move on me for the past few weeks. You made it clear you didn't want us getting together. I thought if I got you to make the first move, we could get past that."

My claws pushed out. "So this whole thing: Doing workouts nearly naked, the sweet gestures, COVERING YOURSELF IN CUPCAKE BATTER, was just some elaborate machiavellian passive-aggressive courtship ritual?!?"

"U-um." He raised a finger up. "That last one w-was more an accident than intentional, but yeah. P-pretty much." He sighed. "But if I'm being honest, t-the day after, um, that night. I was hiding in the closet, um, when you were telling Xavier about your dad, and Samson, and how you got thrown out of your home..." He whimpered.

I felt myself trembling. To some small extent I was flattered. But it was drown out by the overwhelming feelings of betrayal and rage. I wanted to smack him. To claw his face. To make him hurt for deceiving me. I snarled at him... and then turned away. I wasn't a violent person. I never wanted to be that sort of person. Folding my arms against my chest, I frowned. "I thought you were better than that." I felt tears running down my face. "I feel like I don't even know you anymore."

"Teri..." He whimpered, staring at the mirror. "W-we all have sides of ourselves we don't want to show others. Things we're not proud of. Things we don't like about ourselves. I think that's just

part of life. I shouldn't have deceived you. I shouldn't have spied on you. And I know you might never trust me again. I regret it now."

"Then why did you do it?" I said, my voice dripping with bitter petty spite.

Kristoph was silent, as I watched him out of the corner of my eye. I was just about to speak again, when he worked up the courage to talk.

"Because I think I love you."

"I-"

He didn't let me start. "Because you're the first person who ever reached out to me. The first person who showed me it was ok to feel the way I felt. The first person to take an interest in helping me untangle all the stuff that was twisting me up inside." He looked up from the mirror, tears in his eyes. "I regret tricking you like that. But I wanted to help you, and you pushed me away." There was a pause in his speech as he wiped his nose. "I want to help you like you helped me. Because you saw something worthwhile in me. You made me feel happy, made me feel RIGHT, and I wanted to be the one who helped you feel like that. But I didn't know how else I could even have a chance. You shut me out."

My eyes went wide open. I froze, caught off guard. "And that's why you chose to violate my privacy." I squirmed, anger intermixed with my heart racing.

"My parents always taught me that a good relationship brought out traits in the partners they never knew they had." Kristoph took a step forward and put a paw on my shoulder. To my own surprise, I let him. "By being together, they discover things about themselves they wouldn't apart. They become more than what they were, even if it doesn't work out. You were that for me. You helped me with my problems. Helped me become someone with confidence in what I am." He looked down. "I'm sorry for spying on you. For deceiving you. For not being honest about my feelings. And I don't deserve, nor do I feel like you should, let me try to be there for you with your problems." He pulled ever so slightly on my shoulder. Recognising the symbol, I turned around to stare into his green eyes. "But I still want to be." Silence filled the air between us. "So, Teri. Here I am."

My heart was throbbing in my chest, I stared into his eyes, my breathing quick. I felt myself leaning in, until I could feel his breath against my face...

And I turned away, letting his paw fall to his side. "I wish I could trust all of that." I wouldn't even look at him.

"You have every right to be mad." Kristoph's voice was solemn. "But I will do what I can to earn your forgiveness. To earn your trust again. I swear it."

My hands were wrapped around my chest, clutching at my shoulders. "You only like the parts of me I've let you see. I can be really ugly inside. I'll just hurt you again."

Even with my back turned to him, somehow just knew he was giving me a weak little smile. "You've seen me at my worst too, Teri. I still care about you, warts and all."

"I-" I choked up. "I-" There was something in my throat. I couldn't find my voice to speak. I was angry and scared and excited and confused and I wanted to hug him and hit him at the same time. I didn't know what to do.

And then I grit my teeth. "I can't think about this right now."

Kristoph's face fell blank. "W-what?"

"I need some time to think about this, Kristoph. I can't think clearly about this right now. Not with all the stuff that's happened tonight. Just." I knew I should have given him a straight answer. But I couldn't do that when I was changing my mind with every passing moment. "After everything you did tonight. After everything you just SAID- I can't decide. I'm just too emotional. I can't sort out how I really feel like this. I need some space to work things out. Please."

His ears drooped. "O-Oh. Yeah. I understand." He poked his pointer fingers together. "How m-much time do you think?"

I threw my paws up. "I don't know! A week! Two weeks! A month!" I turned to the door, opened it, and stepped under the doorframe. "Now I need to go get some pillows and blankets out. I can't just kick Samson out this late, so he's using my bed. And no, we're not sleeping with each other."

Kristoph slouched forward, closing his eyes. "Yeah. I guess I should have expected that." His ears drooped. "If you want, I can m-move out, and-"

And then I walked back over to him, turned his head towards mine, and kissed him on the lips, my arms wrapping around his back. The puppy made a sudden "MRF!" noise for a moment, his eyes wide, before accepting my tongue into his mouth.

I broke off the kiss a moment later. "Kristoph. You're staying. I'm not kicking you out either. And what you said just now was so sw-" I stopped myself. "Don't feel like this means I hate you. Just. Please give me time." I let go of him, turned, and walked away.

And so everyone waited.