

BLIZZARD

BY

SPOOK AND DAVID RICHARDS

Copyright 1998



"Will you look at that one!" the fox said, ignoring the console for a moment. He watched as the human was led across the room toward the viewing booths, its hands bound to the strap around its waist.

"What?" the other said without looking up, and continued entering parameters from the next run sheet.

The first nudged him, "Look!"

"What?" the second said again, agitated, and looked up. His eyes went wide, ears and whiskers perking, "Wow, look at those!" he exclaimed, trying to keep his voice down.

"Have you ever seen eyes quite like that?" the first asked, hurrying to load the human's file between glances.

"I've seen blue, but those are really something," his partner replied, staring openly as the human walked past their station. The man was well built, as they tended to be, and good looking for a human, with his head fur worn long past the shoulder, as was also the norm. "I bet he'll go quick," he added in a whisper.

"I'd like to find out, but we've got too much to do. Won't have time for snooping," the first said with a sigh, "shame I can't afford something like that. I hate housework."

The other fox chuckled and gave him a poke, "Yeah, like you'd know what to do with a slave!"

Josh stood in the center of the booth, trying not to look bored as the camera circled him. The day had been good so far. It was always fun to hang out with other slaves and trade stories, but now that his turn on the block had come there was nothing to do but stand and look worthwhile. After a pass around him, the camera stopped directly in front and he tried to ignore it; then a voice came through the speaker and told him to look into it. He did as he was told and then it moved on, continually circling him and pausing each time to focus on his face.

He knew why; he had huge, expressive blue eyes, the color of tropical waters and almost as liquid, something foxes always bid high to get their paws on. That and the possibility of a good record probably meant the bidding would take a while.

It did, and a monumental effort was needed to keep from yawning. Finally, a pair of minders stepped up and opened the booth, gesturing for him to come out.

"Congratulations," one of them began, taking hold of an arm, "you've been bought first day."

They led him past the barracks, which surprised him, and he sneaked a curious look over his shoulder as they led him past.

"You're leaving right away, slave. The broker is waiting now."

They took him to the check-out station and handed over some forms which were scanned and verified by the man behind the counter; who turned and unlocked a chain link door, disappeared inside for a moment, then returned with Josh's bag.

He opened it and produced another form, which he checked off as the minders watched. "Standard pre-sale items — pants, two. Long pants, one. Shirts, two. Heavy shirt, one. Socks, two pair. One brush, one comb, toothbrush, one travel size toothpaste, one travel size shampoo, one travel size human soap, one washcloth, one towel, one pair sandals. Personal effects — sculpting tools."

He paused and looked at the minders, "Federal law requires me to inform you that personal effects included with this slave contain items that may be used as a weapon. Sign here."

The minder on his right grunted, signed the form and grabbed his bag. He held it down at his waist so Josh could grab it, gave the clerk a wave and started down the adjacent hallway. They ended up in a plain, undecorated room where a larger-than-average red fox waited, sitting at the table and sipping coffee, his winter coat mostly silver. "Darwin?" one of the minders asked.

"That's me," the fox answered, offering his credentials and looking at Josh. The minder checked it against his form while Darwin circled the human, moving his arms to check under them, peering into his ears and eyes. "Open," he said, smiling, with a glance at Josh's lips. He did so and the fox checked around, satisfied that his teeth were healthy, then sniffed him over thoroughly.

"You did get his medical history?" one of the minders asked, handing him back his ID card and permit.

"Yes, that's why I'm looking," the fox answered, putting Josh's bag on the floor while he checked his fingernails, "I'm a little weary of perfect health records."

"Guess I can't blame you, but I assure you we do not practice fraud here."

"Oh, I'm not suspicious, just anal." the fox said, flashing a grin. He seemed satisfied and handed Josh the bag. "Everything set?"

"Just sign here to take possession, and read this paragraph."

"Weapon?" he asked after reading it.

"Tools for, what was it, slave?"

"Sculpting tools, sir." Josh answered, eyes down.

"Ah," Darwin said, signing the form. "Thank you gentlemen, have a nice day."

"You too sir and please, come again."

"I will."

With that he took Josh's arm and led him into the parking garage, toward a nondescript van parked nearby. After opening the side door, he grabbed Josh's bag and tossed it onto the back bench, then gestured for him to step in. He did, sitting on a thick cushion in the van's center, where the broker fastened bindings to his wrists and ankles. The straps were no longer necessary and he unclipped them, throwing them back with Josh's bag.

"Comfortable?" he asked, looking at him.

"Yes sir, thank you," Josh replied, rubbing where the strap had chaffed his waist.

"Good, we've got a long drive," the broker said, slamming the door and climbing into the driver's seat.

Josh wondered where they were going as the broker left the parking garage and started threading through the city traffic. The van was as cold as ice and he started shivering, pulling up his knees to keep warm. The broker glanced back, then down at the gauges.

"It'll be warmed up in a minute and I'll give you some heat back there."

"Thank you, sir."

There were no side windows, but Josh could tell from the fox's driving that traffic was thinning. He assumed they must be heading out of town, which seemed to be born out when large signs passed above the windshield and they accelerated to highway speed. Daruin turned a knob and vents along the driver's side started blowing warm air at him. He kept his mouth shut but gave the rear view mirror a grateful glance, earning a nod from the fox. The sun's position told him they were heading west. He hoped that bearing soon included south. His masters never kept the house warm enough in the winter and he could use a few years living in a warmer climate.

The broker listened to the radio for a couple of hours and, thankfully, his tastes were varied but safely within Josh's tolerance. He simply couldn't stand country music, and the fox skipped right over those stations. Through the windshield Josh could see that they were exiting the highway, then the broker turned onto a rural route heading north. A little later he turned off the radio, sighing. "We've got a long drive. This may sound unusual, but you can talk. I'm not really in the mood for the radio any more, but not really in the mood for silence, either."

Josh sat up from where he had reclined, used to keeping owners occupied when they were bored. "What would you like to talk about, sir?"

"First, you can stop calling me sir," the fox began, flicking his ears, "my name is Daruin."

Josh raised his eyebrows, not prepared for such a show of generosity. Citizens gave slaves their name when they felt it necessary, not casually. "OK."

"Tell me more about yourself. What do you like to eat, for instance?"

The human slumped, then quickly scratched at an ankle to cover his actions. About ninety percent of the time he had to cook something nice for his master's dinner, then make his own from what was in the slave closet. It wasn't awful by any means, a happy slave is a productive slave and all that, but it wasn't what he had to fuss over, smell, and serve for citizens. Once in a while, if they were feeling generous, they would have him make an extra portion for himself or let him have anything left over. Most of the time, though, it was food meant for slaves.

"I don't get much beyond slave food, sir," he answered, trying not to sound annoyed.

"Stop calling me sir," Daruin said, checking the side view mirror as a sports car flew past, "Hm, sorry. Let's change

the subject. When you have free time, how do you like to spend it?"

Josh almost snorted at the question. For a slave broker he didn't seem to know much of slave life, or maybe his had been busier than most. He stretched out and tried to think of a good answer. Well, what precious little time he did get he spent sculpting. Creating was his only taste of freedom. Unfortunately, though, when his masters find out they have him sculpt for them; but he still enjoyed doing it. "I sculpt, si...sorry."

Darwin noted a touch of sarcasm, though the human did a good job of hiding it. He forgot that the average slave didn't get much free time. "Oh yeah, the tools. Fine, and I apologize if I don't ask very intelligent questions. I'm a broker, not an owner. I've never owned a slave in my life, and I never will. I'm in this business because there's money in it and I need to survive. I honestly don't even really believe in slavery."

That gave Josh a start, and his eyebrows went up. "Really, sir?" He thought that over for a second. He had been a slave all his life. He didn't know of anything else. Sure, the concept of someone disapproving of slavery was nothing new, or even rare, but to hear someone say so directly to a slave was surprising. "No one's ever said that to me before."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Honestly, I'd much rather get into computers. But the money is better here, and I haven't really had the training for computers. I try to only take contracts from the cleanest people I can find. And right now, I'm one of the best at that level. But I don't believe in it. Every sentient should be free to go his or her own way. The humans who made those mistakes are long dead. Your race should not have to continue paying for them." The fox gave a shrug, waving his ears a bit, before continuing, "But I don't really see an end in sight, so I just try and make sure all those I arrange sale for go to good owners."

Josh grinned, "Well, sir, that's good to know." He shook his head at himself for using that word again. He wasn't used to names. "May I ask where we're going?"

"Seattle. So it is quite a long drive, as I said."

The slave tried not to roll his eyes and was luckily successful. Oh great, he thought to himself, nothing but cold and rain for who knows how long. "If it's that far, why aren't we flying, sir?" he asked with a sigh. Until now he had stayed in the mid-west all his life and wanted badly to fly. "And do you know if this master keeps his slaves for long? Oh, and what is he? Fox? Wolf? Buck?"

"You are just full of questions, aren't you? We're driving because I like to and have the time since you're my last buy for this tax cycle. If my survey and interview were correct you'll be his for about five years, and he's a ram."

The van began rolling through a snow storm and Darwin frowned. "Damn, they said this front wasn't supposed to produce." His frown deepened when the snow intensified, and he checked the map to plot a detour that would skirt the worst of it.

Josh looked out through the windshield at the falling snow and sighed. Yup, this was starting out to be a real treat. Who knows how long stuck in Seattle and he's not even there yet and getting snowed on. He eyed his bag and looked back toward Darwin. "Sir, if it's going to be like this, can I maybe put on warmer clothes? I'm still dressed for sale," he asked, gesturing to his loincloth.

Already starting to run late due to the almost instant blanket of snow, Darwin turned onto a side road that seemed to move away from the front's course, but within moments it was upon them anyway. "If this gets any worse then damn, there goes my bonus. Your new owner didn't allow time for this. Here, go ahead," he added, hitting a button on the dash.

Josh shrugged out of the bindings as they snapped open and thanked Darwin before opening his bag and rooting around for warmer clothes. He took a long look at the sharp sculpting tools, trying not to be obvious about it, but the

thought of slashing someone didn't sit well with him. Maybe, given some time, he could pick the binding locks. He found what he wanted — long cotton pants, socks and a thick pullover — and set them out, along with a slim sculpting tool. He had no idea why he did it, but he hid it under the cushion just the same. He gave Daruin, who was concentrating on crawling through the blinding snowstorm, a quick glance and started changing.

Daruin's tail was flicking anxiously, his silver winter coat puffed out slightly, and the fuzzy ears had folded back. "Now, if I could only find somewhere to stop...."

Josh finished dressing and looked outside. "Good grief, sir. Are we going kind of fast?"

The fox snorted and glanced his way, "Back in the bindings."

The human sighed and put his wrists and ankles back into the hoops, which Daruin watched him clamp shut. "Thanks, sir, that will be a big help when we get out in that mess."

Daruin was concentrating intently on driving now that Josh was secured and gave a dismissive snort, "That's what I'm *trying* to avoid."

"I meant when we arrive at wherever we'll be stay..."

A loud bang interrupted his words and a shadowy shape began descending on the van from the side of the road. Realizing what it was, Daruin stomped on the gas, racing out of the falling tree's path, totally losing control of the van in the process. Josh's stomach lurched hard as the vehicle plowed over the side of the road, narrowly missing trees right and left as they careened into the forest, the fox trying to regain control.

He banged around as much as the short cables on the cuffs would allow, saw shapes flashing by and the scattered images of the fox flailing at the wheel, the world shaking, and finally felt one last, brutal jolt as the van slammed into a tree. He was thrown forward and the cables drew taught, yanking his wrists and ankles hard enough to bring a cry of pain before his face slammed onto the floor.

He lay still for a few moments, everything eerily silent. At least it seemed that way until he noticed the ringing in his ears. His face stung and ached — there would surely be a bruise. He'd never been hit that hard in his life. His wrists and ankles felt like they were on fire and he gingerly started to move back and give the cables some slack. With a soft *kerchank* the computer disabled the locks and the bindings fell away from his wrists and ankles. In the front seat the fox wasn't stirring, a deflated airbag against him as he sat slumped over the steering wheel.

For a few moments, the only real sound was the almost inaudible patter of fat snowflakes falling onto the van roof. Adrenaline then kicked in and Josh sat stunned, vaguely aware that his nose was stuffed, possibly with blood that hadn't run enough to reach his lip. He panted through his mouth momentarily, his heart suddenly racing.

He could go. There was a larger bag of something in the back, probably the broker's travel supplies. It was frigid and snowing, but he could read that the pack contained a small tent. If he could get far enough away, they wouldn't find him.

He looked toward the cockpit, the fox's form framed with smoke rising from the engine compartment, and rubbed his bruised extremities. Amazingly, nothing felt broken. This was his chance. He eyed the sliding door handle, reached for it, then stopped. Eyeing the fox again, he spoke. "Sir? Are you OK, sir?"

Daruin didn't respond but the human could see the back rise and fall a little. He was breathing. Alive, but apparently unconscious. Outside the blizzard swirled, and it seemed as if the van was already starting to become covered with a blanket of snow. Josh thought for a moment, wondering what would happen if Daruin didn't wake up. If he was in some kind of shock, he may not — and freeze to death. The idea appalled him. Even though he had never experienced it, he wanted freedom more than anything; but not enough to lose his soul, let alone feed his conscience.

He sighed and worked his way up to take a closer look.

The fox was definitely alive and didn't appear to be hurt much. It was hard to tell with all that fur, though. One of his eyes was swollen shut and there was a pretty bad abrasion on the end of his snout but no obvious bleeding. The cockpit was still swathed in a slight haze of airbag dust, and he coughed slightly before gently easing Darwin back into the seat. He checked him over more thoroughly. There would obviously be bruises, some of them bad, and one of his forearms felt fractured. Otherwise he seemed reasonably OK, but there had to be something wrong or he wouldn't be unconscious. Closer inspection revealed a sizable bump on the top left side of his head.

Josh shivered suddenly. The windshield had shattered and freezing air and smoke were blowing in, along with a strong gasoline odor. Sudden worry gripped him and he lay a hand gently on Darwin's shoulder. "Sir, are you all right?" he asked, shaking softly. There was no response, so he shook a little harder. "Sir, we've crashed and gas is leaking. Sir, we've got to get out. Any spark will fry us in here. Sir!"

Darwin stirred slightly and groaned, looking up at Josh a bit uncomprehendingly.

"Sir, we have to go! Gas is leaking!" he repeated, shaking him again.

The fox's eyes seemed to come into focus and he moaned again, then nodded. "Oh...OK, grab...grab the backpack and the box...in the back. If you would..."

Josh moved back and wrenched the sliding door open, yelping when his wrist protested, and stumbled out into the snow. Immediately the frigid wind whipped him in the face and he cursed his situation. He worked his way along the van, his ankles stinging sharply with each step. Friggin' Seattle, he grumbled as he reached the back door, and I'm not even friggin' there yet!

He opened the back doors, being more careful with his wrists this time. The smell of gas was getting worse, noticeable even in the wind outside, and he figured it would be a good idea to get away from the van as soon as possible. His wrists erupted in pain when he grabbed the backpack, so he moved it up to the crook of his elbow and grabbed the box. It was marked with little outdoor activity pictographs, and included shoulder straps. He forced himself to ignore the soreness in his joints for the time being and headed back around to the driver's door. Darwin had shouldered it open and was teetering woozily beside it.

"Sir," he began from a couple steps away, yelling to be heard over the wind, "the gas is getting really bad. I don't know if the wind will disperse it enough. We need to go. Now."

Darwin nodded, still looking dazed, and they began to run, Josh being slowed by the weight he was carrying. After a few seconds they heard a horrific blast from behind and a large, hot hand picked them up and pushed them along. They both tumbled to the ground, fortunately not getting shredded by shrapnel, kicking up a cloud of snow as the blast sent them reeling. Josh landed face down with the box under him and it knocked the wind from his chest. Before he knew it, the world stopped tumbling and he ended up on his back, snow blowing around him and sticking to his face.

Darwin grimaced and glanced behind, barely able to see the fire through blinding snow. He took a few moments to collect his wits before checking on Josh. "Are you all right?"

The slave was gasping now that his diaphragm had decided to obey him, but nodded that he was. A dim orange glow was all he could see of the burning van. "Sir, what are we going to do way out here in this storm?"

Darwin sat up slowly and looked the human over. "Survive, I hope. Dying isn't high on my agenda. There's supposed to be a town a couple dozen miles down this road. Maybe, after the storm clears, we can make it there." He paused to fluff out his fur at the cold. "But first things first; we need to get in out of this weather."

"My hands are freezing," Josh added, rubbing them together briskly. He arose carefully, making sure he hadn't

sustained any other injuries, and retrieved the box and pack from where they had landed a few paces away.

"Try to keep them in your pockets," Daruin advised, nodding, "frostbite is not fun." With that, he slung the backpack over his arms, wincing at his forearm and looking around. "There's an emergency tent in this pack. We need to find somewhere to set it up."

"Oh no! My bag!" Josh exclaimed, looking back in the direction of the burning van. His heart sank like a stone. "That was all I had."

Daruin moved close and put his good paw on the slave's shoulder, knowing how important the few possessions a slave had were to them. "I'm sorry, Josh, I really am. I'll make sure your new owner knows what you had. But right now you need to come on so we can find a place to set up this tent. You're shaking like a leaf."

They walked on a bit, Josh sulking. Daruin's orange-red fur, mostly silver for the winter, was the only real thing visible in the sea of white that surrounded them. After what seemed like an eternity in the freezing cold, Daruin finally stopped between a promising copse of trees.

"This will have to do. You're going to freeze. The tent is tiny, designed for about one and one half people and rather cramped for two, but it does keep out the wind."

"Anything to get me out of this wind would be fine, sir. My face feels like ice." Josh said, trying to sound as ingratiating as possible. If it came down to it, there was no question of who would be allowed to survive, who's life meant the most.

They set it up and Daruin let the shaking human scoot inside first, following and zipping up the flap behind him. He shook some snow out of his fur, puffing it out and shaking his tail, before sighing and putting a paw to his head. "Oh man, what a day."

He moved the paw to the slave's quivering shoulder, "OK, anything discolored, blue or what not?"

Josh sat Indian-style for a few moments, rubbing his face with his hands. "Hope not, though I wouldn't feel it right now if I did, sir."

The fox completed his visual inspection and nodded, relaxing back against one mylar/nylon wall. "By the way, thanks for getting me out of that van. I wouldn't have made it out alone before it exploded."

Josh blushed as much as his cold face would allow, not used to being thanked. "Well sir, I couldn't just leave you. Your arm felt broken, how is it?"

Glancing at the offending limb, Daruin suppressed a groan of pain. "Definitely fractured. It's gonna take at least two or three days before it's usable. As for the rest of me, I'm fine. A scratch on the nose and a swollen eye are nothing. At least I don't think I have a concussion."

Josh blessed the tent for being small, as the two of them were warming it up enough to be bearable. Outside the wind howled and he could hear snow blasting the walls like sand. His face felt better and he started rubbing his sore joints. But he was cold, and sat shivering. "I hope this new master doesn't mind a few bruises."

Daruin used his good paw to rummage through the backpack, pulling out a blanket that looked like green wool on one side and aluminum foil on the other. Shivering a little himself, he looked at the blanket, then at Josh; then handed it to the human without a word, pulling out a small chemical heating unit and setting it between them. He broke the inner seal and warmth began to radiate around them.

"It's going to get very cold tonight. The last forecast I heard estimated thirty to thirty-five below. And right now I'm

not worried about your buyer, or anything really, beyond you and I surviving the next few days."

Josh smiled his thanks and started wrapping the blanket around him, folding it over to double its thickness. He stopped and held it open with one hand. "You want to share this, sir, or is the heater enough for you?"

Darwin shook his head, still shivering a little, "Stop calling me sir. I-I'll b-be fine. You just make sure you stay warm. Y-you don't have a fur c-coat. I'll be fine in a few minutes."

The human shrugged and knocked the snow from his shoes before tucking them in and wrapping the blanket around himself tightly. He listened to the snow lashing the tent walls and wondered how long it would take for their shelter to become buried. "What if the snow covers us? Won't the air get stale?"

"Yup, that's what this is for," the fox answered, tapping a zippered vent hole in the roof, "This was designed for this sort of thing. Emergency shelter. I have a pipe I can push up through that hole and the snow above if necessary. But I'm hoping it doesn't come to that."

Josh nodded and fell silent. He really had no idea what to do in this sort of situation. Life as a slave may often be hard, uncomfortable even, sometimes embarrassing, but for the most part pretty safe. The thought of freezing to death, frankly, scared him. "Uh, sir?"

"What is it? We aren't getting buried already, are we?"

Josh poked the tent wall beside him, "It looks like it's piled up about a third of the way. Maybe it will slow down?"

"I hope it will. I don't feel like digging our way out."

Josh's eyes went a little wide at the thought, a sight that charmed the fox a little. He was only wearing relatively light clothing, soft shoes, and had nothing more than a single blanket and no gloves. "I don't even want to think about that."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't ask much of you. You aren't equipped for it." Turning a bit, Darwin stretched out as much as he could, groaning a bit and cradling his fractured arm while trying to relax; then scooted some so Josh had more room. "Right now I just need to rest. My head is pounding. If you stay awake, let me know if something really bad happens."

Josh nodded and looked closely at the fox. He always felt foxes were very cute and Darwin almost looked pitiful sitting there like that. Darwin looked up and he quickly averted his gaze.

"If you want to say something, do so." the fox said, wincing as he adjusted to protect his arm.

Josh shook his head and tried to find a more comfortable position where he could keep his feet under him. "Nothing, sir, I'm just a little, well, I'm just not used to this sort of thing. I'll be sure to let you know if anything happens."

Darwin nodded slightly and was asleep in a few moments. "Thanks."

* * * * *

Josh sat for a while, listening to the wind howl and the snow blast against the tent. For a front that wasn't supposed to produce, it was producing in spades. He was supposed to be warm and safe in his new master's house in a few days, but instead was stuck in this tent with a buyer wondering if he'll have to dig his way out in the morning.

The generator was helping a great deal and soon he stopped shivering and looked at the sleeping fox some more. Darwin's swollen eye didn't make him any less cute. For a fox Darwin seemed a little on the big side, but otherwise

typical. There were traces of red fur here and there but mostly he was securely within a silver winter coat.

He tried to lay down alongside without bumping the fox's injured arm to get some sleep himself. If they didn't asphyxiate in their sleep first.

They didn't suffocate and Josh actually woke up first. During the night the heater had run out of fuel but the cold was kept at bay by the layers of mylar, nylon, wool; and the fact that when he awakened, the two of them were cuddled close together, having apparently come to that state at some point during the night. Josh's first thought at feeling the fox at his back was that he may be hurting the fox's arm, if he hadn't already. He could feel the warm muzzle resting against the nape of his neck and didn't know if he should move and wake the fox up or just wait for him.

The breath blowing across his cheek was even and strong, so he decided to play it safe and stay put. If he was squashing Daruin's arm the fox would have awakened and he had no idea what kind of mood Daruin normally woke up in, let alone what mood he would be in given a situation like this. Josh knew from practical experience not to bother a sleeping fox unless absolutely necessary.

After a few more minutes Daruin made the point moot by groaning quietly and blinking his good eye open, then noticing where he was and coming to full wakefulness. "Oh, sorry," he began. Fortunately his injured arm ended up being the one resting on Josh's side, and it vacated that position as Daruin backed up a little. "Musta got pretty cold last night."

Josh blinked and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, not sure how to respond. He just was not used to furs apologizing to him. "That's OK, sir. I guess it did."

Daruin fluffed out his fur, looking up and perking an ear to the ceiling. "Sounds like the blizzard stopped. Let me see how much digging we have to do." Zipping down the flap of the tent, Daruin revealed a solid wall of icy snow. "Oh damn."

"I hope it has," Josh added, ruffling his own head fur which, as usual, was a little oily first thing in the morning, "Sir? Where are we going to go?"

"Well, nowhere at the moment," Daruin answered with a sigh as he gestured at the snow, "but we have to make it to that town. We don't have enough supplies to last until Spring. Not even with one of us not eating or anything."

Josh went silent and looked down, hands fidgeting in his lap. Daruin noticed and quickly added, "I didn't mean it like that. Don't worry."

Checking where the light shown through the tent material he judged how much of the tent was covered. "There's about three and a half feet of snow surrounding us, but it shouldn't be that bad once we get out. This thing probably acted like a snow break and a snow bank piled in around us."

Josh sighed, at least a little reassured that Daruin wouldn't leave him to save himself, and started getting the feeling that this could end up being a boring experience.

Grabbing the air pipe, Daruin shoved it through the wall of snow, smiling, "Well, there's some good news!"

"What's that, sir?"

Daruin leaned back as far from the entrance as he could, then, putting his good shoulder toward it, sprang forward. He hit hard and burst through, rolling to sit on his tail outside the tent. "It isn't that thick." he said with a self-satisfied smirk.

Josh looked at his feet and then back outside. His heart slumped in his chest. It was over, he was going to die. There was no way he would make it more than, at most, a couple of miles in the lightweight shoes he wore. He sat silently

for a time while his smile faded.

"It's a start, sir, but I don't think I'll make it very far in these shoes. My feet will freeze in no time without fur. And even if I made it, no one will want a slave with his frostbitten feet amputated. I-I guess..." His voice trailed off and he was unable to look at the fox. He would be nothing but a burden if he followed.

Darwin looked at the pitiful human and frowned, thinking, then grinned suddenly. "You're not going to die today, and certainly not if I can help it." he said. Crawling back inside he began to work, and after a few modifications and a bit of work with a pocket knife, ring saw and a few local branches, a pair of snowshoes were fashioned for Josh. "There, now my feet will be the only cold ones. Better?" he asked with a grin.

Josh took the snowshoes hesitantly, frowning, and again was unsure how to act. "Uh, sir, shouldn't you wear these?"

"Nah, you need them more than I do. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. And stop calling me sir."

"You're very kind." Josh said, looking at him with a mix of reverence and confusion. He bent down to tie them on. They were bulky and hardly pretty, but within moments the strips of blanket built into them had his feet feeling much warmer. As soon as they were secure he wrapped the blanket around himself again, keeping the cut ends up so the lining wouldn't fall out. The wind seemed to have died down, so at least his face wouldn't be lashed with freezing gales, but he still looked through the slit warily. "I hope this is easy going, sir."

"To be honest, I'm not sure just how far it is; but it's either stay here and die for sure or leave and have a shot at surviving. Now that this storm has parked itself here the road will probably be closed for the winter, so no one will be coming for us."

Josh looked at the fox, stunned. This was just getting worse and worse, and afterward all he had to look forward to was cold, wet Seattle. He was already convinced that the first thing he would do when they got there was throw himself at his new master's feet and beg to never, ever have to go out in the snow again.

"What do you want me to do, sir?"

"Just try to stay alive. And quit calling me sir. I don't own you. I never have. I'm a broker, not a damned slave owner, so at ease, mister. I'm going to need your help to get through this; and not just your duty as a fraggin' slave; but as a thinking person."

Josh smiled and blushed a little. No one had ever told him not to refer to them as a slave should. Darwin was turning out to be one unusual citizen. He gazed out the opening again. "I'll try, si...I'll try, but I don't know how much help I can be for this sort of thing. I've always been mostly a domestic slave."

"Well, something's better than nothing. First thing's first, we have to get packed up."

Darwin glanced at the human, reasoning he was slightly stronger than the slave and as so could bear more weight without getting fatigued. He gave him the lighter load to carry, then tent and food, taking the supply pack and putting it on his own shoulders.

Josh slung the pack over his back and readjusted the blanket. It was absolutely frigid, and even with the blanket he felt a little cold. No doubt as time passed he'd feel gradually colder, even if they were walking constantly. He scooped up some snow and put it in his mouth, swallowing as it melted, and drank a few more handfuls. "Which way?"

Darwin checks his compass, then glanced up to guess where the sun was, frowning. "Due west. Let's get this show on the road."

* * * * *

Minutes turned into hours, hours into aeons. The cold kept getting worse as far as Josh was concerned, and then it happened. Daruin was walking a few steps ahead, ears laid back to make sure Josh was following, when he suddenly fell through the snow and into deep water. Yelping and blubbing, he disappeared under the water for a moment, then scrambled back up, absolutely soaked.

"Help!"

"Sir!" Josh yelled, almost leaping after him. Then he thought better of it and quickly bent down and swept snow away with his hands, which quickly went numb with cold. Neither of them had noticed the trees parting, and the small clearing they were now in the middle of was indeed a large pond/small lake. Under the snow Josh found solid ice. "I'll be right there!" he yelled, and quickly tested the ice below him with a few thumps of his fist.

His wrist flashed pain with each blow, but the ice seemed solid enough and he lay on his stomach, spreading his weight out as much as possible. He reached out for the flailing, sputtering fox, who was quickly losing strength in the slushy, freezing water. Josh realized that he might not know how to swim. He caught a wrist and gripped, bringing a loud yelp from Daruin that made him wince — it was the broken one. But he couldn't let go for fear of the fox drowning so he yanked, and in one quick move released the wrist and grabbed the crook of his furry elbow, then yanked again.

Daruin was near panic and wouldn't last long in the icy water so Josh pulled for all he was worth, slipping and sliding on the glassy surface as he tried to pull him out. Daruin gritted his now chattering teeth, bringing his other arm around to grab Josh, helping pull himself out of the slushy water to shiver in the frigid air.

"D-d-damn!"

"We've got to get off this ice. Come on, sir. Sorry!" He helped the fox off the ice and onto solid ground, shrugging off the tent and blanket. "Here, you need this more than I do now," he offered, draping it over the shaking shoulders, "maybe we should put up the tent until you dry."

Daruin was shaking, dropping into shock from the re-fracturing of his setting arm and the extreme cold. He fell unconscious with a soft whimper, trying to fight off hypothermia and slowly failing. Ice was already forming on his fur.

Josh felt him begin to slump and eased him to the ground. "Oh, damn! Damn damn damn!" He grabbed the tent and started unfolding it, shivering in the freezing cold. His hands were quickly becoming useless and his ankles shouted their dislike for all walking they'd done, but he willed himself to keep working. He managed to get it erected after cold fingers dropped the poles a number of times, then got a hold under Daruin's arms and pulled him inside.

The fox's breath was coming in short huffs and he was covered with ice. Thankfully Daruin hadn't lost the supply pack and he yanked it free, taking out the heater. It only took a moment to find a fresh chemical pack and he slapped it clumsily in, broke the seal, and sat it next to Daruin. He pulled off the fox's shirt and wrapped the blanket around him, using it to fluff the fur and soak out some of the water and ice. He had never felt so cold, and his hands were numb, but once the blanket was too saturated to be of any more use he laid it beside the heater and, shivering and cursing to himself, snuggled against the freezing vulpine. He rubbed the matted fur briskly, forcing himself to remain close to the icy pelt.

Daruin eventually stabilized, though he seemed to fall into something of a coma, lying slumped against Josh while his fur slowly dried in the warmth of the heater. Josh was starting to feel worried for him. He tried to wake him but he seemed completely unresponsive, sending a new kind of chill through the human. He seemed to have warmed up enough. Most of his fur was dry now and starting to feel warm.

He grabbed the blanket, which was now also mostly dry, and covered the two of them. Teeth still chattering a bit, he propped Daruin's feet up on the supply pack, hoping more blood flow to Daruin's head would help. Being on the opposite side of him from the heater, he snuggled close under the blanket and kept trying to wake him, slapping lightly at the muzzle and calling out to him.

Daruin rewarded him with a soft moan, then mumbled something strange as his head turned to avoid the slapping. "...two, four, golf, have new position...estimated...sierra, fox-trot, x-ray...niner-niner four..."

"Sir? Sir!" Josh said sharply, glad to see some reaction. He knew the fox had told him his name, but he was so unaccustomed to using it that he forgot. "Sir, are you OK?"

Daruin opened his eyes groggily and looked up at Josh, a little oddly. "Hi..."

Josh shook the furry head a little. The fox didn't seem to be firing on all cylinders. "You've nearly frozen. Let me see your arm," he said, taking the damaged limb gently. He felt around carefully, finding the fracture which fortunately hadn't broken the skin; and seemed to not have ruptured any major vessels. "We need to reset this."

Daruin stared numbly at the arm, then grabbed it with his other paw, pulling and not even wincing at the pain. "It's set."

Josh's blinked and shook his head, "Didn't that hurt?" he asked, pulling the pack out from under his legs.

"Oh no, I'm not ticklish."

"I think you should go back to sleep now. We'll worry about going on in the morning, OK?" he suggested reassuringly, hoping Daruin would take the hint so whoever he was now would go away. He had no idea how to deal with delirium. "Just go back to sleep. Everything's calm, everything's OK." he added, working as much confidence into his voice as he could muster.

"Kay, love ya. G'night."

Daruin's head dropped and he was asleep again in moments. The human's shook again. Now where in the hell did that come from? Well, at least he was back to sleep. Hopefully he would be lucid in the morning. He checked the fox over thoroughly and felt satisfied that he had escaped any frostbite. Shivering slightly, even though the tent was now fairly warm, he pulled the blanket back over them, snuggling tightly.

"You better be yourself tomorrow, sir." he whispered, then fell quickly asleep himself.

The next morning Josh was again up first. Daruin's breathing had evened out and, between the blanket and fox, it was actually quite comfortable at the moment. He lay there enjoying the feeling while the cobwebs of sleep drifted away. He dreaded leaving the warmth of the heater and the fox, but knew Daruin would be up before long and they'd be heading off again. He sighed and snuggled closer. After yesterday, there was no telling how long Daruin would sleep, and he hoped it would be for a long while yet. He was drifting in and out when Daruin finally awoke, blinking, to glance down at Josh.

"W...what happened?"

"Sir?" Josh mumbled, still half asleep, "Oh, sorry. What do you remember?"

"Cold. I was cold. And...it's all blurry. But I know you saved my life again. That's two I owe you."

Josh's color rose and he grinned sheepishly. "We were walking and ended up on a pond without realizing it. You went through the ice, probably because you let me wear the snowshoes instead of yourself." He continued explaining

the rest, until the first time Daruin awoke. "Then, well, it all got a little strange, sir."

"I remember falling in the ice but I don't remember a bit of that. I musta been delirious or something from hypothermia. If you hadn't gotten the shelter up and done all the rest I probably would have died."

"You were saying strange things for a minute. You," he paused a moment, realizing when he looked at Daruin's arm that they were still very closely snuggled, "...set your wrist. I mean, just popped it right back in. I think we aggravated the break when I pulled you out and well, you just popped it right back. Didn't make a peep."

"Probably wasn't aware enough to register the pain. It doesn't even hurt now. If I can keep it immobile for another day or so, it should heal up fine."

Daruin reached out with his good arm and carefully opened the tent zipper a bit, peeking outside, then extricated himself from Josh to go out and relieve himself. He returned and settled down a little painfully. "How are you holding up?"

"Not bad, sir, considering," Josh answered with a slight shrug, "though you have the right idea." He got up and went behind the nearest tree. It was still absolutely frigid outside and he rushed the process as much as he could. He spared a quick glance around the windswept forest before jumping back into the tent. "Whew! It's cold out there."

Daruin gave him a nod and rummaged through the food, thanking himself for packing waterproof food packets. He handed one to Josh along with a pocket knife, "Yes, it is. Here, you should eat something to keep your metabolism up. You don't have fur."

Josh took the pack, cut it and the individual item open, and started eating. Slaves usually didn't eat the classiest of foods but this was easily worse than anything he'd had before. "Thanks, sir," he said around a mouthful of what pretended to be chicken pot pie. The fact that it was cold didn't help much, he was sure. But his stomach was grumbling fiercely and he ate everything inside without even caring.

Daruin chuckled and poked at an omelet, winced and doused it with hot sauce before eating it. "I should have bought a few chemical food heating bags, too. Too bad I didn't foresee this little field trip." He used his fangs to punch open a package of crackers and some cheese spread, eating that while glancing at Josh. He handed the human a chocolate fudge cookie, one of the most prized desserts one can get from an MRE. "Here, to make up for the fact that you didn't get any hot sauce. I could see on your face the extent of your suffering." he finished with a smirk.

"I didn't foresee it either," Josh mumbled, then saw the cookie and brightened, "chocolate?" He took it gladly, forgetting to wonder what he'd done to deserve it. "Thank you, sir! I haven't had chocolate in, well, a couple months!"

Daruin smiled and took a swig from some bottled water, offering some to Josh. He relaxed back, trying to find a comfortable position, and groaned softly as he failed.

Josh finished everything else, rinsed his mouth with a gulp of water, then savored every molecule of the cookie, taking small bites and swirling it around in his mouth before swallowing. "Mm, that is so good!"

The fox forgot his aches for a moment, smiling slightly while Josh ate the cookie, thinking to himself how something so simple could bring such pleasure to someone who wasn't accustomed to it.

Josh finished, licked his fingertips clean, then stretched out as best he could to work some mild cramps from his limbs. His wrists and ankles were showing bruises now. He took another swallow of water and handed it back to Daruin, who shifted again in an attempt to relax a bit before they continued walking.

"Glad you enjoy it," the fox said, closing his eyes and sitting quietly for a while. Eventually he sat up, rousing the

now dozing human. "Time to go, we've gotta try and get a bit further today or we'll never make it to that town."

Josh nodded and cleaned up the wrappers, eyeing the fox, "Are you all right, sir?"

"I'll be fine, but we've gotta get moving."

Josh sighed again at the thought of another long, cold walk and wrapped himself in the blanket. He put the snowshoes back on and helped re-pack their things and fold up the tent. They slung the packs on their backs, both wincing for various reasons. "Which way are we going?"

Daruin squinted at his compass, "West still, toward town. Let's get going."

They walked for a bit, then a howl came out of the distance, making Daruin perk his ears. He frowned and growled softly. "Wolves."

"People or animals?"

"Animals."

Josh looked around furtively, glancing at the fox, "Will they come after us? I've read books on them but," he began, unconsciously quickening his pace. He was tempted to pull the blanket down from around his head to open up his side view. "Do you think they're dangerous?"

"Yes. It's winter and they can probably smell us, judging by the wind and the direction of that howl. They'll be hungry, too, unless they just ate; which I doubt."

"How far away do you think they are?" The makeshift snowshoes helped but plodding through the deep snow was still hard work, especially at the pace they were setting. It would be a very long day of walking, or a very short one if those wolves had their way. "What will we do if they attack?"

"Do you know how to climb a tree?"

Josh smiled a little, remembering how he used to get in trouble for climbing trees. Most canid furs were afraid of heights, and his masters had often yelled at him for it. "I've been known to, sir."

"For the tenth time, Josh, my name is Daruin; and they're about a mile off, closing on us too, I think. We're apparently in their territory, though I didn't smell any markings. They must be getting old through here."

"Sorry si...uh, Daruin." Josh stammered, "It's a hard habit to suspend."

Daruin sniffed loudly as they rushed on, ears facing eagerly forward. "They're closing rather quickly."

Josh started looking around for a promising tree. "Oh man, this is just what we need. What are we going to do? How long will they wait for us to come down, si...shit, sorry."

"Well, they're actually closer, about a half mile off. Keep moving, we'll get as far as we can before we start climbing trees."

Josh pulled the blanket more tightly around him, keeping his hands inside, and matched the fox's pace. The snow was falling steadily, but at least the wind had calmed down to a gentle breeze. It still chilled his cheeks. At times like these he wished he wasn't a slave, wasn't human. Fur did have it's advantages.

Daruin looked at him suddenly, urgency in his voice. "Find a tree now. They're trying to encircle us."

The human's heart jumped and he slowed to look around, spotting a promising tree with plenty of low, sturdy

branches and more along the trunk higher up. It was only about 30 yards away. "Here, si...Daruin, this looks good."

"Well, don't just stand there looking at it!"

He trotted over and looked more closely, "Damn! These branches are all dead and brittle!" He searched more urgently and found another. It would take a good jump to get up but once there they could get a couple dozen feet up safely. "Here, this one!"

They ran to it and Daruin grabbed Josh around the waist with his good arm, hefting him up to the branch and giving him a boost off his shoulders. He could here the first growls of the approaching wolves.

Josh pulled himself up, and using his arms actually felt good. He was always expected to be in good shape and was used to exercise. He scrambled to another branch, braced himself, and leaned down to offer the fox a hand.

Daruin glanced behind him to find a developing circle of wolves, then quickly turned back to Josh and jumped up, catching the human arm with his good paw. Josh was stronger than he looked, and was hauling him up when a terrified expression washed over his face. The fox was dragged back down and disappeared in a swirl of snow as the pack closed on him.

"Daruin!" Josh yelled, almost falling when the weight was suddenly released. He sat in panic for a moment, shocked by the yelps and growls from below. He looked around frantically, not sure what to do, then slung off the backpack and yanked out one of the sturdy poles from the tent. He watched below for a moment, heart racing, waiting for the whirling forms below to separate. His moment came when Daruin managed to pull himself from them long enough for Josh to drop from the tree, letting his pack fall to the side. He swung as he fell, catching one of the wolves off guard and slamming the pole across it's shoulders.

Daruin struggled to his feet, gritting his teeth in pain from several bites, wondering why the wolves had broken off. Then he saw the reason as Josh came out of nowhere, slamming one of the wolves to the ground. Another growl built up in his throat and he leaped back into the fray, sinking his fangs into the back of a wolf's neck and flinging hard, sending the lupine tumbling with a loud yelp. He put himself between the slave and wolves, growling menacingly, daring them to attack again. One of the wolves took a chance at leaping up at Daruin. He proved a bit faster and brought his good arm up, snapping the wolf's mouth shut and sending it tumbling back.

A second bit down on his bad arm and a strangled yelp of pain escaped him as he turned back, brought his arm up, and bit down hard across the wolf's muzzle. He drew blood as the other wolves broke off and started trotting away. Growling almost insanely with rage and pain, Daruin reached with his free paw to grab the remaining wolf by the throat. He lifted the 70 pound animal off of the ground with one arm while crushing the life out of it. The animal thrashed violently, trying to escape Daruin's grip, but the struggles slowly ceased. With an audible pop the vertebrae gave way, it's jaws relaxing to release Daruin's arm.

Josh watched in amazement as Daruin held the struggling wolf and then winced as the neck snapped. He stood silently, quiet descending upon them, while the wolf dropped to the ground. The sound of the fox's heavy breathing came to the fore like a wave and he realized how bloodied he was. "Sir, you're bleeding all over! Let me look at you."

The broker nodded, groaning with pain, and relaxed back as Josh came to check him over. Weakness washed over him, building with renewed shock, "Listen. Josh, if I'm...too bad...just leave me. S-save yourself...if you can." His voiced trailed off and he passed out.

Josh slumped as he eased the fox to the ground. "Not again!" he cried aloud, "Damn it!" Back he went to the supplies, and as he bent to open them he caught sight of a cabin shrouded behind a clump of trees, a brief ray of sunshine illuminating it's small, dark outline. He yelled happily and turned back to the injured fox. There was no way he was going to leave him. Daruin had protected him, something he was sure very few citizens would ever do. He

sighed, again wondering how Daruin could be the way he seemed. "Jeez, I'm getting more exercise lugging this citizen around..."

Wearing the blanket was not going to work, so he packed it into one of the bags, the chill hitting him like a wall. He worked his arms under Daruin and managed to lift him onto his shoulders. He moved off toward the cabin as quickly as he could, feeling blood soaking into his shirt, huffing and stumbling now and then under the fox's weight.

After what seemed like eons of work in the bitter cold, he finally made it to the cabin. The door was locked, but a key in the traditional spot under the doormat allowed him in, and he lugged the injured fox inside. There was a quiet groan of pain and a slight stir from Daruin when Josh pulled the door shut behind them. Josh's eyes brightened when he saw a large bed near a medium-sized fireplace. He eased the stirring fox onto it and then, before they became buried in the snow, ran out to fetch their supplies.

It was the longest run of his life, the icy air biting at him and the fear of returning wolves nagging at his mind. He spared a quick look at the dead wolf and ran back. By the time he returned, completely out of breath and freezing, he knew he had never been so scared in his life. Daruin was once more awake and returning to a bit of natural instinct by softly lapping at the wound on his arm, tail curled around his legs.

"Sir," the slave began, dropping their supplies by the bed and kneeling down, "let me look at, well, everything."

Daruin shivered and glanced at him, looking exhausted, then nodded and relaxed back on the bed so Josh could check him over. Josh got started with the arm, which had been broken again. Further tissue damage was thankfully prevented by the splints that Daruin had put on his arm; the wolf had bitten them more than flesh. He found a large gash on one leg, where a wolf had initially grabbed him, the pants and fur torn. A few more bites on his upper arm and back seemed to round out the damage, the fur clumped and bloody around them.

"Looks like you'll live," Josh said, finishing his examination, "but those are some nasty looking bites." He shivered suddenly and severely, quickly digging out the blanket and wrapping it around him once more. "Do we have anything to bandage them with?"

"Th-there should be some gauze in the medical kit."

Josh nodded and rummaged through the sack, pulling out the kit. He sat beside the fox, who slowly sat up with a wince, and pulled out some gauze and anti-bacterial cream. "First, let me look at your back."

The broker nodded and with Josh's help carefully hauled off his shirt and rolled onto his stomach, revealing the wounds. There was plenty of gauze, so Josh unwrapped a large one for cleaning. He went for the largest blood stain first, carefully pulling the fur back from the wound.

"Well, that explains the blood all over my shirt," he said, whistling, "this is deep and ragged." He squeezed a dollop of salve onto the gauze and, holding the fur away with one hand, carefully wiped at the gash where a wolf's fangs had torn through the skin. His hands were shaking and Daruin jerked a little at first, sucking briefly through his teeth, but relaxed as the salve soothed him and Josh got his hands under control.

"Thanks again, by the way. That's another life I owe you."

Josh shrugged and rooted through the kit, looking for the butterflies. He found some and carefully used a couple to close the worst part of the gash. "There, that one's done. We should probably let that breath a little before putting a bandage on it. No sense shaving off a clump of fur in this cold. Next," he continued, moving toward another wound on his back. Once those were done, he gestured to the fox's mid-thigh.

Exhausted, he nodded and painfully struggled out of the rest of his clothing, giving Josh free access to his wounded leg and whimpering softly as he began to treat it. "That was impressive, the way you fought those wolves," Josh said as he cleaned that one and moved on. Until this point things had been too hectic for him to notice just how soft and

thick Daruin's fur was. The long, billowing tail lay to one side, the end swishing slightly as the fox flinched now and then. He had always been jealous of tails.

Daruin flicked his ears in acknowledgment, letting Josh know he was still conscious as the human continued to dress the cuts gashes. "You were quite brave yourself." he mumbled.

That gave the human pause, but he moved on, not wanting any of Daruin's injuries to worsen, "That's all for back here. I really should look at your arm now, sir."

Josh took the arm gingerly after Daruin had rolled back over, glancing down the length of the furry body. He was quite a specimen, well muscled if just a little soft in the middle. He stopped himself from staring and turned his attention back to the arm, feeling carefully around where the wolf had bitten. This skin was hardly broken, the wolf having apparently bitten down behind the fangs, but it had swollen slightly and Daruin winced and jerked when he squeezed.

"You had to let him bite this arm, didn't you?" he joked, letting his sense of humor get the best of him. It was one of those situations where he wished he could gobble up the words as they came out, and he stole a quick glance at Daruin's face, not sure how this citizen would react to a joke from a slave.

Daruin grimaced slightly and didn't seem to be mad at him, "Kept him from getting to something more vital, like my throat. The splints — ouch! The splints need to be replaced, and the bone reset."

"I'm not sure I know how to do that. I'm not really trained at this sort of thing." He glanced down at the prone, furry body again. "Are you warm enough? I can start a fire. The last master liked fires so I'm pretty good at them."

"The bones are out of alignment and need to be brought back in line so they'll knit normally. Feel with your fingers and push until they're aligned. I promise I won't bite you, and please start a fire. I'm freezing."

Josh felt around where the swelling was concentrated, trying not to hurt the fox too much, until he felt two edges on one of the bones. "There it is. Ready, sir?"

"Yes."

Josh braced himself, took a deep breath, and pushed with a short, sharp jab. He felt the bones move together, the somewhat gory sensation almost making him wretch. Daruin almost screamed as the break reset, his ears laying flat against his head as a soft, agonized yelp of pain escaped him.

"Sorry," Josh said, letting go as Daruin snapped the arm away, "let me see if it's right."

Daruin dropped into a breathless stupor, trying to remember when breathing didn't hurt so much as Josh checked it again. He growled as the human assured himself that it had indeed set.

"Thankfully, that worked the first time." Josh said with a grateful sigh, glad he didn't have to feel bones moving again, "I better get this fire started before we freeze in here."

With that he stepped to the fireplace, which was clean and empty. Stacked beside in on the hearth was a large pile of neatly stacked wood, but no kindling. He furrowed his brow and walked to the window over the sink and counter against the back wall. It revealed the back yard, which thankfully was on the lee side of the storm, and piled against the back wall to his left were a lightly covered pile of kindling and a lot of wood. "There's kindling back here, I'll be back in a minute," he said to the broker, heading for the door.

Daruin was struggling with applying a new splint one-handed and nodded, "OK."

Josh opened the door far enough to stick his head through and looked around. The snow was falling so hard it

seemed almost solid. There was no sign of wolves, though, so he pulled the blanket tightly around him and jogged around back. At least now his ankles were merely sore and not throbbing. His hands were getting clumsy in the cold, and it took a few minutes to gather as much as he could carry, then shuffle back around front. Slipping in the door, it was quickly obvious that Daruin had fallen to sleep, cradling his injured arm to his chest, his fur fluffing out in an effort to keep himself warm, shivering softly with cold and a little delayed shock.

He tried to be quiet and placed the kindling beside the larger wood before stacking some inside the fireplace and opening the flue. Above was a box of long matches and he bent down with it to get the fire started. His hands were shaking so badly from the cold that he broke the first one twice before striking it. He held it under a twig until it caught then lit another match, breaking it also. The twigs caught within a few seconds and were going well enough for him to add a couple logs, which he did as quickly as he could.

"It is going to feel fantastic to actually be warm again," he mumbled to himself. He warmed his hands as the logs caught, and piled more on so that they would burn slow and steady. The warmth was most welcome and quickly spread. The cabin was old and beginning to get a little run-down, but it was small and seemed well insulated. Soon all but a slight coolness in the air had been chased away and even then, close to the fireplace things were genuinely warm. Outside another bout of heavy snowfall whirled. Josh knew that, sophisticated survival gear or not, they might not have survived the night in it.

He sat by the fire, alternately watching it and the sleeping fox. Daruin was definitely an interesting citizen, the most unusual he had ever met. No one had ever treated him like that, protecting him. He had assumed it was just a broker protecting his investment, but now it seemed somehow a little different. No money would actually change hands until he had been delivered and signed for, so it was certainly in Daruin's best interest to keep him alive and well, but the way the fox treated him was not merely business. He shook his head, sure it was just the unusual situation and his imagination.

It was actually now warm enough for him to take off the blanket, and he started draping it over the naked fox, who's chest rose and fell in long, even breaths. That, at least, was promising. He paused to look him over once more. There was no more bleeding from his wounds, and although the bad arm was swollen, it didn't seem any bigger than when he had set it. He gave him another appreciative glance then lay the blanket over him, sitting down along side. The fox unconsciously cuddled the blanket, shifting slightly, and gave a soft, pained whimper at the movement.

Outside the wind howled, whipping itself into another sustained frenzy, making the little cabin creek like an old rocker. A tiny draft of air reminded Josh of how bone-chilling cold it must be outside. Glancing back at the wood stacked next to the fireplace, he thanked whomever was responsible for that piece of good fortune. If he never saw another snowflake again it would be too soon!

He looked back at the fox, mind wandering. He shook his head and stifled a giggle, almost laughing. He was primarily a domestic slave and well used to hard work, but this?

His mind began to race. Here he was, stuck out in the middle of some vast wilderness during the worst snow storm anyone had ever seen with a beat-to-hell slave broker who didn't believe in slavery and he'd almost been killed and eaten by wolves and the only thing between him and death was a frail cabin and a pile of logs and he didn't even know when his new master was expecting them so there was no telling if anyone would come looking any time soon and they probably wouldn't even see the wreckage after all the snow that had fallen and if worse came to worse no citizen would die for a slave.

Soon the giggle became a sob and he sat crying, cradling himself, the constant fear of the last couple of days finally crashing down on him. He tried to be quiet, but couldn't stop and almost got up to move across the room. It had been awhile and the fire started to die down, so he got up, still sobbing, and carefully stacked a few logs inside, placing them as he was taught so they would burn long and even rather than bursting into ash. Daruin was obviously out for the night, and as darkness fell, so did the human onto the bed beside the fox, sniffing and curling up close to him.

More than ever before he needed to feel someone close, and cried himself to sleep.

* * * * *

Daruin awoke slowly, having trouble reconciling all the dull aches that filtered from his head to their respective locations around his body. He sensed he was not alone as his eyes fluttered open, and glanced back over his shoulder to find the human's face there. The big eyes seemed to have been red and puffy, and he could see and smell the tear streaks down the cheeks. Both told him a bit more of what had happened last night. Thinking a bit, and seeing Josh shiver slightly in the cold of morning, he limped out of bed to rekindle the fire, then returned and carefully snuggled back up to Josh, giving him a shoulder to lean on and laying his tail over Josh's side beneath the blanket.

It seemed to chase away the traces of fearful tension from the human face. Sighing quietly, he relaxed and looked at this human he seemed to have gotten mixed up with. He would certainly be worth any price, as far as the broker was concerned, easily twice what was already a high one. He hoped those gorgeous blue eyes would open soon just so he could get another good look at them. He had no idea where this adventure might be going, but he had already made up his mind about one thing; after this was over, he would pay for Josh's emancipation and let him go. It would do significant damage to his cash reserves, but Josh had paid for them twice over now. What this strangely likable slave had done was far more than a slave's duty.

Now that he was more relaxed, Josh slept deeply, almost gravely, for another two hours. It was hard to watch him sleep and not think of those eyes when they were open. Plenty of slaves had blue eyes, but he'd never seen any so big and liquid. No wonder he had fetched such a high price. This one had a nice face, too. His jaw was strong and wide with none of the prickly hairs that usually grew there.

He kept close and tried to come to grips with how this human thought. He would have expected a slave to run when it was a viable option, yet Josh had stayed and saved his life three times in as many days; all so he could be trucked on to his next owner. Why? About then Josh began to stir, mumbled something, and those eyes fluttered open. The fox stilled himself while Josh came around, just watching him as his mind tried to make sense of what was, at best, a series of abnormal decisions on both their parts.

Josh felt himself waking and tried to fight it off. He didn't much want to wake up. Sleep felt so comforting and warm. Then he began to realize why it did. He was cradled against a warm, furry body.

"Good morning," Daruin murmured as he glanced at a window, "if it is morning."

The human sniffed and turned his head slightly to see Daruin looking calmly down at him. The last cobwebs left him as blue eyes focused on gray.

"You have gray eyes." he remarked sleepily, as if seeing them for the first time.

"Always have."

"I guess I didn't notice. How long have you been up?"

"Bout two hours. Did you sleep well?"

Josh didn't move any more than he had to, turning slightly to face the fox more directly. "I had a dream just now. Your van pulled up to the cabin door. A four-legged wolf got out and came in, saying he was my new owner. He handed you some money, you left, and he crawled into bed and curled up with me. Then I woke up."

"What did you think?" Daruin asked, flicking an ear.

"About what?" he asked, brushing a clump of somewhat grungy head fur from his eyes.

"About the dream."

"Probably just my mind trying to rectify elements of the last few days, I guess." Josh answered, yawning.

Daruin smiled. "I have been meaning to ask why you risked your life so many times to save mine when all I was going to do was ship you to your next owner anyway."

Josh blinked slowly, not sure what the real truth was. "I guess I'm just a glutton for punishment." he joked.

The fox gave him a smirk. "I'm a sucker for hard-luck cases too. But something makes me think there's a better answer. Why did you risk your life to save mine when all I am going to do is take you back to a life you hate?"

Josh sighed a little, letting his head rest on Daruin's good paw. Even with the heavy pullover between them it felt good having the fox against him, the tail lying over him like a small blanket. He knew the real answer, of course, but it was something slaves aren't supposed to talk about.

"Well, it is expected," he replied elusively.

That sounded like an evasion, making Daruin frown slightly. "Technically and legally, yes; but most people think a slave won't risk themselves for a citizen if they can get away with it, and proving otherwise is hard to do. I know slaves are thought of as lesser individuals and expected to act accordingly, but I know better. It took courage and a sense of selflessness to jump back down out of that tree to help me fight those wolves. If you're that uncomfortable with answering me, just say so. But I'm just curious. Why am I still alive?"

"I'm really not much unlike other slaves. I couldn't just leave someone to die. And, well," he paused and stroked the fluffy tail, a habit he'd picked up from grooming his owners, making it flick slightly. He didn't want to say too much, but he would probably never see this oddly appealing broker again anyway, and the look of honest interest on Daruin's face helped. "You're the only citizen to ever treat me like a person, even though I'm not very good at acting like one."

Daruin nodded slightly, looked away for a moment, then back at the slave. "I've had misgivings about my profession," he began slowly, "but I never realized how right I was until now. I treat you with respect because you deserve it as a living person and as you yourself. I just can't think of treating you any differently anymore. And now that I've gotten to know you a little, survived hell with you, and owe my life to you, there is no way I can still think of you as a slave."

He looked down intently and his face eased as the big, blue eyes made him smile, "Josh, when we get out of this you aren't going to Seattle. I'm going to pay off your docket and let you go."

Josh's mind froze. The shock of what he had just heard fell on him like an anvil. He lay speechless, frozen, unable to comprehend a concept so sacred to slaves, so unbelievable. Every slave knew it was possible, yet no one had ever heard of it actually happening. It was beyond rare, it was the impossible dream.

"I owe you my life, Josh." Daruin reiterated, smiling softly at the reaction he had caused. "The least I can do is give you back your own."

Josh blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, blinked again. He fought to come to grips with what he'd heard. "But," he stammered, trying to work out a coherent thought, "but I don't know how to be a citizen. What would I do? Where would I go? I mean," He stopped, and before Daruin could reply, threw his arms around the fox and pulled him down into a tight hug, forgetting for a moment that it was inappropriate. He was still a slave. "I don't know how to thank you," he said, voice shaking.

The hug was returned warmly and Daruin chuckled. "Just live. Enjoy life, do what you want, and enjoy doing it. That will be thanks enough. And as for me, I'm getting out of this business and going back to writing books and

programming."

"I could sculpt what I want?" Josh asked, eyes shining hopefully.

"Of course. Live where you can afford to, get a paying job," he paused and chuckled, "and basically do what you want, as much as you want."

Josh brightened even more. Then his nose stung and his eyes watered as a feeling completely unlike anything he had ever felt before overcame him. He had been given gifts before, and been thankful, only later to overhear "a happy slave is an obedient slave" or some such. What this broker was giving him was so much more, the *ultimate*, and for all the *right* reasons. He fell back to the mattress, tears running down his cheeks.

Giving him a gentle pat on the shoulder, Daruin carefully extricated himself from Josh and eased his sore body out of bed. He wasn't used to emotional situations like this and felt a little strange. He checked the fire and thought about getting out something for breakfast.

"You're going to let me go..." Josh mumbled, watching him.

Daruin looked back and nodded. "You're free right now. If you choose, you can leave right now. But it might not work, because if I don't survive long enough to file the papers, you still aren't free to everyone else. But to me, you're not a slave any more. I hope...I hope you're a friend."

So overcome already, it was hard for the human to bear hearing a citizen say such a thing. He watched Daruin moving around with that effortless grace and power foxes had, trying to think of what to say. "Of course. I don't know what to say."

"How about 'thank you?'" the fox suggested with a tired smile. He leaned against a wall, gritting his teeth and grunting as his wounded leg cramped up.

"Thank you," Josh said, wiping his eyes and sniffing, "Thank you more than I can say." He sat up, stretching, and noticed Daruin's discomfort.

"Where is it? And oh, I'd love to be friends."

"J-just my leg. Damn, that's stiff!"

"Come back here, then," Josh began, patting the bed, "and let me look at it. Friend." he finished with a grin.

Limping back to the bed, he managed to smirk around another groan. "Hm, much better. At least you aren't calling me sir any more."

Josh shook his head, still giddy at what had just happened, and motioned for Daruin to lay on his stomach, which he did. He straddled the fox's good leg to get a better position over the other and started carefully prodding around the wound. "Well, it's staying closed, but you're badly bruised. I wouldn't be surprised if you've got a deep bruise in that muscle. The last master's son had a habit of getting himself hurt all the time and I usually ended up tending to him. A good massaging would hurt like hell but would be better in the end." he said, trying not to look at what nestled between the furry thighs beneath him. He didn't get to see citizens naked often. At least, not in broad daylight.

"Massaging gets all the lactic acid out of the muscle, which is what makes it hurt. Go ahead, I'll try not to scream."

Josh pressed his thumbs into the furry thigh and began thoroughly working the muscle, careful not to let his actions pull at the wound itself. Practice had made him fairly good at it, and he stopped wincing at Daruin's whimpers after the first couple. "Acid? In your leg?" he asked.

Daruin focused on the conversation to take his mind off the pain, curling his tail around Josh's waist in a coppery spiral as he twitched under the massage. "It's a weak organic acid, not like something you'd see in a movie that melts things. It's a byproduct of cellular division and anaerobic cellular respiration. Its presence in large quantities causes the nerves in the muscle to tell the brain that something is wrong. The brain interprets that message as pain."

His brow furrowed as the explanation went a little over his head, but he got the general idea. "So why not just take it out?" he asked, working deeper into the leg.

"That's what the *nnngg* message is good for. It works it out of the muscle and into the blood stream where it can be filtered out and excreted. That's why a *grrrrr* massage helps." He paused for a few moments and tried not to move as the human's fingers spread agony through his thigh. "Sorry, I guess I paid too much attention in my biology classes."

"Oh, that's OK," Josh said, kneading along the leg, "they don't teach us much, though I think I said back in the van that the last master had me learn a lot so I, quote, wouldn't be such a bore, unquote."

Daruin chuckled softly and began quietly murring now that the pain was fading. "Well, I don't think you're a bore. And just think, you can go to school now if you like."

Josh sensed and heard that he was relaxing and eased the pressure on his leg. Since he was already at it, he moved over and switched to the other thigh. "I wouldn't know where to start. I'd like to do everything," he added with a chuckle, shaking his head at the enormity of the concept.

The white tip of Daruin's tail began absently tickling under Josh's chin as the rest of it slowly swished back and forth across the human body. "If *mmmm* you want, I can help you. You just have to find a little niche for yourself. Just make sure it's the one you want." Daruin offered.

The tail felt very nice, making Josh grin, and he worked on the opposite leg, feeling it relax under his hands. He moved his way up higher, eventually going over his buttocks to his waist and lower back.

A thick, loud murr filled the air as the fox began to melt, sighing blissfully. "Thank you plenty, Josh. Mm, you're good at that. Lemme guess, you've had plenty of practice."

"Glad you like it," Josh answered, working his hands slowly up and across the furry back. He was careful to avoid the bites, though. "And yeah, I have. Lucky you, eh?"

"Definitely. Oof! Okay, I feel a little better now and you can stop if you like."

By now Josh had reached his shoulder blades and, moving Daruin's tail gently out of the way, straddled his hips for a better reach. He started in on the shoulders and neck. "May as well finish, you could use this. It stimulates blood flow. And, well, I like doing it for you."

That took Daruin slightly by surprise. It seemed that this slave, this ex-slave, was full of them. He'd expect one to say they enjoyed serving, knowing they were just saying what the citizen wanted to hear, but there was a simple, honest sincerity in Josh's tone that was different. He had come to like him more than he was comfortable with.

"That must be a first."

"First what?" Josh asked, moving his massaging down the furry back before working his way up to the shoulders again.

Daruin glanced back over his shoulder, "The first time you did something for a fur because you wanted to, not because you were expected to."

"It is a switch. How do you feel now?"

"Much better. Thank you." he replied, stretching.

The fox's neck and shoulder muscled finally succumbed and Josh swung a leg over to sit beside him. "Why don't you roll over?"

"Do you think the bites on my back can take it?"

He gave them a closer look, moving the fur aside carefully. They seemed to be mending extremely well, surprisingly so considering they were less than a day old. "Well, sir, they don't actually look that bad, amazingly enough. How do they feel?"

"I know they are there, but they don't hurt that much, just feel tight. And stop calling me sir." He rolled over carefully, relaxing back and looking up at the blue eyes. "Whew, it only hurts a little. Thank heavens for small favors."

"There's something else I *want* to do." Josh said, putting a hand on Daruin's belly. The fur was still soft, though getting a little oily from not being washed in days. Daruin blinked, then realized what Josh had in mind and murred as he started a soft, slow belly rub. "I know how you citizens love these."

The bushy tail curled around him and Daruin murred softly, like quite purring.

Josh sighed contentedly. He liked giving belly rubs, and especially liked giving this one. He was careful not to bump the fox's sheath, though he couldn't help the occasional glance that way. His mind wandered, recalling the dream he had just had. He thought he understood it better now. He had never wanted to be owned, but somehow he felt he would like belonging to Daruin. Maybe the wolf wasn't a negative element, as they had been in real life earlier. In the dream it had snuggled up to him, after all.

He suspected it was really Daruin also, not a representation of yet another master. The wolf may have just been a convenient element of reality to use, and it *had* arrived in Daruin's van. Maybe Daruin taking the money and leaving wasn't Daruin abandoning him, but Daruin the broker being replaced with Daruin the owner.

Was that what he wanted? He had never been anything but property, so his mind worked that way. Did he want to belong to Daruin, this odd, brave citizen? He continued softly stroking, feeling the well-muscled physique beneath the fur, and wondered what it was he felt. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

"Come up with a solution, yet?" Daruin asked, making Josh jump, when he noticed the belly rub had slackened

The human blushed brightly but continued, "Not really, to be honest."

"It looked like you were trying to develop the Grand Unification Theory all by yourself," the fox said with a grin, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong," he answered, rubbing a little lower down onto his thighs and up more onto his chest, widening his stroking, "just thinking about that dream. I don't know," His voice trailed off, and he gave the fox another looking over, "Seems like you'll live after all."

"Thanks to you."

That made Josh blush a little again. "You were trying to save me at the time, remember?"

"Okay, but for some reason, I still feel like I'm in your debt."

Josh's sense of humor got the best of him and his eyes lit mischievously. "Well, if you'd stop trying to kill yourself: First, apparently the road isn't good enough for your driving so you decide to go romping off into the forest, then the walk seems to get kinda dull so you decide to go for a swim in a frozen lake. Then you think it would be fun to play with a pack of hungry wolves."

"Point taken." the fox agreed with a chuckle. Then he turned a little more serious. "You're a special person, Josh. Most other slaves wouldn't have done so much to save someone. They would have run and left me to die or fend for myself. Thank you for saving me. Three times."

There was no immediate reply as Josh kept rubbing, a smile on his face, then nodded.

"It's my pleasure."

Darwin relaxed completely under the human's hands, murring softly and letting the stress drain out of him. He had been living on pain, adrenaline and endorphins for a bit too long. A good belly rub was just what he needed.

"Feeling better?" Josh asked him.

"Much. Thanks a million, Josh. Before you're finished I'll end up being *your* slave," he answered with a chuckle. He flicked the tip of his tail against Josh in thanks.

"Darwin," Josh began, then hesitated. He wasn't sure if he should go on, but did, "can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. It's not like we're going anywhere." the fox replied with a smirk.

Feeling relieved, Josh gave him an inquisitive look. "What did you do before you became a slave broker?"

"Well, a lot of things, really; computer programming, marketing, real estate. Heck, I even tried to be a lawyer, but didn't have the money to make it all the way through law school."

"So, you were never in the military?"

Darwin flicked an ear in puzzlement, "Nope. What gave you the impression that I was?"

"When you were delirious, after falling in the lake, you were saying call letters; as if giving coordinates or something."

"Really?"

Josh nodded, continuing the belly rub, and then shrugged.

"No, I've never been in the military. But who knows, it could have been some figment of a DNA imprint left over from the Black Days drifting up momentarily."

"Oh," Josh mumbled, switching sides again to use his fresh arm. He didn't know anything about the Black Days, the time when the human race spiraled and the furry races emerged to take control.

He sat for a few moments, trying to decide if he should ask the next question occurring to him. Darwin wasn't wearing a wrist band denoting that he was mated, but the other delirious comment still gnawed at him a little. He tried to muster up the will to ask while he smoothed down the soft fur. Slaves weren't supposed to pry.

"Can I ask another question?" he queried, a little nervous.

"Sure."

He hesitated again, then almost blurted, "You seem fairly young. Have you ever had a mate?"

Darwin signed, pausing for a moment and eyeing the human. He usually didn't talk much about such things, but for some reason Josh's curiosity seemed harmless and innocent. As a matter of fact, that subtle sense of innocence and vulnerability was one of the things that was making him so weirdly attractive.

"No. I've been too busy, I guess."

"So you've never been in love? With either?"

"I had a few crushes in high school..." He flattened his ears slightly and pinned his whiskers back, tail flicking, in the vulpine equivalent of a blush. "I never really took the idea of a male mate seriously, though. Not that I'm uncomfortable with the thought, it just never really occurred to me. Why? Are you offering?" he joked with a grin.

Josh blushed like never before. He didn't know why Darwin did that to him, but for some reason this particular fox got to him like no other citizen could. "I wouldn't suggest, I mean, I didn't assume, oh, hell!" he stammered, burying his face in his hands to hide a blush that was surely visible miles away.

It was surprising to hear that Darwin had never really had an open interest in males. Most citizens, though monogamous when mated, were happy with either, with no prejudices. It was a rare thing for a fur to be sexually active with only the opposite sex, and matings could go either way.

He tried to get back to his reason for asking the question in the first place. He hadn't been sure himself until Darwin joked about it, but in fact he did want the fox; more than anyone before. He knew the blush had given him away, but Darwin's implication wasn't what he had been getting at.

He wondered briefly if Darwin was serious, wondered if he himself would know how to act with an inexperienced fox, but asked what he had intended. "Well, just before you fell asleep, after you set your arm, you said 'thanks, love,' like you thought I was someone else. I was just wondering if it was someone specific."

The fox blinked, flicking his ears again, "I did? Hm, well I don't remember a thing. So, who knows? A Freudian slip? Either way, I have come to care for you Josh, and what's more, to respect you."

The belly rub finished, Josh bent down to rest his face on his hands, which he propped up on his elbows. "That's very nice to hear, more than you probably know," he said, flicking his gaze over Darwin's body again, "I'm sorry if I'm not very good at taking compliments."

"That's probably because you haven't heard enough of them, something we must remedy, my friend."

Josh smiled and gave the furry stomach a pet. "You're completely unlike any citizen I've ever met."

"Well, yeah, I guess I'm a little different," Darwin agreed with a small frown, "but then again, I always have been."

"How so?"

The fox shrugged slightly. "I never thought like anyone else, and never did what they did just because everyone else was doing it. A rebel without a clue? A true nonconformist? Or just some poor schmuck loser who couldn't ask his best friend to the prom? Heh, yup, I was never like everyone else."

He hesitated and chuckled a little bitterly at the memories, "I find value where no one else does, and see stupidity and waste where everyone else sees efficiency. That's what's different."

"You didn't go to your high school prom? I've always wished I could have. It seems so, well, glamorous." Josh said after taking in what the fox had said. How could anyone pass up a prom? "You certainly don't seem like a loser to

me."

Daruin smiled warmly. "Thanks, and no, I didn't go. Before I could work up the guts to ask my best friend, he decided to go with some vixen. He probably would have said yes, too, if I had shown the nerve to ask." He sighed and shifted a little, ears flicking. "So I just sat at home and watched reruns."

Josh brushed a lock of hair from his eyes and turned wistful. It was hard for him to imagine how anyone who had the chance would let it slip by. The tuxedos, the females in flowing gowns, the dancing — he had dreams about it when he was that age and forced to watch citizens going to school, wishing he was with them.

"I was cleaning the garage, if memory serves."

Daruin frowned. "I'm sorry you missed it. I chose not to go, but you never had the chance. For that, I am sorry."

"Don't be, sir," Josh said with a grin, giving the furry stomach another scratch, "it was that way for us long before you came along."

The fox nodded and relaxed, sighing softly and looking up at this human whom he found so strangely likable. "So, what are you going to do? Where are you going to go? You're free, so what do you want to do first?"

The long head fur swayed as Josh shook his head. He had no idea where to begin. It was hard for a slave to think much beyond the day, and all he wanted to do now was stay with Daruin. He shrugged, blushing a little at the secret thought.

"I honestly wouldn't know where to start."

"Well, you have your entire life to think about it. I'm just glad you'll get the chance," Daruin offered as he glanced toward the fire, "are you getting cold? The fire's getting low."

"I'm glad for the chance, too, and I have you to thank for that," he asserted, pausing as emotion welled up in him again and threatened to wet his eyes, "I can't think of how to ever repay you."

He hadn't noticed the cold, due mainly to being so close to Daruin's warm pelt and having the big tail against him, but now that the broker mentioned it, he did feel a slight chill.

"Yeah, I guess I am a little chilly," answered and started to get up.

Daruin unwrapped his tail and achingly got to his feet, stopping Josh with a paw on his shoulder. "Oof, it's okay. I'll get it. It's about time you got served for a change," he said with a grunt.

Blinking in momentary confusion, Josh watched Daruin grind to his foot paws. Even knowing that Daruin considered him a free man, it still came as a surprise every time the fox did something for him. After a lifetime of serving, being served never ceased to catch him off guard. He watched Daruin, who was stretching and appeared looser now but still moved gingerly, and tried to figure how this all could have happened.

He had never been confronted with so many feelings in so short a time, never met anyone like Daruin, or, at least, not any who would admit it. He smiled as Daruin eased back down with him, and couldn't stop himself from stroking the fur a few times.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Daruin offered, leaning into Josh's hand, and shrugged, "it should warm right back up. I needed to stretch anyway. Keeps me from getting too stiff."

Still sitting Indian-style, looking down at Daruin, Josh asked, "How does it work? How do I get set free? I know I don't belong to the new owner until he actually takes possession, but it had to be his money that bought me at auction."

"No, it was my money. A client gives me his maximum bid and signs a contract to pay up to that amount. I'm not paid until I deliver, then I'm reimbursed plus expenses and my fee."

"So," Josh began thoughtfully, "right now you own me?"

He found himself liking that thought very much, but it did bring another question to mind.

"How do they keep brokers from just keeping us when they buy someone they like themselves?"

The fox shrugged. "They don't. Usually the lure of money keeps us from just keeping our acquisitions and it would be considered bad form. Let's just say my gift of your freedom, er, cost a lot of money."

"There is also a small provision in our license; we're only allowed to own two personal slaves. We have extra rights for another ten, but those are for business uses only, like labor. Penalties are very harsh for not following the rules, which makes sense when you think of what a huge business the slave trade is."

"You bought me with your *own* money?" Josh suddenly exclaimed, his mind catching up with what the fox had said, "but you don't get anything for it if you let me go!"

Daruin took a deep breath. "Fifty thousand dollars. You were quite expensive."

Josh's draw dropped nearly to his lap. "I cost *that*?"

"Someone wanted you rather badly; a tiger, if memory serves. From the look in his eyes he didn't just want you to work, either. Would that have bothered you?" he asked, eyebrows arcing.

Josh paused a moment, surprised at the question. "I'm a slave, I do what the master wants." he offered with a shrug.

"But would you want to?"

"A tiger? Tigers are gorgeous. Do you mean would I if I had a choice?"

Daruin nodded.

"Probably. We don't get to pick and choose much. I've been to slave clubs where we get to do what we want, but I actually prefer citizens to other slaves in that regard." he answered honestly.

"Well, someone of considerable means wanted you, or I should say, wanted someone like you. I thought you would fit the bill rather well so I outbid the tiger."

"Can I ask a, well, uncomfortable question?"

"Uncomfortable? What?"

The slave had never dared ask such a thing before, it simply was not done. He looked intently at the gray eyes, seeing nothing threatening there, and took a short breath.

"Why? What made me cost that much? I know my eyes are popular with foxes, but," he stopped and shook his head, "is there some kind of, I don't know, record?"

"Are you sure you want the answer?"

That gave the human pause and he leaned back on his hands for a moment, wondering what would prompt the question. Daruin didn't seem at all upset at him for asking, so he figured he may as well know the truth. He wanted, needed to know. He assumed he had never really meant anything to anyone on a personal level, and needed something, *anything*, to give himself some kind of self worth. He sat back up, looking at the patiently waiting broker.

"Yes."

Daruin nodded, knowing he was about to break the law, and that Josh might not like what he had to say. Slaves were not permitted knowledge of slave trade information. But he didn't care, not now, because Josh was free as far as he was concerned and deserved to know what his life had been.

"Records are kept. They are very thorough. Owners must periodically fill out a detailed survey and return it to the Trade. It includes everything; your ability to work, your attitude, your performance in every regard."

He paused and gave Josh a sympathetic look, "*Every* regard."

Josh blinked. That meant....

"Yes, that too." Daruin offered, catching the human's reaction.

Josh's mind flashed back. He was fourteen and feeling the throes of puberty. The first soft, downy hairs had begun to appear in the usual places. His master of the time, a fox, had been sniffing him much more than usual for weeks. He had also seemed somehow closer, placing a paw on his shoulder or ruffling his head fur, and Josh had caught him staring on occasion.

One night, just as he began to read a little before going to bed, he had been called to his master's bedroom. He threw on a loincloth and trotted in to find him lying nude on his bed. He patted the mattress beside himself, smiling.

Josh had momentarily froze. Master had a vixen mate, but the use of a slave was not considered adulterous so he had been half expecting this. That fact that it was now about to happen, though, made his stomach flutter.

"Come here," the fox added, his voice soothing, "and join me."

He forced himself to obey, his mouth going dry. Master's eyes swam over his body as he approached. He settled nervously beside the fox, not knowing where to look or what to do.

A paw turned his face to his master's, and he met the yellow eyes apprehensively. The fox smiled, those eyes remaining soft as he stroked his cheek. The touch sent a shiver through him and raised goose bumps all over his body.

"Now is the time for you to learn that there is more to being a slave than work." Master said quietly.

"But Master," he stammered, voice cracking as he whispered, "I don't know what to do."

The paw left his face and claws slid softly down the front of his body, making him gasp. He felt frightened and exhilarated all at once. This was a situation he had imagined, but never experienced. Even with his human nose he caught hints of the fox's arousal, and could see a pearly drop of wetness at the sheath's opening. His breathing quickened and he swallowed a lump in his throat.

He didn't know if he could do this. The fox was a drowning presence; masculine, powerful, handsome, feral, and so confident in demeanor. He had never felt so vulnerable, even when being punished.

The claws reached his loincloth and moved to the side, unclipping the latches. The material was pulled away, exposing him completely. He looked to the side shyly, trying not to notice the fox's nakedness, even though he had fantasized of what he would do. He had no experience; but puberty had certainly brought desire, and talks with older slaves had brought knowledge. He gulped against the lump in his throat again.

"I am going to teach you," Master began, "and you need not be afraid. I promise I will do nothing to hurt you. I will give you pleasure, and you will do the same for me."

He paused and placed his paw gently on the inside of Josh's thigh. His legs twitched at the touch and he gasped again, bringing a smile from the fox.

"See, doesn't that feel good already?"

For the rest of that evening, Master had treated him like never before. He had never been a cruel owner. Demanding, yes, but fair. That night, however, he had been so gentle, so attentive, and so patient, that Josh felt he hardly knew him. There had been moments of fear, of embarrassment, of uncertainty, and of shock, but there were just as many of pleasure, of happy discovery, and of outright ecstasy.

But now, today, he frowned at the memory. To think that such a defining moment in his life, one he considered intensely private and personal, was probably a matter of record made him feel...betrayed.

"Oh." was all he could say.

"Your overall record," Daruin said, stressing the words, "and your eyes are what drove up your price. You've been an excellent slave, very highly recommended by past owners, and you're very good looking. Presto, high price."

"I bid for you," he continued, giving the troubled face a stroke, "because of your record and because I thought you could use a break after your last owner. Badgers are notoriously hard on slaves, and I saw the bruise on your cheek at the preview a couple of days before the sale. I assume there were others before it?"

Josh nodded, thinking of the owner he had left a few days before. "Thanks for the break." he offered sincerely.

Daruin chuckled. "The real break was him having to sell you so soon. Now you have a break for the rest of your life." He yawned and slowly swished his tail up against Josh again, relaxing. "Freedom suits you well. Just remember to keep in touch with me when you're out in the world. I'd like to know what you end up doing with your life. Make sure you don't squander it."

"But you'll lose all that money," Josh said. He stroked the fluffy tail, carefully pulling apart the small knots that had begun to appear and smoothing them down, "why not just keep me?" He had to admit that the idea was appealing.

"Because I owe you my life. I pay my debts. You saved my life, so I will give you back yours." he answered, smiling.

Josh focused on grooming the tail. It was hard to fathom that someone would just give up that kind of money for him. He yawned and gave the fire a glance. It seemed as though it would sustain itself for at least another couple of hours.

"Thank you," he repeated, almost reverently, "of course, I never really had it."

Daruin gave a little shrug. "Technically, you did. Papers for indentured servitude cannot be signed or even created prenatal."

Josh gave the tail a long fluff, sneaking another peek between the furry thighs. "What's the point?"

"I don't remember, frankly, because it's an odd mix. It had something to do with the original documents, when we

furs first took control. But slavery is hereditary, so I don't really see the point either. Just your bad luck, I guess."

"But I was selectively bred," Josh began, "I thought my parents' mating was arranged? I don't really have a family to inherit from."

Looking a little uncomfortable, Daruin shrugged again. "I'm not defending the system; frankly, I think it stinks. But I didn't make the rules."

Josh grinned sheepishly. "Well, I'm not supposed to know this, but Master had the TV on and left once and I saw a show about it. What is now slavery began as a well-intentioned attempt to save my race as it suddenly found itself spiraling toward extinction, a backlash from the genetic experiments that created furs. I guess it was an easy line to cross."

"Sometimes I think it was too easy, Josh."

The human sighed and worked out another knot on the pensive fox's tail.

"I have twin boys somewhere."

Daruin perked an ear and looked at him. Chances were that it was a touchy subject for this particular human. "I'm sorry, I can't track down and free them too." He looked away, his tail flicking restlessly then settling down to let Josh work.

Josh again wished he could gulp the words back down, as he had just broached another taboo subject for slaves, but a note of pride crept into his voice nonetheless.

"The Slave Commission had me mate about a year and a half ago. She was really pretty. I know it's unusual for both parents to not be around for the first few years, but I got sold right after, so..."

"Both have my eyes, I'm told," he said after a pause, "anyway, sorry," he added, catching the tail as it flicked again, "am I babbling?"

Daruin chuckled. "Yes, but I don't mind. I'd go nuts if I didn't have someone to talk to."

"Then tell me more about you," the human suggested with a smile and rested a hand on the furry belly, scratching and stroking idly.

"I don't know if there's really much more to tell. I grew up in Michigan, left when I was twenty and have been traveling ever since. I have an office in Colorado Springs, and a home near there — just because I've always wanted a house by a lake. Sank a lot of money into that place. It's a big house. I'll never be able to fill it, I think."

"Woo, Colorado Springs! I had a slave friend who lived there for years. He said it was beautiful, and Pike's Peak makes a nice little pocket of fair weather right over the city."

"Yeah, it's pretty nice."

"He showed me a lot of pictures and I'd love to live there, even if it does get cold." he said with a grin and a gesture toward the window.

"Hey, get successful and you can get a home there too."

Josh grinned and went quiet, looking down at Daruin's pelt while he stroked him. The fox sighed softly in the silence, closing his eyes and just resting. Josh leaned forward and stretched out beside him, resting his face on one hand, and looked the fox over.

"I'm glad the massage helped. How do you feel?"

"Oh, much better. Just a little tenderized. Or make that a lot tenderized."

"Good," Josh said, then noticed that there was a large kettle sitting next to the sink cupboard. It gave him an idea so he got up and walked to it. There were two sinks, both with stoppers. He put them in and grabbed his blanket, wrapping himself up, and carried the kettle to the front door.

Opening it, he was rudely reminded of just how cold it was outside. He took a couple of steps away from the cabin, looking around for a moment. There was nothing but snow and trees for as far as he could see. He shook his head and quickly packed snow into the kettle, stuffing it well over the top, and went back in. Using the strong metal rack resting beside the fireplace, he put the kettle over the flames.

Daruin had watched him with mild interest and raised his eyebrows. "What's the water for?"

"I'm taking a bath," Josh proclaimed, relaxing back down onto the bed while the snow began to quickly melt over the fire, "with all the hot embers in there it ought to be boiling in no time, then I can fill it again. The sink will hold about two loads a side."

"Yeah, baths become a bit more important when you have as many sweat glands as yourself. Need a hand? Your wrists are still bruised."

"Thanks, but I don't think you should be carrying around that much water. I'll lug it just fine." he answered with a smile.

"Okay."

Soon enough the water was boiling and Josh found a pair of thick mittens in the cupboard to use. The kettle weighed a ton, and sure enough filled one side of the sink over half way. He searched around in their packs while the second load warmed.

"I know I saw shampoo in here somewhere. Ah, there it is."

A sigh escaped him as he went to the sink. "It's going to feel good to be clean."

The water was still too hot, a good thing as it needed to cool slowly while the rest boiled. Daruin stretched out and stared at the ceiling as Josh got the rest of the water ready. He gave the fox a glance and stripped. There were a few cold drafts wafting against him, but they were almost refreshing in the cabin's warmth.

He dipped his head, luxuriating in the feel of hot water, and set about getting himself clean. Daruin looked to him, almost blushing and flattening his ears as he let his eyes explore Josh's naked back. He didn't take his gaze away until the head popped back up from the sink.

It took two loads of shampoo to clean his hair before he grabbed a rag and lathered it up for his torso. It made quite a mess on the floor. Once that was clean, he splashed water on himself to rinse off and leaned on the counter to wash below the waist. He wasn't disappointed, he was feeling better already.

"That mess just seems to be migrating from you to the floor."

Josh looked up from where he was scrubbing and grinned. "Better the floor than my body, don't you agree? I don't think the owner will mind much if he notices it."

He finished his legs and used cupped handfuls of fresh water to rinse. Then he turned back to the sink and tried

cleaning his back.

Daruin frowned. "Need some help?"

"Sure, thanks," Josh said with a glance over his shoulder, pulling a lock of head fur from his eyes, "that would be nice."

Daruin got up and walked over, taking the newly-lathered cloth and scrubbing Josh's back down. Josh moaned nicely while he did it. "We're lucky, I suppose. If we get really desperate we can give ourselves a tongue bath. Tougher for you, though."

"Well, let me know and I'll..."

The human stopped himself, about to joke that he'd gladly help, but wasn't sure how the fox would take it.

"Thanks, that was nice." He rinsed the rag and pulled the plug on the sinks. They drained completely, but it was open for debate as to whether or not the pipes would freeze and burst.

"Sure." Daruin agreed, returning to the bed and grooming himself idly.

Josh rested his hands on the counter and looked out the window for a few moments, enjoying the feeling of being clean and watching the snow fall. Light wisps of cool drafts wafted over him but he ignored them, thinking. His mind was so full of things that he could hardly think at all, and most of those things had to do with the fox behind him.

Enduring another blast of cold air, he partially refilled the kettle and set it by the fire, just to have water handy, and draped the washcloth over the side. He turned and padded back to the bed, wrapping the blanket loosely around him, and started trying to straighten out his tangled hair.

Daruin grabbed him a brush from the nearby pack and offered it, which he took gladly, then sat up at the head of the bed, tucking his knees up under his chin and curling his tail around his feet.

The human tried not to stare while he brushed out his head fur. It dried quickly and was soon flowing over his shoulders as it normally does.

"Ah, that feels great."

Daruin smiled, put the brush away, then rocked back and forth a bit, looking thoughtful.

Josh sighed and reclined near the fox's foot paws, toying at Daruin's toes with a finger. "I've always wished," he began, then paused and changed direction, "you look thoughtful. What was that you mentioned before? The Grand Unification Theory?" he finished with a grin.

"Something to do with relativity and quantum mechanics, it's very complicated. And no, that's not what I was thinking about. Just something much less important. So, what was it? Your wish, that is?"

"Oh, nothing," Josh evaded, smiling bashfully, "just me and my dreams, I guess."

"I've already granted you one dream. Why not another? Go on, tell me." he said, smiling.

Josh raised an eyebrow and gave the furry body another long glance, especially right in front of his face. He blushed, brightly, and replied haltingly.

"Well, I've always, uh, of all the furs, you know, I wanted to be," he stopped, his face becoming even more flushed. He had never admitted this to anyone, let alone a vulpine, "a fox."

"I don't think I can help you there, but I assure you, I am flattered."

Josh remained silent while the blood returned to normal in his face, then shrugged. It was almost impossible to look at him without seeing his nakedness, so he shifted to remove Daruin's genitalia from view before he embarrassed himself.

"You probably have no idea what it's like to see a fox from another point of view."

Daruin looked down at himself. "Well, since I've never been anything else, I suppose I don't. What do you see, Josh?" He raised his eyebrows, not missing the human's change of position. He couldn't stop looking at those gorgeous eyes, so it wasn't hard to notice where they had been falling. Looking him right in those eyes, he leaned forward slightly.

"What are you getting at?"

"Your fur is so thick, soft, and nice to touch. The color is simply beautiful, plus the way the patterns of white and black follow your form. And to have such a gorgeous, billowy tail, what a feeling that must be! There's more I can't describe. It's just something about a fox's features — how they come together — the ears, the eyes, the perfectly formed snout, the whiskers, and," he halted when his eyes flicked lower and looked away, then tried to continue, tried to admit what he felt without actually saying so, "foxes are just, you are just," his voice trailed off and he shook his head, too embarrassed and unsure to continue.

Daruin flattened his ears in a fox's blush, his tail swishing free from his ankles and twitching before he leaned forward and gave Josh a soft lick along the cheek, grinning.

"I didn't know you felt so strongly. I really don't know what to say."

"Neither do I," Josh agreed, trying not to blush again, "we aren't allowed to."

"What, tell us how you feel?"

"When it's certain things."

"You're not a slave anymore, Josh. What are you feeling? I'd like to know, if you want to tell me."

"I don't know how," Josh replied, his mind racing. He wanted to say how he felt, but it wasn't a slave's place to make advances. He had no idea of what to say and was having a hard time looking at Daruin, "I've been attracted to citizens before, different kinds, usually males, sometimes females, but never," he said, hesitating to gather his courage and meet Daruin's gaze, "never like this."

Daruin blinked and nodded slowly. "Josh, I," he stopped to swallow, now nervous himself, "I, well, truth be told, I've grown very fond of you too. I just didn't want to tell you because I was afraid you'd just treat me like another owner. I've been thinking you wouldn't be yourself because you're so used to having things be expected of you. I haven't felt like this in a long time." He turned away, his ears pasted flat against his skull as he stammered out his admission, and looked even more sheepish than Josh.

Josh sat up, surprise chasing away his embarrassment. Daruin's reaction was obvious, but he couldn't help asking. "You mean that?"

The fox risked a glance back at him and nodded. "Yeah, I meant it."

Josh gulped and sat for a moment, not knowing what to do, looking at Daruin and seeing him like he hadn't before. The fox was no longer just a citizen, or a broker, but a man. One with feelings and needs just like his own. And,

strange as it seemed, fears, too.

"I wouldn't think of you as another owner." he said quietly, almost whispering.

"What would you think of me as?" the fox asked, looking back at him.

That caught Josh a little off guard and he didn't know how to answer. He frowned slightly, then smiled. "A friend, at the very least. Someone who makes me feel like no one else ever has. I...I'm not sure how to explain. You've done so much for me, made me feel things I haven't before."

"I can say the same thing," Daruin agreed, flicking his ears slightly and sighing, "you've done a lot for me. And, well, heh, I have been getting rather interested in you. You are a lot like many other slaves I've traded, but at the same time very different. I can't put my claw on it, but somehow you're special. Erf," he sighed while looking away, curling his tail up into his lap, "I never was very good with this personal stuff."

"I guess that makes two of us." Josh agreed, getting nervous. He wondered if he should take the direct approach, or if that would shock the fox.

"At least I know I'm not the only one with that problem, even if we came about them different ways."

"Can I be completely direct?" Josh started to ask, sliding close to sit alongside while his stomach fluttered, "or am I supposed to find a more subtle way to say this?" he finished, blushing a little and giving one of Daruin's ears a scratch.

Daruin had an idea of what Josh was trying so hard to convey, but he didn't want to put words into his mouth. He wanted to hear him say it. More so, he wanted to hear it said. To him. By Josh. He leaned into the scratching a little.

"Please, with directness there is no mistaking the meaning. Besides, knowing me, I'd interpret subtlety as completely the wrong thing." He paused and readied himself, suddenly not sure if he was ready for this, then let his breath out.

"What were you trying to say?"

Josh had no experience with this sort of thing — the main reason why he had asked — and felt more awkward than ever before. He took a deep breath, looking down.

"I think you're the most attractive, interesting person I've ever met."

There, he had said it. He couldn't bring himself to look up at first, then glanced hopefully upward to gauge how the fox would react. He was rewarded with a warm smile.

"Josh, I think the same thing about you, even if nature did cruelly deny you a vulpine birth." he said, finishing with a little joke.

Josh giggled, some of the tension easing with it. "Well, like I said, it would have been nice," He petted down Daruin's head to the nape of his neck, "I've always been so jealous of fur. But you make it all seem okay, Daruin. I don't want to babble again, I just want you to know that I, well, I feel a lot for you I can't explain. And I want you more than I can say. More than just because of lust. It's a desire I've never had before."

Daruin blushed fully, tucking his muzzle down and flattening his ears, but his tail slowly curled around Josh. He had never taken the time to know a slave so well and found himself caring for this one more and more. The long, soft head fur, those wonderful eyes, the work-hardened body, the way he seemed so emotionally innocent despite his physical experience; he realized that those things had been drawing him in all along.

Swallowing almost audibly, he looked back up, wondering how a simple human slave could make him feel like a

bashful little kit. "I would like that. Very much."

Eyes beaming, Josh slowly drew the tail through his hand. "I was hoping you'd say that," he said, sliding that much closer. A lump rose in his throat and a tingle spread over him as he closed the inches between them, heart beginning to race, "you make me feel like no one else." He tilted his head, moving his lips toward Daruin's.

Daruin's mind still reeled a little, but his heart and body knew what he wanted and he moved to close the gap. His arms encircled the human in a tender hug as his muzzle met Josh's mouth with a slow, hesitant kiss. He curled his bushy tail around him and snuggled closer as Josh stroked the back of his head and neck.

They had been physically close almost constantly since the crash, but to be intimately close felt altogether different, and altogether better. Josh's heart literally skipped a beat as he melted into Daruin's arms, and he watched the handsome vulpine face meet his before lazily closing his eyes and losing himself in the feel and taste.

The kiss grew slowly deeper and less hesitant and Daruin began to murr. He scratched slowly down Josh's back, being careful not to claw too hard while his other paw slowly drifted past his cheek and down his chest to teasingly pinch a nipple. Josh moaned and fought the urge to pull too urgently at the long tongue as the kiss deepened. He used his free hand to tug at the blanket, letting it fall away behind him, then stroked along Daruin's chin.

He let his hand slide along the gentle flare of his furry cheek before cupping and gently rubbing an ear. A mixture of contentment and anxiety fizzled through him that was hard to reconcile. But as the strong, furry body pressed lightly against him, all nervousness left, replaced with a kind of serenity. His hand stroked its way down, feeling the muscle beneath the soft fur, until it found the base of his tail.

That brought a soft yip from Daruin as the kiss ended, and his tail flicked slightly. His snout nuzzled under the human chin while his paws slowly explored Josh's body, claws dragging over bare skin. He licked over Josh's face in a very vulpine display of affection, and his soft murring caressed Josh's ears like liquid velvet.

The human blinked lazily, soothed by the licking and soft rumble from Daruin's throat. The feel of those claws across his skin was incredibly erotic and he caught Daruin's tongue in his lips, drawing it into a long kiss more passionate than the first. He massaged the base of his tail with one hand, making the fox growl quietly, then used both to stroke up and down his sides, alternately ruffling and smoothing the fur.

The massaging of his tail sparked a tingling warmth between the fox's legs and an even more profound need to be with him completely. He chuckled softly as his paw found the curly fur between Josh's legs, and he cupped him gently, slowly caressing and stroking while nipping at an ear. Josh gasped softly, spreading his thighs slightly, so he nibbled some more; a warm, carnivorous smile, which seemed much more friendly than dangerous, spreading over his face as he stopped to take in those eyes once more.

"Mm. I want you to remember," he began, becoming a little breathless as Josh's arousal fueled his own, "we are equals. If there is anything you want, just ask and I will accommodate you."

He stopped long enough to lick across the slightly parted lips before continuing. "I want to make sure you enjoy tonight as much as I will."

Josh looked down Daruin's body, taking it all in yet again, until his eyes rested where they had been drifting since Daruin had taken off his clothes. He let his hand fall and lightly ran a finger back and forth along the short, plump sheath, then traced little circles around the opening before moving lower. A little bead of pre-ejaculate appeared, making his mouth water.

"I'm sure I will," he said, brushing his lips against Daruin's as he spoke, "and I am all yours, for all the right reasons."

He nodded and gently laid Josh back onto the mattress, mouths finding each other again. His sheath began to move within Josh's fingers, the warm hardness of his penis slowly, luxuriously sliding into his palm. It made him moan and

shiver slightly as his body began to rub slowly against the human, his tail wagging lazily.

"Thank you," he whispered, his body almost moving with a mind of its own as he rubbed rhythmically against the bare skin beneath him, "because I need you Josh. I need you."

Josh kissed him, moaning loudly as the furry body covered him. He suckled sensuously on the long vulpine tongue, gripping and softly rubbing the shaft in his hand. Releasing it after a few moments, he slid his hands up and around the broad shoulders, mindful of the healing wounds.

The feel of Daruin moving against him so erotically, the warm hardness against his belly, and the way his heart was racing were quickly causing his own need to rise. He could feel the fox becoming more and more intense, hear the rumbling from his chest deepening. He pulled away from the kiss, letting the length of Daruin's tongue slowly slide from his mouth.

"I need you too, Daruin, so much."

Those words, and the way Josh's fingertips were now tracing little circles around his tail base, made the fox growl lustily and he licked at the stubble-covered chin while his hips rubbed a little more quickly against those beneath. Then his tail flicked and his ears flattened a little as he reached a point of indecision. It was almost a struggle to speak around the deep murr that filled his throat.

"This...this is gonna sound stupid, but this is, well, my first time with a male. I...I don't quite know what to do or...I..." he paused and blushed a little, the inside of his ears reddening, "could you help me?"

Josh smiled and nodded, cupping Daruin's ears in his hands and massaging them as he gazed sincerely up into the fox's eyes.

"I feel," he started, unsure of how to phrase what he felt, then decided to let his heart do the talking and to hell with how it might sound, "I'm flattered, and honored, to be the first you chose."

He ran his fingers teasingly down Daruin's spine again, delighted to hear the rumbling murr and see the raised hackles it produced, to again toy with his tail base. Stroking the furry buttocks, slipping a finger down the bare inner cleft, he adjusted himself under the furry weight above, moaning softly at the warm wetness that soaked his belly.

Daruin stiffened and he knew that only one thing would satisfy a fox in such need. As much as he wanted to taste him, he wanted something else even more; and knew it was what the fox needed. He kissed him again, tenderly, licking at the vulpine lips, and nudged first one, then another leg outside Daruin's.

His own need was getting difficult to put off, and as he spread his legs and watched the fox adjust over his hips, the sight of it made his groin buzz. He ran his hands up to Daruin's chest and rubbed at the hardened nipples, enjoying the feel of the maleness moving against his belly.

"First," he began, reaching down along the soft abdomen above, "we need to take advantage of that very pleasant mess your making on my stomach."

He grinned fondly and grasped the vulpine penis, careful not to stroke and earning a little yip from Daruin, then thoroughly coated it in the puddle of slick pre-ejaculate. There was no better lubricant than that naturally produced by an aroused fur.

The fox had puffed out his fur to better enjoy Josh's caresses and he looked down at him with hungry affection, gasping softly when the human took him into his hands.

"I am glad you accept me." he finally answered, nipping him again. He slid a paw up the bare chest as they kissed once more, then back down again, wetting it before the claws dug gently into the sensitive flesh below. His eyes

closed and he leaned his head back slightly, hips moving a little at the combined sensations.

Josh blushed slightly for what seemed like the hundredth time, but it passed quickly as the claws teased at him, making him shiver and squirm. He glanced at the dripping, glistening maleness in his hand and again wanted to feel it against his tongue, but instead nudged the fox back a little, raising and spreading his knees.

"Move it lower, just let it happen," he whispered, voice quivering with the anticipation of having Daruin inside him, "just don't rush in."

Daruin shifted a little at Josh's direction and let out a soft yip of pleasure as he spread his knees wider and felt his hips slip up against Josh's rump. He suddenly found himself pressed firmly against Josh's waiting anus and his paws automatically slipped to the human waist while his tail puffed out and hovered behind him.

Trying to just let it happen, he thrust slowly forward with his hips. There was unexpected resistance and he looked uncertainly at Josh, who only smiled and nudged at his rump with his ankles.

A loud moan from him and a soft hiss from Josh filled the air around them as they slowly pressed together, then Daruin's crotch finally came to rest snugly against his rump.

"Like that? Mm," he groaned, mind all but centered on his tightly encased manhood.

There was a brief burning and he drew a breath through his teeth before adjusting and matching the fox's moan. The sight of Daruin mounting him was overpowering, the feel of him inside a passionate fullness.

"Oh yes, Daruin," he gasped, clutching onto the fox and pulling him close, "make love to me."

He couldn't believe what he had just said, or how much he needed to say it, or how much he meant it. If Daruin made any response, he never heard it. But he did feel it, as the fox began thrusting gently but deeply inside his warm tightness, soft yips and huffs of exertion and pleasure escaping him as he worked himself into a steady, achingly slow rhythm.

Joe reveled in the sensation and the way his thighs and scrotum rubbed and nudged against him. He petted the furry chest and ribs, stretching his neck up to lick and kiss his nipples. Their lovemaking quickly sent growing blooms of warm passion through him, the vulpine maleness filling him and driving his lust from within.

Daruin groaned with lust and his thrusts began to build in speed and power. Josh was tighter than the few females he had been with and the taut grip on his shaft felt incredible. His instincts began to overpower him, a soft growl built in his throat, and his arms worked under Josh to pull him close. As his back curled their bodies pressed together, the warm hardness of Josh's penis pressing against his upper belly.

The growl in Daruin's chest vibrated straight to Josh's core and he was thrilled to feel Daruin's powerful body surging against, and inside, his. He licked at Daruin's lips and wrapped himself around him, his own body coming abruptly alive.

It was what he always wanted; to please a fox who wanted only to share, not take. His mind glazed over with a kind of completeness he had never felt, and he moaned and thrust his hips in time with the fox's, giving himself like he had never before.

Their bodies moved together in a faster, lusty rhythm. Daruin squeezed his eyes shut briefly, but opened them again, wanting to see Josh accept him. He did, his eyes closing only when the fox kissed him passionately before licking and nibbling at his neck.

The thicker bulge of his vulpine knot pressed firmly against Josh with each thrust and he almost trembled with the jolt of pleasure each stroke gave him. Josh panted in time with the manhood inside him, and the way the human body

succumbed to his maleness heightened the mixture of love, instinct, and power he felt.

The claws pressing into his back heightened Josh's lust, and feeling the vulpine knot bump him over and over made his entire being quiver in anticipation. He stroked and gripped the furry back and hoped Daruin would drive on and tie them. He wanted desperately to be locked with him. All thought faded, though, to be replaced with pure sensation as his climax neared. His penis, stroking as it was against the soft fur of Daruin's stomach, strained for release.

The gripping claws and thrusting manhood were maddening as Daruin struggled to fill him with as much burning fox cock as he could, hazing his mind with pleasure and just a little pain — just enough to emphasize the fox's bestial strength and lust. The growl grew louder still and the muzzle lifted his chin to gently grip his tender throat, fangs pressing against his skin. A moment later he cooed loudly as Daruin's knot worked quickly into him, filling him completely, the fox's hips jabbing as much as they now could.

That, and when the fox's jaws closed on his neck, proved too much for his mind and body. Josh wrapped an arm around Daruin's neck, pulling the muzzle even harder to him, and reached between them with the other. Only a precious moment after grasping himself his loins exploded and he felt himself constrict around the flesh that pounded him in rapid, short strokes, climaxing like never before, penis jolting in his hand.

When Josh suddenly clamped around him the fox's eyes snapped open and a nova of ecstasy bloomed from inside the human and surged through his vulpine body. He howled against the throat as every muscle tensed and his knot exploded inside Josh's body, filling him with long jets of seed. Each pulse was squeezed from him by his climaxing lover and he felt every spurt gush through his knot and shaft before racing into Josh.

The pounding intensity of Daruin's orgasm heightened Josh's. His hips bucked and he relished the feeling of Daruin's seed pumping hard and deep into him. It was not the first for him, but the first to mean more than just sex, and for him an experience far beyond the merely physical.

He finished gasping and moaned softly as their pulses gradually faded, the fox's outlasting his own, and hugged him lovingly as the hot, furry body rested onto him.

Daruin relaxed against his lover in a breathless stupor as the final soft spurts and gentle nudges of his hips carried through, enjoying the warm, wet feeling of Josh's cum soaking into his belly fur. He nuzzled him as their panting faded to sighs of contentment, and a soft murr idled from his chest as he lovingly licked over Josh's face.

"Thank you."

Josh hummed and smiled as the fox licked him, enjoying the incredible fullness of Daruin inside, still softly throbbing. He grunted a little as they shifted to a more slightly more relaxed position and simply relished their togetherness for a few moments. Gently rubbing Daruin's ears, he kissed him.

"No, thank you. I've never felt like that before."

"Neither have I," Daruin admitted while almost shivering from the powerful emotions that had gripped him, "nothing even close, not with the few females I've been with."

He ran a claw gently along his cheek and down to his neck, wiping away a bead of blood from where one of his fangs had nicked him. He frowned a little.

"I guess I was a bit rough. Did I hurt you?"

The human shook his head. "Nope, but ask again in the morning." He giggled, running his fingers along Daruin's face. "Seriously, it was wonderful. You were so intense, I...I just can't explain. It was wonderful," he repeated, looking at him sincerely.

Darwin smiled and brushed the pink lips with his own. "Yes, it was wonderful. It will almost be a shame when I let you go," he said, murring.

"Then don't," Josh said matter-of-factly, hugging him close. At this moment he felt a serenity and completeness he couldn't have imagined. He wondered what it was, if it was the word he almost feared using.

Darwin blinked, "What?"

"Then don't let me go."

The fox paused, considering, then his face hardened a little and he shook his head. "No. You have earned your freedom more times than I care to count and you will get it. I would love for you to stay with me — for as long as you want — but it will be by your choice. Because you want to. Not because I am your owner. I don't want to be your master, I..." He fell silent as his train of thought suggested more than he thought he should say. Sighing softly he leaned on his elbows, the tip of his muzzle touching Josh's nose, "I would love to have you stay with me but I would not 'keep' you. I respect you far too much to do that and renege on my word now."

Josh closed his eyes for a moment, trying to comprehend what Darwin was saying, daring to hope that the fox felt something of what he did. "Really?" he asked, opening his eyes and meeting the fox's again, "you want me with you?"

Darwin began licking him again as he realized his knot had softened enough to come out, and regretfully pulled himself free, giving Josh time to regain control and avoid an even bigger mess. Josh sighed that sexy little sigh of his as he did so and kissed him. He excused himself and padded over to the fire, grabbed the kettle, and headed for the sink. He dumped it, refilled it outside, and placed it over the fire again.

"Sorry, but do you know how difficult it would be to get this out of my fur if I let it dry?" he asked, chuckling, then turned more serious, "and yes, I would like you to come stay with me if you would like to. At least for a while..."

Josh watched him walk over and start cleaning, then looked down at himself and laughed. "Jeez, and I just took a bath!"

"Then come over here, silly, and we'll share the next batch of hot water. It's more efficient that way."

Josh got up, satisfied at the ache in his rump, and walked over. He put his arms around Darwin and didn't say anything for a couple of minutes, hugging the fox like he hadn't hugged anyone since being taken away from his parents so long ago, resting his head against the furry chest.

"I'd love to," he finally said, struggling not to cry, "it means so much for you to say that."

The fox smiled and held him, nuzzling along the side of his face. "Well, I'm glad to know that Josh," he began, not sure of how to go on, "it means a lot to me to know that you want to stay with me too."

He let the moment last for a while longer, just holding the confusing, confounding, and oh so alluring human close, then finally letting him go to pour water into the sink. It was only lukewarm, but would do.

"No one's ever just wanted me for me before," Josh said, sniffing, then blushed and chuckled at himself, "and here I go getting all choked up. Sorry, don't mean to put a damper on things."

"You go right ahead, I know this is even stranger for you than it is for me," Darwin remarked, giving him a kiss, then grabbed the washcloth and soaked it, "OK, you first. Now hold still."

He grinned playfully but generally behaved while washing Josh's rump, thighs, and front before giving him a quicker going over everywhere else. Josh did have to endure a few teasing licks and nips of affection, though, before he

rinsed the cloth again and looked down at his own belly.

"This is gonna take some effort."

"Can I help?" Josh asked once he had stopped giggling. Preventing another erection while Daruin washed him down had been quite a challenge. Being bathed by someone else was a new experience in itself, and having Daruin do it like that was highly erotic. "Do you want to suds up or just concentrate on the, uh, worst of it?"

Daruin chuckled. "Whatever you think would be best, hot stuff. I just need to be clean by the time you're done. I didn't say you couldn't be creative in getting there."

Josh blinked at him, smiled, then frowned at the sink. "Hm, never washed a citizen with just this little sink of water before. I guess I *will* have to be creative. Maybe you should climb into it."

"Yeah, right. I don't imagine it'll be easy, but between the two of us we should figure it out. But please hurry, if my stomach dries like this, there will be trouble."

"Trust me, I know," Josh mumbled. He soaked the rag and rung it out, then started working it against Daruin's belly, trying to clean the fur in clumps. He stood close, putting his other arm around the furry shoulders, and gave one of his nipples a nip.

The fox eeped and chuckled, batting Josh's rear with his tail and sighing happily.

After a few cycles of soaking, scrubbing, and rinsing the stomach came clean. He knelt and looked up at him.

"Now, don't be afraid," he said with a mischievous grin, then pressed the cloth to Daruin's scrotum, gently massaging away the fluid that had accumulated there.

Daruin murred, "Afraid of you? And why should I be scared?"

Josh rinsed and nudged his thighs apart, "You furs sure do get messy," he said with a smirk, then answered, "because I'm down here with a hot rag and a silly disposition. It's all your own doing."

"And I'm hungry," he added, then gave the sheath before him a long, hard look and glanced up menacingly, "for something better than an MRE."

The fox blinked and swallowed slowly. "As in what?"

As if you didn't know, Josh thought with a private smile. He finished cleaning his scrotum and inner thighs, rinsing the cloth again. He cupped it over Daruin's sheath, squeezing gently. "Something...filling," he said with a grin, moving the cloth slightly up and down, "something flavorful."

He stood, still holding the rag to him, and bit one of his nipples again. "Yes, very hungry!"

Not really trusting himself to remain standing through what was coming, Daruin grinned and leaned back against the counter. He gazed seductively and ruffled Josh's hair.

"Then help yourself, Josh; although I don't know how much you may get."

Josh stayed partially bent over and set about gnawing playfully at Daruin's nipples, happy to see them quickly harden. He dropped the cloth and replaced it with his hand, hoping the fox wouldn't rush out of his sheath. Butterflies flitted in his stomach at the chance to please the fox again.

"Mm, tasty!" he exclaimed, munching on him some more.

"You're silly." Daruin said with a grin, then gasped as Josh's teeth nipped at him. He rubbed his back softly while leaning back over the counter a bit more for support, tail swishing slowly as he stirred in Josh's hand.

"When I'm allowed to be."

"Oh, I am so glad to know I suit your palate."

He had to pause as he giggled, then kissed the fox quickly and dropped to his knees, eyeing the gorgeous sheath. Then, able to wait no longer, he latched his mouth onto it and ran his tongue around, glad beyond measure to have Daruin's taste in his mouth. Daruin shuddered softly and sighed as he resisted the urge to thrust outward. He paws held the back of his head as, after a few tantalizing moments of having his sheath sucked and licked, he began slowly slipping out.

Josh moaned loudly at the feel of Daruin's warm shaft sliding along his tongue and adjusted his mouth, pushing against the sheath opening as more of the fox's sexy member emerged. He felt wonderful, better than he ever had before. Somehow, it being Daruin made this different. He was giving rather than serving; and he began to give for all he was worth, sucking slowly but strongly in and out, caressing the furry balls with one hand while the other massaged the base of his tail.

His thighs quivered and Daruin yerfed in pleasure as his knees threatened to buckle again. He began thrusting gently against Josh's lips and savored every moment, his tail curling around the human neck to tickle his chin. Soft yips of pleasure filled the room while Daruin wiggled and tried to think of how he would repay Josh for all of this.

Pre-ejaculate began flowing in earnest and Josh moaned again at the taste of it. He pulled out in one slow, hard stroke and then swirled his lips and tongue over the tip of Daruin's vulpine penis, savoring the taste as it squirted pre-cum into his waiting mouth. Then he plunged in to the hilt, his fingers playing over the fox's sensitive areas as his mouth worked him over.

A loud gasp and slight drop at the knees proved that to be an effective technique, so he continued as Daruin shuffled onto the counter, not letting the hot, dripping member escape his mouth.

The fox wrapped his legs loosely over Josh's shoulders and leaned back, fingers of one paw digging into Josh's hair. It wasn't long before he felt another knot growing, and marveled at Josh's talent.

A mild squeeze at the base of the furry ball sack confirmed a growing bulb and he was rewarded with a healthy squirt of pre-cum and said bulb popping free. He looked at it lustily for a moment as he sucked the fox, then watched the belly breath and quickened his pace.

He sucked harder and faster, pausing every few strokes to enjoy swallowing a mouthful of pre-cum, his cheeks brushing the thighs resting on his shoulders. A happy grunt escaped him when he felt Daruin swell and throb. He grabbed the knot gently, squeezing it delicately, and pulled back to hungrily swallow the first few spurts of thick fox cum before again sucking every inch of him. He milked the howling fox for every drop he could get, but most of all, wanted to please him as much as possible.

Daruin felt himself jolt and geyser into Josh's waiting mouth. Josh slowed his stroking, hoping to draw his climax out all he could, and let the seed fill his mouth again and again as he slid the shaft along his tongue. The fox's body arced against Josh as he gave all he had, slumping back in relaxed torpidity and murring warmly. He smiled affectionately at Josh, brushing his chest with his tail, while Josh held him in his mouth for a few minutes.

"Mm, when are you gonna quit pleasing me so I can please you, Josh? Keep this up and it'll end up with me being *your* slave."

Josh smiled up at him and gave the retreating penis a soft kiss, then did the same to his belly, then the middle of his

chest.

"I'm OK, you've done more than enough for me today. Stop feeling selfish because, believe me, you've given as much, if not more, than you've taken. I guess that's called 'sharing,'" he countered with a smile, "because pleasing you is pleasing me too."

Daruin chuckled, "Well, it has been wonderful. Wow, you light me up! But I think we've had enough for today. You've tuckered this poor fox out," he said while slowly slipping to his feet and leaning on Josh, "let's say we just rest for a while. I need time to recover!"

"Sure, that's fine," Josh agreed, then leaned down and kissed the still-exposed shaft, once at the tip, and twice more farther down, before standing back up, "but you better put that away or I won't be able to stop kissing it."

"Give it a few minutes," Daruin said, giving the bulbous base a tap.

Josh looked at it for a moment, then leaned down again.

"Stop!"

He giggled and grabbed Daruin's waist, holding him while he kissed and licked it for a few moments, then drew it through his mouth once, slowly.

"OK, I'm done."

Daruin gave him a sidelong glance, then kissed his cheek and smiled slightly, "About what you said — I am going to enjoy pleasing you too Josh. Personally, I think you'd enjoy being under my tail. Remember how much I liked being under yours? Uh, so to speak."

Josh moved his arm up to the tired fox's shoulder and settled onto the bed with him, lying his head on the furry chest. "There's something I want you to know," he began, idly toying with Daruin's chest fur, "what we did earlier — well, I've had sex before, but it was never like that. Even if you don't feel as strongly, I want you to know."

He paused, trying to think of the right word. He wasn't used to talking like this. The attempt failed him so he looked up to the waiting fox and went with the only word that came to mind.

"When you were tensed and surging against me, and when you, when *we* climaxed, it was...special, so very special for me."

Daruin smiled down at him, gently licking his nose and nuzzling, "It was special for both of us. I told you I was never with a male before. I had no idea what it would be like to actually do it. But it wasn't just the act, it was you."

He hugged the human gently and sighed, curling his tail up around him and cuddling close. He had never felt this way before in his life. And although he wasn't completely sure why he felt the way he did, he knew he liked this feeling and would do anything necessary to hold onto it.

Feeling warmer inside than he ever thought possible, Josh smiled and eased up just enough to plant a soft, lingering kiss on Daruin's lips, brushing his tongue just a little against the fox's.

"You feel so nice," he said, then yawned mightily and smiled, "hm, seems I've tired myself out a little too."

"Do you mind me volunteering as a pillow?"

Josh giggled. "And such a fine pillow you are! Just let me know if anything hurts."

"I don't know if I can feel much of anything at the moment. I just feel kinda warm and fuzzy all over," Daruin

answered with a murr.

"You and me both, and I don't even have fur," Josh agreed, his eyes closing lazily. Then he shook his head and unwrapped himself to stack more wood on the fire. He returned, pausing a moment to savor Daruin's prone, dozing vulpine form before sighing dreamily and lying back down with him.

Daruin mumbled something that sounded like "d over to" but Josh couldn't be sure. By the time he snuggled back up to him, the fox was deeply asleep.

Consciousness lingered in the human head for a few moments after Daruin had fallen asleep, hoping he hadn't missed anything important. But sleep suddenly beckoned earnestly and he sank quickly, the fox's heartbeat caressing his ear. He tucked his face close to Daruin's and whispered.

"Dream with me."

* * * * *

Daruin awoke slowly and easily, taking in a sharp breath before remembering where he was and how he had gotten here. He smiled and worked his muzzle into the pile of hair beside him, breathing in the scent of the human.

He had never seen a slave asleep before. They had dozed in his van on longer trips and some were always napping when he scouted for possible buys at an auction house barracks, but he had never gotten a good long look at a sleeping human face. A smile tugged his lips as he carefully brushed a lock of hair away from Josh's cheek.

What were usually somewhat chiseled features were now softer, and his whole face seemed so peaceful and relaxed now that it wasn't working to hide the feelings behind it. He was almost angelic.

He marveled at how he felt. He knew he was usually a grump in the morning, and his current predicament should only make it worse, yet lying here with this confounding human made him feel so good that none of it seemed to matter.

Another thing he had never done was get to know the slaves he bought and sold. He had talked to them, of course, as Josh was hardly the first he had conversed with once the radio got boring. But everything a slave said; every answer, every offer, every sentence, was either carefully considered or habit.

It was simply how they lived. Most owners wanted a slave they could talk to, yet none wanted one to argue with. Slaves were very good at dancing around a confrontation, keeping a master interested without risking punishment. Josh, from the records of his education and what previous owners had taught him, was better than most. "Tactful and rarely boring" his last owner had added to his record. Josh was lucky to have had a generous owner early enough in life to get a broad spectrum of knowledge.

Was that why Josh had bewitched him so? As if on cue, the human shifted slightly and tucked himself closer, making him smile. The room was getting cold now that the fire had been going unattended all night. He draped his tail over him.

No, it couldn't be that, he thought. He talked to people all the time and never slept with them, never mounted them, never felt so deeply about doing so. Maybe it was how he was constantly surprising him. No slave, by reputation, would put himself at risk for a master. Oh, it was the law, of course. A slave is required to sacrifice himself for his owner if necessary. But most citizens would be amazed at how easily that can be avoided, especially in a situation like this where no one was around for miles.

Josh, on the other hand, had put himself at risk three times so far to save his life. One could argue self-preservation, but humans are a hardy bunch and all the supplies were there. Any slave would have either run for it right off the bat

or took the opportunity later. He had never thought that a human could be selfless.

They were so used to serving, so full of other people's wants and needs all day, every day, that he had a hard time believing that one could refuse to let a citizen die just because it was right, not because it was required. Yet Josh had done just that three times, for a slave broker, because he had a conscience.

He was cute, too, and there was a devilish sense of humor hiding behind that calculated detachment. The more he drew out of him, the more he liked what he found.

It was dark, that was certain, but it didn't feel intimidating. A warm, comforting feeling wrapped around him. All around was a soft, soothing rumbling sound that he could feel on his face as much as here. That, more than anything else, was what made him feel so peaceful, so serene, in a place so black.

A glow grew in the blackness, tinted red by his eyelids. He felt soft fur against his cheek and chased the dreams away with his mind. The air was chilly but he felt warm and secure, in a way he hadn't felt since childhood with his mother. His heart knew the feeling and all of it stayed with him as light replaced darkness.

He mumbled something as his eyes fluttered open, adjusting to the light of day, and for the first time in years he couldn't wait to be awake. The soft rumble was coming from Daruin's chest.

"Pleasant night?" the fox asked, nuzzling him and caressing down his side as he awoke.

"The best," Josh answered with a smile, rubbing his cheek against Daruin's chest. Soft scratching at his side prompted a long, luxurious stretch.

"No argument there." Daruin agreed, the stretch prompting one of his own and an impressive yawn. He could feel the skin stretch over his wounds but there seemed to be almost no residual pain, which surprised him. "It was a good night for both of us."

"What do ya say we do it all again?" Josh groaned, still stretching.

"It would kill me."

When Josh finished twisting and stretching he collapsed like a rag against Daruin. His stomach growled loudly enough to shake the wall, prompting a chuckle from them both.

"On second thought, could we maybe eat instead?"

Daruin sat up, his spine letting out a little creek, and padded over to the packs. "We're gonna have to rummage around here and see if we can find any good food. If this place doesn't have any, I may get down to the point of actually having to hunt."

"There's no MREs left?" he asked. He noted that he didn't feel the usual urgent need to visit the toilet after having a citizen mount him. It was surprising, given the amount of semen furs produced. He always had to before.

"Only a few left. Once they run out it's either hunt or starve." He lifted up a brown package and tossed it to Josh, grabbing another for himself.

The bag bounced off his stomach, as he was lost in another long stretch. He slowly wiggled from head to toe, feeling better than he had in years, and considered the situation. He sat up and grabbed the food as Daruin joined him.

"Hunt? What about the wolves?"

"I don't know," he answered with a shrug, "we may have hurt them badly enough that they will avoid me in the future. But truthfully, I'm not sure. I wouldn't let you go hungry, though. So if we can't get out of here in the next

couple of days, I'll have to see what I can do."

"We're going to need something to drink," Josh said, getting up. He wrapped himself in the blanket and carried the pot to the door, stepping outside and filling it. He set it over the dying embers in the fireplace, added some small logs to rekindle the fire, and returned to the bed. "That ought to be nice in a few minutes."

"Yup," Daruin agreed, brushing his fur down with his paws. The scars were doing considerably better and the fur was beginning to grow back in where it had been torn free. He glanced at his tattered clothing and frowned.

"How do you feel?" Josh asked, gently pulling the fur away from where he remembered the worst bite on his back to be.

"Somewhat stiff, and rather sore from all that fun last night," He paused to grin. "But I'm feeling worlds better than I did two days ago."

Josh's expression went a little dazed as he chewed a bite of ham. "It's been, damn, how long? Five days? Six? It's like you picking me up was a lifetime ago."

Daruin poked through the contents of his package and settled next to Josh. "It has been a lifetime in a few ways, Josh. You do have a new life now, remember?"

Josh nodded and, catching Daruin between bites, leaned in and kissed him. "I owe you so much. Thank you."

The fox's ears flicked slightly, an "aw shucks" look spreading over his face before he licked Josh's cheek and chin in return. "Don't mention it. We saved each other, we're together, and we're happy to be that way. Let's leave it at that."

Josh blushed a little, not accustomed to being that forward and casual with his affections, and smiled in agreement. He went back to eating and, lo and behold, found a chocolate cookie. He looked at the packet, his mouth watering, then his smile widened and he dropped it into Daruin's lap.

"There, it's your turn."

Daruin opened the packed and sniffed happily, then smirked playfully. "Hm, maybe we could share it. I like sharing with you. It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy."

That made Josh laugh. "You're *always* warm and fuzzy!"

"I guess I am, aren't I?"

"Let's save it for last, then."

After a few bites, Josh fetched the water pail and brought it over. He sat down and took a few gulps, then handed it to Daruin.

"Wow, that is fresh water if there ever was any."

Daruin took a long swallow and nodded, setting the pot down on the nearby table before looking at the side dish and snack portion of his meal.

"I should start portioning these things out so it will last," he said, glancing at the cookie, "besides, I never was good at waiting for dessert."

Josh gave his furry stomach a poke, "Well, you're not skinny like a slave, but you're not necessarily fat either." He chuckled and eyed the remains of his food longingly, then set it down with a sigh. He was still hungry so drank more

water to try and fill himself. "How much longer do you think we'll have to stay here? Any idea?"

"No, so go ahead and eat. If we run out I'll think of some way to provide for us. I can't have you starving to death on me."

"I'm hardly going to starve," Josh countered, "so if you think it's better to save some then we will. It's no big deal. I've done worse."

There it was again. Letting him talk freely over the past few days was bringing to light so much of what a slave's life was really like. Not any grand revelations, just little comments like that which were beginning to add up. He sighed.

"I know. I know you have. I just want to make sure you never have to do those sorts of things again," he paused and sighed again, "but it would be more logical to ration the food out."

Josh gave him a snuggle just for saying that and grinned, "Then we'll ration it. Now unwrap that cookie before I throw you outside and keep it all to myself."

"Mm, chocolate!" Daruin said with smirk after opening the package and sniffing it.

"Give me!" Josh exclaimed, making a playful swipe for it.

Daruin eeped and twisted away, giggling and scooting back on the bed. "Hey, you can't have all of it!"

A number of tactics occurred to Josh, but he discarded them in light of Daruin's broken arm and healing wounds. So he settled for an ankle and, leaning back, started dragging the fox toward him. "I could eat a lot on my way up to that cookie, you know."

Laughing, the fox smiled warmly and only offered token resistance as he was pulled in. Almost acting with a mind of its own, his tail curled around Josh as soon as it could and tickled his stomach.

"I just wanted to share it. You can help me if you want, though."

Josh, now kneeling, stopped pulling when Daruin's rump reached his knees. The nude fox was quite a sight indeed and the tail wrapped around him was as soothing as ever. He took a paw in his hand and pulled Daruin up to sit with him.

"You need help? Sheesh, no wonder we're here!"

Daruin just licked the end of his nose. "I never could manage to cut something properly in half. And with both of us loving chocolate so much, I was wondering if you'd help me divide it up fairly."

"Sure," Josh said, catching a few whiskers in his mouth and drawing them slowly through his lips, "got any ideas?"

That brought a shiver from Daruin before his face turned thoughtful for a moment. He smiled coyly. "We could just see who can get the most of it. What do you think?" he murmured, smiling almost hungrily before biting down gently on one end of the cookie, eyes promising mischief.

It seemed to take Josh a few moments to figure out what was going on, having never seen someone offer half of something in this way. Then it dawned on him and he blushed for the millionth time. Trying not to giggle, he carefully clamped his teeth down on the opposite end and waited.

A twitch of his tail seemed to be the starting signal and Daruin took more of the cookie into his mouth. He didn't stop until his lips met Josh's and then bit the cookie off. He chewed and swallowed happily, licking his muzzle after a moment and smiling wickedly. "Mm, that was tasty. How about once more — without the cookie getting in the

way?"

Josh slowly chewed what little he had gotten, deciding that he really liked that way of eating. He swallowed, for the first time in his life hardly tasting the chocolate as Daruin gave him a look that made his heart flutter.

"What cookie?"

"Right," the fox murmured before his muzzle moved the last inch. He pulled Josh close and kissed him deeply and lovingly, his long vulpine tongue slipping around inside the human mouth, tasting him, a long soft murr filling the air. Josh suckled at the tongue slowly playing around in his mouth, moaning and wrapping his arms around to fuzzle his ears.

They kissed like long lost lovers and Daruin rubbed himself closer, murring as his ears were rubbed. His paws caressed slowly down the human's back then up over his sides, while his tail continued to curl around his middle. Josh let his hands stroke their way around to Daruin's chest, alternately ruffling and smoothing the fur as they went, until they reached his nipples.

He broke the kiss slowly, gripping the fox's tongue with his lips as it slid free, and again ran the long whiskers through them; first one side, then the other. Daruin closed his eyes, softly licking Josh and murring blissfully. His paws ran slowly down Josh's ribs, claws leaving slight indentations in the smooth flesh until they reached his hips. They reversed course to tickle gently over the human belly while his entire coat stood on end from Josh's gentle touch.

Josh shuddered and gave the nipples a soft pinch, feeling them harden, making Daruin's fur puff even more. It made him look very cute.

"Oh Daruin, you look amazing!" he said breathlessly.

"It just goes to show how much you light my fire, Josh. Even if I do look a little silly this way, like I've been in the dryer too long."

"Silly is not a word that leaps to mind," Josh countered, smiling. He leaned forward and started kissing and nibbling the middle of Daruin's chest, working his way around, nuzzling into the fluffy fur to tease at the skin beneath. Claws worked into his hair and the fox let out a long sigh before he laid back onto the bed, rubbing himself against the human, who felt a gentle poking at his stomach. His tail slid deftly between his legs, teasing playfully.

"Oh, I'll, mm, take your word for it."

The tail took Josh by surprise and he nearly fell onto Daruin as a sudden zap of pleasure hit him. He hadn't realized just how turned on he had become. "Woo!" he exclaimed, giggling for a moment, then let his head fall onto a nipple. He growled playfully while licking and nipping at it, pressing his stomach down onto the slickening hardness below, and enjoyed the yips from Daruin he was causing.

Daruin was now rubbing himself against Josh's belly, shivering at the feel of his emerging member stroking along the human stomach. His tail continued its slow swishing and he let them both shift until Josh was comfortably draped over him.

He caressed down Josh's cheeks, then over the back of his neck to rest on his shoulders, and a slow smile spread across his muzzle in anticipation of things to come. Josh returned the grin and switched to the other nipple, hands roaming the furry body, hips slowly moving against the hot shaft at his belly. The tail between his legs was almost making him dizzy.

After giving the nipple one last nip, he smiled wickedly and started playfully munching his way down Daruin's chest and stomach, chomping at each muscle as he went. Daruin would have laughed too, but was too busy moaning as

Josh left a trail of fire right down the middle of his body.

It took a monumental effort, but the human managed to avoid the sexy, tempting vulpine shaft as he happily nipped away. Wanting to make it last, he reached Daruin's hips and kept going, eyes locked on the exposed penis; then resumed exploring with teeth, lips, and tongue, moving to his groin and inner thighs.

He nudged one of the legs up, nibbling and nuzzling his thigh, stopping just short of the fuzzy scrotum before licking his way around it to the other side. The fox gasped and squirmed blissfully, his deep murring becoming more insistent. He felt more aroused than he ever had before, so attentive was Josh. When he spoke, it was almost a growl, though his expression showed only affection.

"Mm, that is so nice! Now, about that sharing," he began, grinning, "last night you shared yourself with me, and now I get to repay the favor. I want you inside me, Josh, if you want to."

Brightening, he rested his chin between Daruin's balls and thigh for a moment. No one had ever offered that before, only demanded it. He blinked lazily for a moment as he looked up at him. Then it occurred to him that the fox had never done this before, and that they didn't have anything for the human to lubricate with. He drew a breath to say as much, but his nose found the answer and drew his eyes to the dripping shaft.

"Thank you," he said sincerely, and started licking again, cupping a hand under the tip of his penis.

The fur on Daruin's balls became sparse and wispy at the bottom, so he started licking and suckling, teasing the sensitive skin while his free hand stroked his thighs and the patch of exposed skin behind his ball sack. He was quickly rewarded with the feel of a little squirt of pre-ejaculate in his palm and more murring and moaning from Daruin.

His back arced slightly under Josh's mouth, the human sending waves of pleasure through him. Whimpering happily, he draped his tail across Josh's shoulders and gripped the bed cover. The anticipation, mixed with a hint of apprehension, only heightened the sensations.

Josh smiled and gave the tail tip a little bite as it flicked across his face and then went back to work. Daruin's maleness was so incredibly hot and sensitive that the simple idea of how good the fox was feeling made his own lust grow. He tickled the rigid shaft a little, wishing momentarily that Daruin had removed the fur from his balls as most did, then slid a finger up the length of his penis until it reached the tip.

Down it went into his palm to be slickened, then under his chin to touch the tight pucker below. Daruin's hips rose again, easing his reach, his tail actually quivering from the sensation.

"I...is there anything special I should do?"

"Try to relax," Josh said, smiling affectionately, as his tongue teased at the base of Daruin's penis. The fox was so turned on he wondered if either of them could last another minute. More and more precum was filling his hand and he started rubbing his slick finger over the vulpine tail hole.

"Try not to clench and let it happen."

With that he prodded a little harder, stopped to wet his finger again, then pushed a little once more, making soothing noises as he did. Daruin bit his lip gently as his virgin anus was invaded, but as the human slowly coaxed his finger into him, he found himself relaxing around it and growing even warmer inside.

He didn't have the intellectual reserves at the moment to feel embarrassed by the sexy small talk Josh made as he licked and nuzzled between his legs, telling him how sexy his manhood was, how good he smelled, how wonderful he tasted, how excited he was. It didn't matter to him one bit that he was surrendering his body to a slave.

It seemed to work. There was resistance at first and he moved slowly, carefully, working his finger in fully to tease at the bulge of his prostate. He moved it rhythmically, worming it around as he nuzzled the plump scrotum. His own groin ached for release, but he fought off the temptation while slowly loosening his lover.

A paw worked into his hair briefly, ruffling it before sinking back to the cushions. The fox yipped softly and his hips began moving with his finger, coaxing him on. Josh moved his soaking hand, now puddled with precum, from under Daruin's shaft and transferred it to his own. He coated his straining manhood with it, and used what was left on another finger. He slid that one in beside the first, again going carefully, and stroked them in unison.

Daruin gasped and humped his hips again, obviously getting very close, as the fingers found the inner bulge of his prostate. Electric bolts of pleasure shot up his spine and belly as he panted with lust. Josh shuffled his way up, propping himself on his free hand, until his thighs rested against the back of Daruin's. He lowered his now glistening penis, rubbing the head just above his buried fingers.

A soft smile crossed his muzzle as he rested back further on the bed and closed his eyes expectantly, his tail flicking down and curling around Josh's thigh. He murred softly in thanks as he relaxed and prepared to be taken, then whispered something that sounded suspiciously like "I love you," but Josh couldn't be certain around the loud moan and occasional whimpers.

Josh let his fingers slide free, wiping them on the cloth by the bed and, before the ring of muscle could clench again, nudged his tip inside. Turned on as he was, he had to fight the sudden urge to thrust and then, propping himself up on both hands, started carefully easing his hips forward, sinking a little into the slick, tight hole.

There was a long hiss and he paused as Daruin's murr turned into a quiet growl. Josh was used to hearing this at times like these and soon it was gone, replaced with a quite whine as Daruin first felt the burning pain of being filled. Moaning quietly, he slowly pressed his hips down against Josh's, his eyes finally opening as his furry bottom met the human hips. He remembered to keep relaxing and the burning eventually eased.

Josh let out a long, shuddering groan of pure joy as Daruin pressed into him, taking him in more quickly than he expected, until his hips were met with the wonderful feel of his furry rump. Their eyes met and the fox smiled happily, not needing to say anything, and gave his throbbing shaft a playful squeeze, a deep murr of contentment filling him.

As the human hunched forward and withdrew most of the way, Daruin's head came up and, just as he reentered him with agonizing slowness, met him with a hard kiss. Josh wished he could lay flat against the fox as Daruin had done with him, but the human spine wouldn't allow it. He pulled on the long tongue and began stroking, grunting a little, body alive with passion and pleasure, his shaft riding inside Daruin's tightly gripping behind hotly.

Daruin let out a blissful yelp as Josh began thrusting. Now that the pain had faded it was a sensation completely unlike he had expected. He had no idea there could be so much pleasure in it, when all he was expecting was to endure some pain while his partner satisfied himself. His muzzle worked against the human lips in a desperate, hungry kiss and he squeezed slightly around Josh's wonderfully stroking cock with each shove.

He met each stroke with his hips, losing himself in the act and the feeling of being so ultimately intimate with Josh. His eyes closed and he gritted his teeth, then, without warning, a hand closed around him and he passed easily into climax, spurting all over Josh's belly.

Josh knew he wouldn't last long, so incredible did the fox feel beneath him. His mind glazed over as it seemed his very soul was pouring into Daruin. His thrusts came a little faster and he barely got a hold of Daruin's hot shaft before it erupted up onto him. The feeling of his lover's orgasm sent rhythmic lightning bolts through him and he cried out as his penis swelled and jolted, pounding within the tight walls of the vulpine innards as he came also.

The fox arched his back and howled, head tossing back and forth as each pulse of his climax felt like another

explosion within Josh's grasp. Slowly it wound down and his growls turned back to warm murring as he felt Josh's seed pour into him. He closed his eyes and savored the moment. This was almost the greatest orgasm of his life, second only to the one when their roles were reversed last night.

He had never felt so complete in his life, or so happy. As he relaxed back onto the bed, he smiled up at the human, giving him a tight squeeze with his legs and body. Josh let his sopping hand drop down, and he cooed as the human knowingly wrapped his knot in a soft grip. It brought on another small peak, and Josh ducked quickly to tease a mouthful of seed from him.

Tail flicking up to brush Josh's back, he curled up to kiss him lovingly.

"Thank you."

For the first time in his life an orgasm almost made him laugh at how incredibly complete it felt. Finally he could think again and looked down just as Daruin kissed him. He savored it, pulling the long tongue into his mouth and toying with it. He felt more than just physical warmth as Daruin wrapped him up, and glanced to see the vulpine seed running down his chest and belly, dripping onto the fox.

He kept a soft hold on the gently throbbing knot and snuggled against him after carefully sliding himself free.

"No, thank *you*. I wish I could have lasted a little longer, but you, you move me like no one I've ever met. I," his voice trailed off, and he nuzzled the furry chest before giving him a lingering kiss, "it means a lot that you wanted to share yourself like that with me. But don't let me go on and on again." he finished with a grin.

"Between the two of us, then," he began after yerfing as Josh left him, a hot tingling replacing the fullness, "we make the Earth move. And I'd move it for no one else." he finished, licking him. His ears flattened slightly as he spoke, though, as his emotions rarely ran that close to the surface, and he blushed fully after realizing what he said. But he still hugged Josh tightly, knowing that he had meant every word.

Josh's voice caught in his throat and he felt a slight stinging in his eyes.

"Oh Daruin," he said, almost choking on the words, "no one has ever, ever said something like that to me. Not even another slave. I," he stopped again, fighting back tears brought on by a warm swelling in his soul, "I, damn it, I think I'm in love with you."

He dropped his head onto Daruin's chest, unable to bear it if the gray eyes went hard at what he'd finally mustered the nerve to say. If he had blown it, he didn't want to see it on the fox's face.

A moment later he didn't see the small smile light up Daruin's face, but felt a paw gently stroke down the back of his neck and a soft tail brush tenderly over him.

"That's funny, Josh, because I think I could say the same thing," Daruin said softly, pausing his purr-like murring, "I love you too." He almost shivered at the admission, almost as if he didn't believe it was him who had actually said it. But as he repeated the sentence in his mind, that deep feeling of rightness about it grew until he hugged Josh tightly and sighed.

His fears dispelled, Josh lifted his head, hope gleaming in his eyes, "You mean that?"

His answer was a nod and a soft squeeze.

Seeing the sincerity in Daruin's face was all he could take, and his soul swelled up inside. He laughed a little, too happy to control himself, then hugged the fox more tightly than ever, joyful tears soaking the furry chest.

"I've never met anyone so wonderful."

Daruin nipped softly at the top of his head, stroking down his back slowly, and tried to find something to say. Words still wouldn't come, so he let his actions speak for him and hugged Josh lovingly, contentedly. The residue of his injuries, which seemed to be healing at an amazing rate, and the still-warm afterglow of their lovemaking sent him slipping into sleep.

Feeling the paws stop drifting over his back, Josh looked up to see the fox sound asleep, a peaceful, satisfied look on his face. He sniffed a few times, unable to take his eyes off Daruin's face. He felt warm and sated but couldn't sleep. While Daruin dozed, he petted him and compassionately stroked his face. The product of their lovemaking was getting a little uncomfortably sticky between them, but he ignored it as he took the opportunity to touch and memorize every last hair on the fox's face. He was so handsome.

It was some time later when Daruin finally woke from his nap, blinking his eyes open and yawning impressively. He flicked his ears back in embarrassment.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Erf, you just put me right to sleep. I didn't mean to be rude."

"No problem, I just couldn't sleep," Josh countered with a smile, "I know you're recovering from all those wounds, probably not helped by having me three times in less than a day's time. In your condition, anyway. Besides, citizens always pass out on me. I've been assuming that's a good thing."

Daruin chuckled. "Oh, it is, and that's why I'm so sore!" he quipped, groaning as he stretched against Josh and noting the mess between them, "We'd better get cleaned up before we get stuck together like this."

"I'd stay stuck to you forever," Josh asserted, then lost himself in a long, warm kiss. When they finished he looked down. "Next time, remind me to take a bath *after* I say 'I love you.'"

Laughing heartily, Daruin eased the two of them apart and headed over to the basin. He filled the bucket with snow, then sniffed himself and turned back toward him.

"I think I'll remind us both of that."

Josh laughed too, the joke easing his nerves somewhat. He looked up at Daruin as he set the pot on the fire. "Daruin, when you said that — it was like the world fell away and it was only me and you. I can't tell you what it means to me. I can't make you understand. I just hope, well," he paused a little before asking, "could you say it again?"

"I love you," he answered, not pausing, and smiled.

Josh closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the words and replaying them in his mind. He opened them and got up, padding over to the fire. "I love you, too," he said, then hugged him tightly and nuzzled his neck. Daruin returned his embrace and kissed between his eyes.

"Now all we have to do is survive until we're rescued."

Big blue eyes brightened, "Well, at least this means I get to scrub you down again. I'll try not to get carried away this time."

They watched the snow fall while each pail of water heated, then Josh worked up a good lather on him in portions, rinsing each area as he went, until the sink was empty and the fox stood in a sudsy puddle.

"There's that. Now it's my turn."

With that, he grabbed the pot and picked up the blanket. He paused and looked at the mess on his own chest and

stomach, giving Daruin a hopeful look.

"Would you mind doing the honors?"

He filled the bucket and then shook out his coat and smirked playfully. "You know, I was thinking. This is rough, but it isn't so bad. Maybe we don't have to get rescued right away. The prospect of being trapped in a cabin with you is becoming more and more tempting. I'm not even really sore from earlier."

"Oh please!" Josh exclaimed, laughing, "I want to see you in a silk robe! But now that you mention it..."

He stepped over and, avoiding touching his sticky stomach to the fox's clean pelt, gave him a long kiss. "It won't be so bad with you here."

"Home is where the heart is," Daruin added, licking his cheek.

"I've heard it said but never believed it until now. You know, once I'm cleaned up maybe we should take a closer look around this place," he suggested, looking around, "we've been so busy surviving and mating that we haven't even looked in the other rooms." He walked over to the counter and opened the cupboard underneath.

"Hey, there's a smaller pot, a large frying pan, and a set of plates in here! Even some silverware. Plus we've got, oh yes, toilet paper, a couple cloths and towels, some basic cooking utensils, and, wow, quite a knife set." He grabbed a large knife and turned around, giving Daruin a mischievous grin.

"Want a trim?"

Daruin blinked and eyed the knife, backing off a bit.

"Er, um, no?"

Josh dropped, turned, and faced him again holding the sharpening stick.

"Probe?"

Daruin looked incredulous, half laughing, thinking how cute Josh looked when he was genuinely happy. "What?"

The fox's expression kept him giggling for a few seconds more, then he waved a hand. "Never mind, we took care of that already anyway." He moved to the next cupboard. "And here we have, woo, look at this."

He pulled out a thick metal grill for the fireplace. "We can cook on this. OK, what else. Here's food!" he exclaimed, "canned beans, canned corn, flour — hm, apparently whoever owns this is planning to come back within the next couple of months at the latest."

"This is probably a spring-through-fall cottage, given it's proximity to the lake I, uh, played in. Those labels look fresh so I imagine the food was either forgotten or safe enough to last out the winter. Stupid to leave canned food to freeze, though. We'll have to make sure it's OK before eating any. So," he said, stirring the water in the sink with a finger, "we won't be starving any time soon, assuming I can bring down a deer. Hm, I wonder..."

Checking the gun cabinet beside the fireplace produced only a box of 12 gauge slugs. "Darn, that would have made this much easier."

"At least we can set them off if we get bored."

Daruin shook his head and chuckled. "Did that sense of humor of yours ever get you into trouble?"

"Yeah, but I can't help it."

"So I see." he agreed with a grin.

Josh looked out the back window. "There's an outhouse back there, but the snow is drifted half-way up it."

"Not to mention your rear would probably freeze to the seat while you were trying to go. We're going to have to figure out an alternative means of relieving ourselves."

"We've got more utensils," the human remarked, closing a drawer, "some grooming stuff, frozen shampoo and toothpaste, and some other stuff. Why it's in here and not the bedroom is anyone's guess. This guy definitely doesn't have a slave." He grabbed a comb and started going through his knotted hair.

"What about the other rooms?"

"We've been in here because it's close to the heat, so hold on." Daruin said, walking around, then stopped when Josh asked him to refill the pot. He did and resumed. "There's a storage room in the back, I'm gonna sort through it and see if they left some clothes behind. There's also apparently a master bedroom but we won't be using it — too cold. You can check that while I look in the storage room."

Josh nodded and swung the bedroom door open, peeking in. There was a large bed with a dresser beside it. He went to the latter and opened the drawers. There were no clothes but a few neatly folded sheets. On the walls were a couple of deer trophies, some books, and three fishing rods; along with a tackle box on a nearby shelf.

In the closet he found boots! He yelped and called out to Daruin. "Hey, there's three pairs of boots in here! I'm sure a couple would fit! Or at the very least, not be too small." He pulled them out, exposing a cardboard box behind them. Inside was mostly paperwork that looked like the deed to the cabin and land, plus a bunch of other stuff he wasn't concerned with.

"Great!" Daruin called from the storage room. He rummaged through a box or two and smiled as he found some old jeans and a few shirts. He dressed himself and enjoyed the extra warmth, eyeing a couple of backpacks and a small case of dehydrated camping food. Nodding appreciably, he headed to the bedroom to be greeted by a frowning human.

"Aw, I liked you better naked. I'm going to get that bath. You wanna finish rooting through this closet of junk?"

Daruin started checking through Josh's find, reading some of the stuff for lack of anything better to do. "Cool, now your feet won't freeze if we decide to take another walk."

"That reminds me," Josh called from the sink, "are we going to leave and try again for that town you were talking about?" He couldn't decide which answer he'd prefer, but definitely knew whether or not he wanted to spend another few days slogging through a snowstorm.

Finding nothing of real importance, Daruin walked back to the main room and grinned. "I can't always let you indulge your fantasies Josh. I gotta wear clothes some time. But no, at the moment we're in a good position and we don't need to leave. Besides, the drifts out there are really high and I don't know if you'd be able to keep up."

Josh was scrubbing his belly and looked up, eyebrows jumping. "Keep up? *Keep up?*" He laughed until his stomach started hurting. "You're the one who, oh, never mind!"

"OK, so maybe you've got me there," Daruin said with a grinning sigh, "fine then, we can't leave because I wouldn't survive the trip!"

"You know," Josh began as he finished cleaning off, "we're creating quite a stain on the floor here. I guess the owner

usually bathes in the lake or something."

Darwin winced. "And when this is over, I'm gonna have to pay for all this. Ouch. Or there's a secret bathroom around here we haven't found yet."

"We'll just have to try and damage it as little as possible." He smiled as his eyes fell on the bed. "As for those stains..." He stepped over and flipped the mattress, exposing the clean underside. Seeing no need to dress, he went to the chilly bedroom and returned with a few sheets and a fresh blanket. He wrapped one sheet around himself and quickly made the bed. "Presto! I am worth something."

"I've never tried to argue that."

"You know, now that I take a look at it, this place doesn't seem all that run-down. Just well-used. The pipes never did freeze all the way."

"Probably well insulated. Only question is, what are we gonna do for the duration of our stay? It's not like I brought a book."

Josh had one idea and grinned, then shook his head, "Well I just washed off!"

"I suppose I could try to clean up the floor." Darwin offered, chuckling.

"Don't worry, I'll get it." Josh said, automatically grabbing a bottle of cleaner and an old rag from under the sink.

Darwin frowned slightly. "If you insist, you're the experienced one."

"But you can melt some water to rinse this away with." Josh suggested, then scrubbed the floor. Once it was rinsed and dried, he walked back to the fire where Darwin stood and slid his arms around him. "I love you, Darwin."

"I love you too, Josh," the fox replied, murring as they hugged, "I love you too."

They stood embraced for a few moments, swaying slightly to some soft tempo in their heads, then Josh looked up at him. "So, tell me more about yourself. I've sure done enough talking about me."

Darwin sat Josh down on the bed and curled up with him while thinking about what to say, his tail tip slowly flicking within Josh's grasp. "I don't really know what else to tell you."

"That's OK, I guess."

He gave him another quick hug and then went to the fireplace, stoking the logs with a poker. "Whoever cut this wood is good at it. This stuff burns forever." He returned and curled back up with Darwin.

"You feel good, even with clothes on."

Darwin sighed, still thinking, "So do you, even if you don't have fur. Well, I think I'm only special for how unremarkable I am. Other than my incredible rash of good luck in meeting you, it's been a pretty dull life."

"Good luck? You've nearly died three times so far!" Josh exclaimed with a laugh. "I'm probably a jinx!"

"Maybe so, but I'll die happy. I may have been a free man all this time, but my heart has been as empty as your enslaved one. You've changed that for me." Darwin asserted, nibbling an ear softly.

Josh leaned into him and grinned. "Word to the wise — don't do that to slaves. It turns them on."

The fox just murred and continued slowly nibbling, pulling Josh against him. "I'll remember that next time I run into

a slave."

"Oh, I almost...woo...forgot," Josh said, closing his eyes and moaning a little, "oh my! You better stop," he pleaded half-heartedly.

Daruin smiled and wiggled his tongue in Josh's ear for a moment before licking his cheek. "OK, I don't wanna torture you too much."

"I wouldn't call it torture, and I can't believe I just said stop." Josh said. He kissed the fox slowly, murring along with him. "So how long do you think we'll be trapped in this paradise?"

"I'm not sure. Until we work up the nerve to try and walk into town I suppose. The road is snowed in for sure, and they don't bother plowing it at this time of year." He stopped and sighed, resting his head against Josh's. "We may be here until we do something about it."

"I vote we stay snuggled like this until the spring thaw. There, my first vote."

"I'll agree to that for now. Snuggling you is nice." Daruin agreed, lapping lovingly over his face.

Josh smiled as the fox licked him, starting to get used to having it done so much, and resisted the temptation to catch the tongue in his lips. Instead, he slipped a hand up Daruin's shirt to softly rub his belly. "I'm glad you like it."

Daruin murred blissfully and scooted down onto his back to enjoy the belly rub properly. On his way he nuzzled Josh affectionately, then sniffed loudly and frowned.

"You look...what's that word? Pensive?" Josh asked, laying alongside and resting his head in the crook of Daruin's good arm.

"No, just worried. Are you feeling all right?"

"I feel fine," Josh answered, his brow furrowing, "wonderful, even. Why?"

Daruin frowned, sat up, and sniffed thoroughly around Josh's neck and in his hair before sighing again. "You're going to be getting ill soon. Your smell's been off all afternoon but it didn't hit me until now. It's probably from the weather and all the troubles."

Josh blinked at him. "But I never get sick, even when I was *supposed* to be sick. It always made masters happy when I didn't."

Daruin shrugged. "Your scent has changed, though, and my nose tells me that you've caught something. It's never been wrong before."

Josh gave him a small, reluctant nudge. "Maybe you should keep a little distance so you don't catch it."

"I've never been sick a day in my life, so I don't think I'll start now. I must have gotten a good mix of genes. But even if I do, there's nobody I'd rather be sick with."

He paused to chuckle. "Considering the contact we've had, if I'm gonna catch it I have already."

"There is that," Josh offered with a coy grin, "you say the nicest things."

Daruin resisted the easy return line and softly licked Josh's ear, "So do you."

"There you go again," Josh said, not entirely willing to resist, "hey, I keep forgetting to ask; why do you like to do in

your spare time, anyway? Hobbies? Sports?"

"Hobbies? Other than fooling around with my computer, I write and read a lot. I love reading. I do build models occasionally, it's helped teach me patience. Heh, I probably should get into a more active pastime like picking up a sport or something. But I've never really bothered, and I guess that explains the couple of extraneous pounds"

"Extra pounds?" Josh asked, giving the stomach a squeeze. He felt a little layer of softness, but it seemed more normal than fat to him, as opposed to his own almost scrawny belly — the result of a slave's diet. "You look quite nice to me. Feel good too. It must come naturally. What do you model?"

"Tanks and airplanes mostly."

"Hypothermia recovery, I'm sure, burns plenty of calories, and we've been eating light. You may be losing weight and not noticed; but I never got the impression that you were that overweight."

Darwin shrugged, dismissing the subject.

Used to such things, Josh took the hint and gave him a nuzzle. "So what do I have? Bubonic Plague? Malaria? Woo, wait! It's Scarlet Fever, right?"

"I don't know what it is," Darwin answered with a smile, stretching slightly to give Josh more stomach to rub, "only that it's something. My nose isn't *that* good."

"Do you have a lot of friends?"

"Not really, I never did get out much."

Josh shifted, a little uncomfortable at what he was about to ask. He wasn't sure how Darwin would react or what the answer would be.

"What do you think they will think of me?"

"They should be OK with it," he answered after a moments pause, "one of them will think I've lost my mind, but she always thinks that."

"What is she?"

"A doe who tried to be the sister I never had. She always said I followed my heart more than my head. I guess she was right."

Josh gave his snout a little kiss. "Lucky me. I do love you, Darwin."

"I love you too. Lucky me."

Grinning and resting his head on the furry chest while he scratched the belly below, Josh mused, "Wow, it almost sounds like..." His voice faded when he failed to find the right words.

"Like what?"

"Like," he began, pausing and looking up at him, "I don't know, like, I'm almost afraid to say it. It's a little scary for someone like me."

"Like something too good to be true?"

"Yeah, definitely. But it's kinda like, well, like we were..." He stopped again and hid his face in Darwin's chest fur. "I

just *can't* say it!"

Daruin blinked as the thought struck him. "Like we were mated? It is a thought, but one that can wait. We need to see how well we can live together, and you can't tell that during an emergency."

Blue eyes snapped wide and Josh grinned. "Well, *engaged* was the word I was thinking of, but that works. I just didn't want you to think I was being a foolish, naive slave with no clue of what life is really about by assuming too much."

"Thanks for the concern, Josh, but there's no need to be hasty. We have the rest of our lives to decide living accommodations." He winked and gave him a little nibble.

"As far as I'm concerned right now; it's strange, but the thought of living without you seems so far away, like it was a lifetime ago instead of days. Suddenly I don't know how I would function if you handed me off to a new owner and disappeared."

"I would never sell you back into slavery."

"I know," Josh added hastily, "I just mean that you've come to mean so much to me, more than anything, more than freedom, that I can't imagine what it would be like to not have you around." He smiled and gave the middle of his chest a kiss. "Life would be so empty."

"You're not gonna have to worry about that," the fox began, scratching the back of Josh's head, "I'm not planning on leaving any time soon, or any time for that matter."

"I wish I could say how much it means to hear that," Josh said, looking back up at him, "I never dreamed it was possible. It's something we all daydream about, talk about at slave clubs, and never really know." He gave him a little kiss and sighed happily, then yawned. "I'm getting really tired all of the sudden. I feel dead. I don't even think chewing on my ear would keep me awake."

Daruin chuckled and snuggled him close, draping his tail over him and allowing himself to become a pillow. "Well, you've had a busy day today. I think I'll nibble on your ear anyway, but lick more than anything else. It'll put you to sleep, and maybe you'll rest enough to not get as sick."

The human sighed as Daruin softly licked at and around his ear, humming softly and working into the fox's warm pelt. "Let us hope so, I hated being sick on the occasions it happened."

It only took a couple of minutes for Josh to drop into a deep sleep, and Daruin licked and snuggled him gently, fluffing out his fur as their closeness lulled him into being tired himself. He pondered a bit that they'd both been sleeping too much, then dropped into sleep with him, tail and arms encircling the smooth skin.

* * * * *

The fox yawned and erfed as he awoke. He immediately noticed that Josh was extremely warm and his scent was oddly changed. Sighing softly he continued holding him and nuzzled close, a bit depressed that he was indeed getting ill. He wished he could do something.

Josh looked down at the watch, did a double-take, and jumped.

"Oh no! It's been half an hour! I gotta go!" He gave Eric a pat on the shoulder and ran off.

"Sorry!" Eric called after him.

"It's not your fault, don't worry about it!" he called back, a chill running through him as he got back to work. He

would never get finished on time now. Master will be furious.

He finally completed everything almost fifteen minutes late and sprinted back to the house. Master was waiting right inside the door. Josh could tell by the look on the fox's face that he had seen him talking to Eric and knew why he was late.

"I'm sorry Master, I..."

An open paw slammed into his face, making his cheek sting.

"What time is it?" the fox growled, ears pinned back.

Josh quivered and looked at the watch he had been given to wear, specifically to make sure he finished on time.

"Quarter after, Master." he mumbled.

Smack!

"What time were you supposed to be done?"

"Six o'clock, Master."

Smack!

"Was six o'clock enough time to finish?" the fox demanded, tail whipping behind him.

Josh fought to keep his hands at his sides. His face was on fire and tears of pain and frustration welled up in his eyes.

"Yes, Master."

*Smack!*Smack!*

"But you decided that talking to your slave friend was more important than serving me?"

The human reeled a little and his knees almost buckled.

"I'm sorry, Mas..."

Smack!

"Answer the question!"

"No, Master," he said quickly, voice quaking, "I lost track of time."

Smack!

"When I say six o'clock, you finish by six o'clock! Understand, slave?"

*Smack!*Smack!*

"Yes, Master."

"Are you sure?" the fox demanded.

"Yes, Master." Josh cried, shaking all over and having trouble standing. He was wearing a collar, and the fox grabbed it and yanked, very nearly sending him to the floor, and dragged him to the slave room. He was so hurt,

frustrated, and stunned from all those hard slaps that he stumbled weakly. The fox shoved him down onto his bed and glared at him.

"While you sit there hungry for the rest of the night, think about your duty to me, understand?"

He blinked and the furry face was closer. He jumped, startling them both. It took a moment for reality to set in while he sat cringing, soon realizing where he was and how he felt. Trying to muster a grin for Daruin, he moaned and made a face.

"Sorry, bad dream."

"Considering how bad you must feel I'm not surprised. How bad was it, and how do you feel?"

Josh thought for a moment, rubbing a cheek that wasn't bruised but still felt so. His whole body was hot and was sweaty, and his stomach felt cramped. Several joints proved stiff as he tried to enjoy a stretch and his head felt woozy. In short, he felt awful, and said as much. Still, he tried again to muster a smile.

"I guess I am sick," he said, "I knew I'd hate it."

Daruin whined softly and started licking him, trying to be of comfort. "Hopefully it will be over with quickly. We can't leave if you're sick, or you'd only get worse."

Josh smiled weakly and gave Daruin's ears a fuzzle, liking the sight of how much the fox enjoyed it. "I hope so. I'm hungry, I think. I feel queasy, but starving. Maybe some food would help."

The fox nodded, disentangled himself, and put some snow over the fire to boil their entree. "I'll let you eat the rest of these. They're nutritionally balanced and rather bland, so shouldn't be too hard on your stomach."

"I should also have some aspirin in the boxy back pack."

"Thanks. Here, let me help." Josh said, starting to get up out of habit at seeing a fur preparing food. His head spun a little before he was half way up and he dropped back onto his rump. "Woo, dizzy!" he yelped, "and man, it is *hot* in here!" He looked at the fire when his vision steadied, but it was only glowing coals at the moment.

"That's not the room, it's you. Get back under the covers. You may not want to, but after you take the aspirin you'll feel like you're freezing. Here," he said, handing him three aspirin and some water.

"Under the covers? I'll boil!" he protested, taking the pills. He swallowed them and guzzled the rest of the water. "I need more," he said, starting to get up again. Another bout of dizziness struck and he sat back down. "Damn, I keep getting dizzy," he grumbled, "would you get more water, please?"

Daruin took his cup and, once the food had warmed in the pot, returned with it and settled next to him. "Well, you'll feel colder once the aspirin kicks in, and you can't afford to get chilled."

"OK," Josh mumbled, crawling under the blanket. He immediately felt twice as hot and sweat started beading on every pore. He took the water gratefully and guzzled it, ignoring the food for a moment.

"What is it, do you think? Flu?"

"It looks like it. Fortunately for you a flue's worst symptoms usually only last for 24 to 48 hours. But it will linger on for a week or more, or less for you since you have a strong constitution. The directions for recovery are plenty of bed rest, lots of fluids and do not allow yourself to get cold. I know how hot you must feel, so I'll let you have the bed to yourself and I'll sleep in the bedroom. I'm going to inventory how much in provisions we have and try to think up a

few ideas about deer hunting."

Josh drank down another two glasses of water and started eating. It was weird being nauseous yet having his body crave something to eat all at once. If he ate slowly, he found that he could just barely keep it down, though he felt a few times that it might come back up.

"Hunting? What about the wolves?"

"I beat them once, they might be leery about trying me again. I know it's a danger but it's either that or we eventually run out of food. So, I must take the risk."

"Can we eat the canned stuff since it was most likely frozen when we got here?"

"Canned food doesn't get affected by much. It should be OK if we heat it up."

Josh nodded and, after a while, managed to finish his food. The aspirin had begun to work and his aches faded some, but now, as Daruin had predicted, he was getting cold. He snuggled under the covers, which were now clinging uncomfortably to his wet skin, and gave the fox an apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry, Daruin. It was getting to be so nice being here with you. And now I'm just getting miserable."

Padding over and snuggling with him, Daruin tried to keep him warm.

"Hopefully it will be over soon."

The chill fell over him like a curtain, and even with Daruin wrapped around him he quickly began to shiver. It only took a couple of minutes for it to intensify to the point where his voice shook when he asked for more to drink. He doubled the blanket over and wrapped himself tightly, fighting off a sudden bout of nausea and almost puking from an unannounced cramp.

"Josh? What's happening?" Daruin asked quickly as he started to get up.

"Cramp," he answered through clenched teeth. Then he doubled over, panting into his lap for a few moments while his head and stomach spun.

"That bad?"

Josh shook his head, resting back slowly as the pain faded. He curled up tightly, bundling the sheets around him, and rested his head against the fox. "It's going away, I'm OK. Well, not OK, but it was just a quick one."

"I wish there was more I could do, but I don't know much about medicine beyond everyday things."

"Thanks, but all I'm supposed to do is drink a lot and stay warm. The first is easy, I don't know about the second. I'm so cold. Can you please bring the kettle and a cup over?"

The fox did so and sat with him, letting out a sigh. "Now I'm getting all worried about you and there really isn't anything I can do."

"Just stay with me, I've never felt this bad." Josh suggested through chattering teeth.

The human slowly drifted off and seemed to sleep like the dead. Every now and then he would awaken for a few minutes, just long enough to drink some water and maybe be helped over to a sitting position to relieve himself into an old, rusty pot Daruin had found. Another day and a half passed in an uncomfortable fever before the pains really hit.

They were sharp and almost unbearable. It felt as if every cell in Josh's body was being systematically ripped apart and reshuffled. His very being seemed torn to shreds as the ripples of agony wracked him. When he awakened he longed for unconsciousness, where the pain was less focused and more disconnected.

A trembling, whining Daruin tended him as best he could, a look of worry and fear on his face that Josh couldn't register, or gather the strength to ask about for that matter.

When he was able to think, all Josh could do was quietly panic. He had never heard of anyone being this feverish. The nights and days passed in a haze of cold, shaking, and half-sleep. His muscles were exhausted from the constant shivering, and Daruin had to rub out frequent cramps.

Dreams flitted in and out. Sometimes it was hard to tell what was real and what wasn't. Then, when a wall of almost insufferable pain rolled in one morning, he thought he must surely be dying. He looked up to the bleary-eyed fox, who was gazing at him worriedly and stroking his forehead, and mumbled, his voice chattering.

"Am I going to die?"

Moments later he was out cold again, sleeping fitfully, barely even, while lashes of pain crashed through him. Even after half a day it was almost too much to bear, and he was moaning constantly, crying out often when the pain briefly peaked.

Days turned into weeks and Josh remained bedridden. True consciousness did not come any more as the pain was far too great, only fitful snatches of being fed and given water. He was blind now, and deaf, most of his nerves having long since surrendered to overload and simply stopped sending messages to his brain. Even his sense of touch felt odd, numb in most places, but with a higher degree of sensitivity in others.

The only thing in the dark, soundless world of his mind were the hands. That was all he knew them as; for he had mostly forgotten about everything in his life, simply existing without identity or knowledge.

Those hands were gentle and loving, yet at the same time strong and steady. They fed him, bought him water, and quite often just held him. They gave him some grounding in the outside world without which he would have much rather just given up and died.

There was a strange sense of motion, of being off-balance. All around him was the clamor of machinery he couldn't see. There were voices too, one's he recognized from the past. The discordant sound of the machines pounded him from all sides, somehow striking him physically. Always he was moving, but the machinery moved with him, pounding him, deafening him. He cried out over and over for it to stop, but he couldn't even hear his own voice.

It became just another part of the clamor that banged and crashed through him. Intermittently the voices of past masters or other citizens scolded him, taunted him, played tricks on him. He struggled for some sense of direction but all around was blackness. The only thing keeping him sane was one tender voice.

It was reassuring yet strong, soft and quiet yet clearly heard through the cacophony in his head, and the sound of it caressed his battered body like velvet. He reached out for it when he could think enough to. That struggle was all he had to live for.

More harried and delirious dreams and nightmares passed through Josh's mind as he lay there in his dark, soundless prison. At some points, he realized he had been turned onto his stomach or back, but he couldn't fathom any reason. Slowly, excruciatingly, time passed. Seconds became days, days, an eternity. He had no feeling, no sense of being inside a body anymore.

But after three weeks of constant torture and a desperate, precarious grip on his sanity, he dropped into a genuine, completely exhausted sleep and did not rouse or dream.

Darwin sat in the chair and, for what must have been the millionth time, stared at Josh, dumbfounded. This kind of thing just did not happen. It had never happened. Even Black Days myths didn't go this far. It just wasn't possible.

But for some reason, it had happened.

Josh was a fox.

* * * * *

Darwin ran a paw over his face again, trying to think of some explanation. For some incomprehensible reason the human had changed. It had been excruciating for him and the mere fact that he seemed to have survived was a miracle in it's own right.

Whether or not he was sane — well, he would handle things one miracle at a time. Every day for the past three weeks he had tended to Josh's every need, watching with horror, and then a growing sense of awe, as the human body contorted and shifted. Bones stretched, muscles reformed, and sometimes the body reshaped itself almost quickly enough to follow with the naked eye.

He had been certain Josh was dying. Nothing like this had ever happened in recorded furry history, and for the first time in he didn't know how long, he prayed. He begged and pleaded to any deity that might be listening not to take Josh from him just as they had found each other.

It had started with something that terrified him. He had managed to fashion a crude spear from the handle of a broom he found in the supply room. Remembering Josh's jokes from what seemed an eternity ago, he had climbed a tree above deer tracks in the snow. Dinner was soon hanging over a bucket in the supply room, and although he was sure a good butcher would have laughed, he managed to hack it up well enough to feed them.

When he coaxed in all the meat Josh would take, which was quite a bit, he had sat there with him, fearful tears wetting his cheeks yet again, stroking Josh's head fur.

Then it happened. He reached up to scratch his snout and a small patch of Josh's long head fur came with it. He had stared, completely dazed, for a few moments before tugging gently at some more. It too came out in his paw, making him whimper with newfound terror.

What is happening to the only person I've ever loved? he cried, letting the head fur fall to the mattress. Josh had a fierce grip on his other paw, and he stroked the arm softly, knowing the human needed physical contact. When he had realized Josh was blind and deaf, Darwin was simply too shocked to react at first, then realized that some form of contact was needed.

He looked down to see a pile of short arm hair where his stroking had ended. He lifted the blankets to discover that, during the hours he had been gone hunting, hair had been falling out all over him and clung to the sheets underneath. He was almost afraid to wash him now, but every time he took a warm kettle of water and wiped Josh down it seemed to calm him. As he did so the last time hair seemed to wipe right off the human skin like dirt. It scared him, yet fascinated him as well.

Now, after two and a half weeks of near constant worry and fear, the worst seemed to be over and Darwin just let himself look. The change had been stunning. Instead of his normal human features, Josh's nose and jaw had stretched out to form a typical *Vulpes Sapiens* snout. His ears, which had scabbed over and fallen off, were replaced with two triangular flaps atop his head.

His body had changed as well, becoming leaner of limb and thicker of muscle. Then there was his tail, a long, slim stick now laying across the back of one of his thighs. Josh had not grown his fur yet, but was already starting to get bristly. Just by eye he knew it would be long and thick, nicer than his own, and he almost envied him for a moment before chuckling the thought away. He was alive and still with him. Little else was important. And after a moment of

thought, Daruin knew it was for the best.

Josh had gotten his third wish.

The first thing he realized was that there was no pain. It almost felt strange not to hurt at first, but as his mind drifted upward from the deepest sleep of his life he just relaxed and enjoyed the sensation — or lack of it. After such awesome suffering the feeling of warm serenity and quiet was sheer bliss. He thought for a moment that he might be dead, but the fur tickling his face told him he was still with Daruin, as did the sound of the fox's breathing and the strong, familiar smell of him.

He wrinkled his brow, eyes still closed.

Strong, familiar smell?

He slowly opened his eyes. The ceiling didn't look right at all. He had no idea how long he had been blacked out but obviously it had been long enough for his eyes to need time to adjust. There was a shadow below his eyes and he blinked a few times.

It didn't go away and he reached up, expecting to wipe something away. He jumped a little when his hand bumped his face.

Well, he thought, I have been out a while. I can't even reach my own face right!

He lifted his head and looked down. It dawned on him that his skin was a strange color just before his eyes came to rest on the business end of a bare sheath. He gawked and then sat bolt upright, unable to believe his eyes. He felt dizzy for a moment but it quickly passed and he just sat, staring down at himself in stunned silence.

He was now sitting between Daruin's knees, having awakened resting over his hips and belly, and looked at them. The color was the same but strangely dim, as if a filter had been dropped over his eyes. On the other hand, his sight was incredibly sharp. He literally saw every tiny detail of each strand of fur if he tried. It suddenly dawned on him what the shadow was and his hands leapt to his face.

He flinched as they again met it before he expected, and then he began to explore. Fingers traced a long, graceful muzzle and when he parted his lips, he felt four fangs where mere teeth used to be. On either side were stubs of whiskers. He felt up around his head, finding a pair of erect ears before moving his hands down his body. He was almost afraid to touch between his legs, and instead just stared there again.

Daruin's breathing, along with his own, were the only sounds. He felt a tail in his lap and turned to see Daruin sleeping soundly. The look of utter exhaustion on his face was obvious, along with a slight frown of worry that stayed even now, so he decided not to wake him. Surely he was aware of what had happened.

Instead he looked down at the rather ugly, bare tail that snaked out from his rump. It was very long, even for a fox tail. His skin itched a little all over, and he sat lightly scratching here and there for a few minutes.

That's when he felt how strong his fingernails were. He gave them a close look and found that, although they weren't long, they were a lot thicker than before, and black. This prompted further examination, and he found the expected, slightly padded areas on all four paws. Looking at his feet was hard, as his legs felt stiff, but it was nothing compared to what he had just gone through.

He started feeling his face again, wondering what he looked like, still too stunned to fully comprehend just what had happened.

His movements finally aroused Daruin. His eyes opened slowly and met Josh's for a moment. Seeing the amazed and confused expression there, he sat up and leaned forward, softly licking along Josh's muzzle in a long, loving stroke

before tiredly resting his chin on his shoulder and sighing softly.

"I don't know what to make of it either, but you're a real fox."

Josh noticed that he was also being tightly hugged, and Daruin let out another, more shaky sigh. A tear trickled out of his eye and onto Josh's cheek as he nuzzled close, the pent-up weeks of worry and fear letting go. He clutched him tightly and cried, paws gripping his back.

Elements of his newly-rendered senses slowly awakening, Josh returned the favor and as Daruin's tears proved too much for him, he cried also. He started to ask something, but the first couple of syllables came out all wrong. He frowned, then giggled as he pressed his cheek against Daruin's.

"How could this happen?" he asked, slowing down to frame the words carefully with the long, strange-feeling tongue, "and how long have I been out?"

Daruin choked back a sob and looked up into Josh's beautiful eyes, which were, amazingly, still a bright, liquid blue. Emotions still poured through him, and their intensity took him by surprise. If he had any doubt of his love for this slave, it was gone now that he saw him awake again.

"Th-three weeks. I thought you were dying. I-I-thought you were leaving me just after I found you. I didn't understand what was happening. I still don't. But I love you, Josh, with all my heart. Please don't leave me."

"Three weeks?" Josh exclaimed, slurring the words badly, visibly stunned. He thought for a moment, the reason for Daruin's exhausted expression becoming clear. If he had been out that long, he would have been completely helpless, especially considering that he didn't really remember any of it. He pulled Daruin closer, hugging him as tightly as he could, and pushed his new muzzle against his ear.

"I don't know how this could have happened either, but I love you too, and I'm not going anywhere. Ever."

Daruin nodded weakly as his tears continued to flow, nuzzling constantly and holding him tight as if to reassure himself that Josh was really alive. Minutes later he settled back and fell into deep sleep once more, mumbling something about beautiful eyes.

Josh watched him sleep for a few minutes, watching that earlier tension visibly drain from his handsome face, and wiped the tears from his own peach-fuzzy cheeks. He decided to get up and try this new body out, but waited long enough to plant a soft, slow kiss on the side of his muzzle.

"Thank you, my love."

Shuffling to the end of the bed, he placed his feet on the floor and stood slowly. His expectation of feeling dizzy wasn't thwarted and he wavered for a few moments, arms and tail waving, before managing to stand erect. Even without fur his tail felt absolutely wonderful. It was like having a fist pressed to the base of his spine, but in a comforting way, and he could feel it's length swishing behind him.

He took a few tentative steps, grinning ridiculously, and carefully made his way to the counter. It now sported the signs of heavy use, with blood stains that he hoped weren't his. A glance through the supply room door eased his mind, for hanging from the ceiling was a deer carcass, most of the meat cut away, with a large pail beneath it.

The sight seemed to trigger his nose, for it erupted with the smell of fresh, raw meat. The intensity almost overwhelmed him for a moment until he gathered himself and started intentionally sniffing the air. It was full of smells with a richness and variety that surprised him. Knowing furs had a better sense of smell and experiencing it were two very different things.

He could smell Daruin — smooth, male, and sensual — his own lingering sweat, different kinds of wood, the fire,

everything. It took quite a few minutes just to take it all in.

Looking back at the fox, he wasn't sure if he was entirely happy with the way the lingering red in Daruin's winter coat had dimmed with his new eyes, but he still looked magnificent; and the smell of him was deeper and more satisfying than he ever knew as a human.

He gingerly stepped away and walked around some more, stumbling a little now and then, thankful that no one was around to witness what felt so foolish. Fumbling around made him feel like a baby, but he understood enough to get on with the job.

His eyes were part of the problem. It seemed his depth perception was a little off. Not bad, just different. Things seemed closer, yet he could focus on details off in the distance he could never have seen so well before. He spent hours just walking around, looking outside at the snow, and generally trying to get used to himself. It felt strange to sense his ears moving, but he seemed to have little trouble making them point where he wanted.

After a while he put more wood on the fire and enjoyed a long drink of cool water before sitting back on the bed, yelping when he landed on his tail. He swished it out of the way, rubbed at the stinging base, and giggled; partly at himself, partly with exhilaration.

Daruin continued to sleep blissfully, whimpering softly now and then and turning a bit to touch him as he sat. It was almost as if he needed the contact.

Josh didn't feel especially tired, even though the sun was setting. Still, Daruin needed comfort and he wanted to be close to him anyway. So he lay down with him, snuggled close, and pressed his muzzle against his neck. He closed his eyes and just enjoyed the feeling of being alive, being a fox, and being with the one he loved.

The nap did Daruin a world of good, especially knowing that Josh was out of danger, but he did have the strangest dream. He dreamt that suddenly he had become human and Josh was the fox. They had just begun discussing things when the dream abruptly ended and he came back to wakefulness. Yawning, he glanced down at the new fox and sighed softly, glancing out to see that the sun had just recently set.

He licked Josh's nose and looked him over for yet another time.

"Woo, that tickles!" Josh said with a giggle, turned his head, and gave a little sneeze. He shifted and hugged Daruin tightly. "Sleep well?"

"Pretty good, and I feel better. I still don't know what to think about you, though."

"I have a feeling I look pretty ridiculous with this peach fuzz instead of fur." Josh commented with a grin, his speech still badly slurred.

"Yes," Daruin agreed with a chuckle, "but it is growing fast. At this rate you should be grown out and silver within a few days. How do you feel?"

Josh took a deep breath and stretched as he exhaled, working his limbs experimentally. He looked down at himself, eyes again drawn briefly to the plump sheath he now had, almost afraid to pay it any attention.

"Stiff, a little off-balance, a little chilly, and a lot confused." He gave Daruin an intent look. "How did this happen?"

"I have no idea. I've never heard of anything even remotely like this," Daruin answered, shaking his head, "it's unprecedented. I just don't know. At least you kept your eyes. They're still blue, you know."

"Really?" Josh asked, those eyes widening, "you know, I've been stumbling around this room for hours and forgot to

look in the mirror!"

Daruin smiled and lost himself for a moment in those liquid blue pools. "Blue eyes on a fox are unheard of. My gray ones are extremely rare. Even without your fur, you look very nice, Josh. You got your wish, even if I'll never know how."

"I-I do?" Josh asked, feeling himself react strangely. He thought he was blushing, but didn't feel like it. He noticed that his ears and whiskers had gone back, and could feel the former heat up inside.

So that's what a fox blush feels like, he thought for a moment.

"I mean," he continued, "I look OK as a fox? Do I still look like me?"

"You look like a fox, so don't look much like you used to. The eyes are the biggest thing that identify you as still being you. Other than that, you're a fox now, Josh. When you grew a muzzle and your ears moved up your previous facial features were significantly changed."

"I'm almost afraid to look. What if I'm...am I, uh, ugly?" he finally asked.

Daruin's reply was a grin and velvet murr of reassurance, "You aren't ugly, Josh. You're a beautiful fox. You're just gonna look a little silly until your fur grows out."

"You know," Josh began, smiling, "you're gonna have to teach me how to kiss with this muzzle." He reached up and gave himself a tap. "Whataya say?"

"I'd be happy to, it's only a little different."

The broker leaned forward slightly and tilted his head a bit to the side, starting the kiss slowly and easing Josh into it. After a few moments Josh got into the hang of the slightly different configuration and they enjoyed a long, tender kiss, both of them murring softly as it finally ended.

"Mm, that was fun," Josh whispered, swooning, "I've never murred before. I didn't know it happened all by itself."

He kissed Daruin again, this time more deeply. Not being used to it made him overdo the tongue, sending it in a little farther and more quickly than he expected. He balked and couldn't help himself, flopping onto his back and laughing. Daruin erfed and gagged a little before giggling himself and patting the quaking, fuzzy stomach.

"Heh, yeah, when we kissed before I had to hold myself back to keep from giving you a tonsillectomy. It's always that way with humans for us. Don't worry about it, you just need practice."

"Sorry," Josh gasped when his stomach stopped quaking. He looked up at Daruin and suddenly turned serious as a thought occurred to him. He sat up and cupped the fuzzy ears, massaging them gently, earning a long murr and a nuzzle.

"Daruin, before I forget, how *could* I forget, I want to thank you for taking care of me. It must have been so hard, I know. I want you to know that, well, I'm sorry you had to go through that. And it really means a lot to me that you stayed."

"Leaving never crossed my mind. I love you. I realized that when I thought I was about to lose you. I didn't know what was going on, but I knew I couldn't leave you to die. My heart would have died with you."

"I never thought I'd hear that before I met you," Josh said, hugging him warmly, "and I love you too, more than I can say. Thank you so much for loving me. I never knew how empty I was before."

"That's why I decided not to question this change as much as I should have. I don't care. I just want to stay with you, and I want you to stay with me. I just love you, and all that matters to me is that we're still together."

"You must be hungry. Can I fix you dinner, my love?" he asked, giving Josh a playful grin.

"Wow, you're right," Josh agreed, reminded of the aching chasm that was his stomach, "tell you what. Since you've been slaving over me for weeks, why don't you at least let me help? I could use the practice. I'm still not moving quite right."

He paused. "My love, I like the sound of that. I am yours, you know, until I die — if you want me." He kissed him then, a soft, slow one, and looked at him lovingly afterward. "Is it deer tonight? Hey, that was a pun! 'Slaving over me?'"

"In that case, we are each other's, Josh," Daruin said with a laugh, "and yes, I'm afraid so. Trust me, you like it. But for your awakening, we'll celebrate by breaking open some of those canned vegetables and have the cherry pie filling for dessert. Oh, and don't try to be a stand-up comedian when we get outta here, OK?"

Josh leaned on Daruin's shoulder as they stood, suffering another dizzy spell. It was gone almost instantaneously, though. They walked to the counter, sparing a glance at the fire.

"I see you cleaned out the ash and got more wood. Then again, I guess you did that a couple times, eh?"

Daruin nodded. "Three weeks is a long time. Almost a month. The worry almost killed me."

Josh sighed and leaned on the counter, tail waving a little. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it, I'll be OK now and so will you. I hope."

With that, he went to carve off a hunk of meat while Josh picked out a couple cans of vegetables.

"Hope?" Josh suddenly asked, "I feel fine. Could something go wrong? I mean, this isn't exactly something you *catch*, like a cold. There's some whole baby potatoes here and some corn. How about those?"

"True, and yes, they sound good," Daruin replied, then chuckled, "you've been eating like a horse, we might need another one of these." He returned with a large hunk of meat and pulled down a plate, cutting it into steaks and grabbing the old frying pan from the cupboard. "Another thing we're going to have to do is reimburse the owner of this cabin for all the stuff we've taken and used."

Josh looked around the room again. The back packs had long since been unpacked, their contents stacked neatly here and there, and the cabin now looked distinctly lived-in. He gave a little sigh.

"I guess I should clean it up before we leave."

The smell of the meat, now that it was right there, flooded his muzzle and he took a deep breath. It was rich and gamey, and somehow he realized it smelled fresh. This one must not be the first deer Daruin had brought in.

"That smells amazing," he said, then leaned over and pressed his muzzle to the side of Daruin's neck, "but you smell simply awesome!" He confirmed his sincerity with a long murr.

"You'll find that scent probably just became a much more important part of your life. Your nose is much more sensitive now, but also, fortunately for you, probably much more difficult to offend," he offered, giving the top of his muzzle a lick, "scents will tell you a lot about someone. I just wonder if the necessary changes were made in your brain to process all the new information."

"It seems to happen in little, um, jolts. While you were asleep, for instance, I didn't really smell that deer hanging in there until I saw it, then it hit me like a wall." He paused and chuckled, returning the lick affectionately. "It seems the more time goes by the more things get processed. For example, smelling the meat makes me wanna, I don't know, take it and run; but as soon as the thought occurs I can dismiss it and it doesn't come back."

Daruin blinked and rubbed his chin. "Wow, that must have been one thorough change. That impulse is typical of foxes. You seemed to have changed more than physically."

"Also, earlier I seemed to have no trouble getting control of my ears and tail once I tried, and I can always feel them moving around," he added, nostrils flaring at the proximity of the meat, "wow, it's awesome!" He stopped and turned, looking directly at Daruin with a huge grin on his muzzle. "Do you realize that all my wildest dreams have suddenly come true?"

He tried not to jump with joy at the sudden thought, and just threw his arms around the other fox. "I'm free, I'm a fox, and I'm in love!"

Once released Daruin set the frying pan on the rock over the fire and sat back on his haunches as the meat sizzled. He smiled warmly up at him.

"I tell you, it couldn't have happened to a nicer person. I don't know how it happened, but I am very happy that your dreams actually came true." he said, watching as Josh stood and scratched here and there at his growing pelt.

"Uh, I don't know how to put this — I mean, I wasn't allowed to learn a lot about the Black Days and all that, but, well, it has to be you, doesn't it? No one's ever had this happen before," Josh mused, glancing down at himself, "so I couldn't have just caught something out of the air. You said you might have some recessive genes or something. I've been with furs before, foxes and otherwise, and never changed; or do you think something could have been planted in me in the past and was dormant until now? I just don't know either."

Daruin paused, thinking, then nodded. "Yes, you're right, it must have been me, some sort of aggressive DNA tendency that just seemed to like you. As for a dormant implant awakening, I doubt it. Any such things always happen at puberty, when the body is looking deep into it's DNA. It must have been something about me and you."

"Nobody knows everything about the Black Days. Almost all of the records on the research were destroyed in the war. I guess it is possible. I mean, everyone's heard the old myths and who's to say the government isn't hiding certain information? But even in the myths, no one ever survived the change."

His voice trailed off as he kept thinking, then he finally just sighed softly and hugged his tail.

Josh stayed silent and stripped the paper from the vegetable cans, sitting them over the fire to warm. He sat and snuggled up to Daruin, gave him a nuzzle, and for the first time felt his own budding whiskers.

"Well, when we get back to civilization, we're going to have to drink a toast to your DNA."

He flicked his ears slightly and went on. "I wonder why I survived? It must have been your tender loving care."

Daruin chuckled at that, nuzzling close and resting against him. "Your not wanting to die, and me not letting you. I think we will drink that toast, but we're also presented with a problem. What will we do about you? If anyone finds out about what's happened to you, you'll be in a medical research lab before either of us could say 'Pavlov.' And I'll be strapped down right beside you."

"Really?" Josh asked, his brow furrowing and ears resting back a little, "I thought it would just make more paperwork." He thought for a few moments before continuing. "There's no record of me having any existence beyond a slave. No driver's license, a human social security number..."

His voice trailed off for a second.

"My new master's gonna want to know what happened to me, at the very least."

"I was unable to fulfill his order and will apologize. You died en route. Ran off after the crash, maybe, and I never saw you again. Wolves must have gotten you."

"But what about me now? I don't have an identity as a fox. And Joshua is a blatantly human name."

"Hmm. The eyes don't help, either."

"Oh yeah, that too. I guess they are a giveaway, aren't they? Blue just do not happen with furs."

Josh's nose quivered and he fetched plates for them, for the first time not feeling dizzy when he stood. "That smells just about right to me," he said, nodding at the venison, "still a little bloody, right?"

"Good for just past rare, but I like mine a little more medium. Believe me, I got my blood craving out of the way for the year when I brought those deer down."

"I'm starving!" Josh exclaimed, forking his steak onto a plate. He took a bite and jumped as he bit his lip with a fang. "Ouch! Gotta watch those!"

He moaned loudly as he chewed another bite, more carefully this time. "Oh, that is so good! You foxes have it made!" he roared around a mouthful.

"Uh, that's 'we' foxes. That we do, too, but you're one of us now, so don't continue to refer to foxes as if you weren't included." Daruin corrected with a smile, starting to eat himself.

The former human worked his way down to the last few bites, amazed at how the taste filled his entire muzzle, and thought hard about this latest complication. Life before had been so simple.

"What can you do with me? When we get back you'll have to explain me somehow," he said, "wait! What if I was a passenger along for the ride and had all my paperwork with me? It's possible since all your paperwork for me as a slave burned up in the crash. Maybe I could be a friend or," he paused, leaned forward, and nipped Daruin's whiskers, knowing how much he liked it, "lover, and had all my records with me which burned up in the wreck."

"They'd try to track down your name in their computers. You're on file at the slave commission. And when they couldn't find a fox to fit the circumstances, well, there goes that idea."

"Oh, that's right," Josh mused, "this is really good, by the way, you're a good cook. Most of the citizens I've met couldn't cook much because they had slaves to do it for them."

"I don't believe in slaves, remember? I never had any."

"You don't know how it shocked me to hear you say that the first time."

"I can imagine. You've never really dealt with anyone not of the slave trade so, among those you know, the attitude is rather persistent. That goes for owners, too."

He ran a claw softly through Josh's now peach-fuzzy fur, examining it closely. "Mm, you're gonna be silver in winter, too." he said with a grin.

"Yeah, but I can't wait for the red to come out!"

He finished eating and glanced to the window. "How has the weather been, by the way? And how much longer do

you want to stay?"

"The blizzard is long gone, but the temperature has stayed cold. It just dipped back to sub-freezing range again yesterday. There's been the usual, normal snowfall here and there, but nothing major. As you've probably seen, there's still just as much snow on the ground as when you were first overcome. Although, when your fur grows out, we should have a decent chance of making it. I can't imagine it staying this cold much longer. We'll go after your fur grows in."

"You know, wearing those human pants is going to be miserable."

"You just have to know how to work your tail. Usually, if they aren't too tight down the legs, your fur settles down a few minutes after you put them on. I'll help you when the time comes."

Josh nodded and took their plates to the sink, which had somehow not frozen its pipes. "Thanks, I'll probably need it. Speaking of pants," he said, looking down at himself. He had been naked all this time, but had hardly noticed. In the past it had always made him at least a little self-conscious.

"When you have fur it isn't quite so bad. Still, you shouldn't really wear anything yet, as it could damage your fur as it first grows in and create bad patterns. Then you'd have to wait for them to grow through."

"Hm," Josh hummed, still looking down at himself. Though still not very long, his coat was growing in fast. The base coat looked like it would be very thick, and he couldn't wait for it to grow — along with the longer guard hairs. "I can live with that."

Darwin eyed and smirked playfully. "I don't know if I can. You're going to be awfully cute, you know. My oh my."

Josh flashed him a grin and then turned. "You think so?" He swished his tail around briefly. "This root of a tail still looks kinda ugly, though."

The broker looked down at his own tail and smiled. "We were never really meant to be seen without fur, so yeah, you are going to look rather funny until it all grows in."

Josh nodded, still looking down at himself, and suddenly felt the need to urinate. He grabbed the blanket from beside Darwin.

"I gotta go, be back in a minute," he said, trying to work the snow shoes onto his new feet. He managed to get them secured, wrapped himself in the blanket, and headed outside.

It was bitterly cold and a breeze was bringing in more frigid air. He stumbled a little as he tried to high-step through the drifts to the cabin's side then parted the blanket. He relaxed himself, then yelped, clamping down again.

He had completely forgotten that he now had a sheath and almost urinated right up through it! That might be fine for animals, but furs never did so, preferring to keep themselves clean inside.

Now stinging intensely for relief, he forced himself to relax again and concentrated. Shortly there came a smooth, surprisingly refreshing sensation around his penis as it slid forth. Watching and feeling it emerge was mesmerizing. He had always hoped he would have a penis like that.

It was much like Darwin's, only slightly slimmer. He sighed as his bladder emptied, watching himself in fascination. After shaking off the last drops, he pulled it back in, finding the act simple and again, very pleasant. Having finished, he shook his head and giggled a little.

"Get a hobby, Josh!"

A look around confirmed that the forest was still immersed in a sea of snow. It was drifting everywhere and never seemed to be less than a couple of feet deep. Walking to civilization was going to be a task indeed, even if it didn't snow any more at all.

"That was an experience," he mused after returning to Daruin's side.

"Hm, really?" the fox asked, blinking before glancing down Josh's body and smirking, "I didn't think it was *that* big, but then again from the look of your sheath..."

"You can't even see it!" Josh yelped, giggling and giving him a playful swat. He stretched luxuriously, grunting at a little lingering soreness, then relaxed. "I feel *wonderful!* Better than I ever have; well, at least now that I have some sense of balance."

Daruin chuckled and coyly tickled along Josh's ribs, "I'm still getting used to the change. You're going to be a very handsome fox, you know. Hell, you already are now that your muzzle fur has grown in." He punctuated his statement with a lick on said muzzle.

Josh murred, again a little surprised at how it came so naturally, and gave him one in return. "When do you think it will be safe to, uh, show it to you?"

Grinning in a coy, carnivorous way that might normally scare a human, but in his current form seemed more alluring to Josh than threatening, Daruin answered, "I'm not sure. There's no telling what my reaction will be when I do see it, hon."

Josh found himself responding to that look, a shiver of lust suddenly running through him, but he forced it down and smiled instead. Getting up to distract himself, he set about walking around the room again, swishing his tail as much as he could, then stopped.

He began hopping, seeing how high he could jump. His legs felt much more elastic than he was used to and he found himself leaping twice as high as expected. Landing, however, was a different matter and he swayed precariously for a moment before falling flat on his face.

"Ouch! Watch that first step!" he mused from the floor. "Seems there's a tendency to go forward."

Daruin jumped, then relaxed some when he heard that sense of humor still functioning. "You're still not one hundred percent, you know. You might want to be more careful before you try for the high jump team." he admonished, grinning as he helped him up.

"I'm so happy!" Josh exclaimed, wrapping his arms around Daruin and reveling in the feel of their fur mingling, "I'm a fox! This is so amazing! And it's all because of you."

The other fox flattened his ears slightly. "It should have killed you. And if it had, that would also have been because of me."

"All's well that ends well," Josh countered, giving him a feathery kiss, "and if I had died, you probably never would have known it was you. We still don't have proof, just an educated guess."

"Only logical one, though."

"True. OK, what are we gonna do to kill a few hours until nighttime? I can't wait to look outside at night. Need any help with, hm, anything you've been doing while I was out of commission?"

"I have most of the grunt work done; firewood's chopped, there's food, so I guess I've got most of the angles covered. Basically we're just gonna wait until your fur grows in. At this rate it can't be more than a day or two. It seems a

temporary jolt to your metabolic rate was part of the process, which would explain your appetite. So as soon as you've got a decent pelt we'll head out."

Josh looked down at himself again. He had about a quarter-inch of fur, and half an inch around his chest and shoulders. He felt at his muzzle, noticing the short whiskers.

"Hey, my whiskers are growing!"

A tongue ran softly along his muzzle, sliding over the budding whiskers and sending a shiver through Josh's entire body.

"Their sensitivity also makes for some interesting applications."

"So I've *gasp* noticed from when *oooo* I caught yours in my lips before." he replied, then did so and allowed himself to become lost in the simple pleasure of the two of them licking each other. It felt wonderful, and once he got over that initial, intense rush, not necessarily sexual. "You'll have to educate me," he added with a sly grin, "I only know what masters have asked for."

Darwin was lost, sighing and murring as they licked, happy to be gently grooming his love's soft fur. He finally stopped and nuzzled him tenderly, chuckling a little.

"Heh, sorry, got carried away. Another instinct to tell you about; we tend to groom those we care about, just by licking sometimes. You've probably noticed me doing that to you before, and now I want to do it more. You're going to feel the urge to. For canids it's OK between friends occasionally and happens all the time with partners. But other species can get a bit touchy about it."

"Any time you want to get carried away, go right ahead," the slave whispered, murring, "and I'll keep that in mind. I kind of have an inkling to right now. I love you, you know."

Darwin gently kissed him, then scooped him up and settled back down onto the bed with him, sharing a nice cuddle with his love. "I know. I love you too."

Emotion rose in Josh again, along with another feeling, and he looked up at him. "Darwin, I want to belong to you," he began carefully, "I want to be yours. I don't mean as a slave, but as a...mate. I would do anything for you."

Darwin blinked, sniffed back a sudden tear, and squeezed Josh lovingly. That concept would normally seem a little premature at this point, but he had by now discovered one thing about Josh; there was no deception in the former human's feelings, no want of betrayal, no ulterior motives, no carefully considered duplicity — only raw feeling, expressed so bashfully yet felt so deeply. He looked again into those amazing blue eyes, made even more so by now being set in a vulpine face.

"As mates then. If you would be mine, I would most happily be yours."

Josh sat speechless, looking at Darwin and trying to fathom what he had just heard. In spite of what he felt in his heart, he couldn't help a slight pang of insecurity. "You really mean that? You would keep someone like me?"

"I'd have to be out of my mind not to. I know I'm crazy, but I'm not *that* crazy."

"But I'm just a slave," he stammered, "I know you're setting me free, but that's really what I am inside. I don't know," he said, pausing, "you could find someone a lot easier to deal with than me."

Darwin's ears flicked back for a moment, "Maybe I could, but I don't want to. I don't want anyone else. I love *you*. Maybe I could find someone better, but I doubt it."

"I just don't want to be less than you want, that's all," Josh began, "you can call me insecure, if it fits. Do you want me any more or less now that I'm a fox?" he finished, ears perking.

Smiling at the eagerness in Josh's ears, Daruin thought for a moment. "You do look cute like that, you know? And to answer your question, it doesn't make any difference. True, you're a bit more physically attractive to me now, but you were a very attractive human, so you've only gained ground there. I loved you before you became a fox, so now it's just icing on the cake."

"I'm more attractive?" Josh asked, tail wagging, "but I look like I've been sheered to make a sweater! Thanks for saying so, though, it means a lot to me. Especially coming from you."

"I am already picturing you with fur, but still, I have no doubts or regrets about you. Do you?"

"Are you kidding? If you like it, then I couldn't be happier! And like I said, I've always wanted to be one." He looked up to one of the windows, noting that it had gotten dark. "Woo! It's dark!"

He leapt up, wobbled a bit, then prowled to the nearest window, pressing his nose against the glass.

"Man, I can see almost like daylight! There's just no color."

"Night vision. There are now more rods in your eyes and probably a photo-reflective coating on the back of your retina like mine."

Josh scratched briefly at himself, then looked down. Fur was growing on his scrotum, too, and he scratched lightly again. "That itches!" he complained, giggling, then eyed himself some more. It was amazing to see himself having what he had always been fascinated with. Glancing back at Daruin, his ears flattened a little.

"Sorry if I'm being less than subtle. This is a new thing for me." he said sheepishly.

Daruin chuckled, eyeing the new fox's body for a moment and fighting down a sudden rush of desire. "Don't worry about it. I almost understand. Still, I have to ask, what is it like? Being different, getting accustomed to the change? And oh, try to refrain from scratching or you'll make imperfections in that lovely pelt you're going to have, then end up waiting for them to grow out."

Josh thought that over for a moment while he got back into bed and snuggled in between his lover's legs. He gave Daruin's crotch a long, murring sniff and let his breath out in a satisfied sigh.

"Wow, that's hard to explain. Everything is different. I mean everything. But it all seems better, with the exception of colors being so dull. It's a small price to pay. I mean, everything *smells!* I can hear so much! And the way my tail feels against my spine, like having a fist pressed comfortably there."

Daruin bent down to lick Josh's ears. "At least it's been almost all pleasant surprises."

"And," Josh took up, blushing as foxes did, "when I went out to pee it felt like velvet. Not peeing itself, but when it slid out. Wow. It's a lot of little things like that, too, and stuff like having such springy legs. Next time I'll try not to fall down."

"I never really stopped to think about how things like that felt, but yeah, I guess your descriptions work." Daruin agreed, smiling at him.

"One downside is that I'm going to have my own pelt to take so much care of like I had to do for owners. Something tells me I'll miss just having hair to wash."

"You still have your eyes, something I'll have a lot of fun getting used to."

Josh leaned down and took another long sniff of Daruin's crotch, filling his lungs, closing his eyes as thick, wonderful smell packed every nook and cranny of his head. He exhaled and looked back up at Daruin, who was shaking his head and grinning at him.

"Wow, I'd better stop doing that," he said a little sheepishly, "I don't think I'm in any condition just yet."

Daruin blushed slightly and pulled Josh up a bit, nuzzling him, "No, probably not. You're still recovering and I'm still a little tired. I mean, you just survived something that should have killed you. It would be best to give you a little time."

"I know, but well, does it ever stop being so," Josh started, then paused, nose quivering at the end of his snout, "damned erotic? How can you live with it? Sitting here with you, all I can smell is how incredible you are. It's so masculine, so musky but not tart, so thick but at the same time not heavy. And it's *so* sexual."

He looked at himself and noticed that his sheath was swelling a bit and forced it down, shaking his head. "All I want to do is make love with you again."

"You're still getting used to your nose. After you've spent some time with your cranked-up senses your brain will begin compensating. But to tell the truth, you're not the only one having a lot of trouble."

To emphasize the point, he gave Josh's shoulder a little nibble. Josh grinned and kissed him, then looked toward the window again and sighed.

"When are we leaving? At this rate, how long do you think I'll need before this grows in?" He ran a paw-like hand down his chest and stomach, which were now covered with a very thick base coat, though it was still short. Meanwhile, Daruin was doing the same to his back and murring.

"Another couple of days, at this rate your guard hairs should be coming through by then. I'm still jealous. You're going to have a fantastic coat." He stopped and put on a pouting expression. "Not even a fox to start with, and he gets fur that most foxes would kill for."

Josh laughed and followed his gaze, still trying to get used to the blind spot caused by his muzzle. "I guess it will be pretty nice. Maybe that's just because it's brand new. It will probably get dingy and faded like an old car before long." he joked.

"And as for being jealous, with a good bath I'm sure your pelt would look just as good as any spoiled master's. You could probably say that I got it from you anyway." Josh suggested, giving him a lick. Then his ears jumped again.

"Hey, I just licked you without even thinking." he proclaimed. Daruin nodded and proceeded to affectionately groom Josh's muzzle and face, licking slowly.

"Mm, instinct again. But although you received vulpine DNA from me, it would have had to meld with your own. That means the genes for my fur were probably only a genetic template, and your body mixed it's own complete fur matrix," Daruin added, still licking him.

Josh murred contentedly and stroked him. "I'm just not used to being licked so much, or doing it myself," he said. He tried not to *try* to return the favor and did a passable job of it. Daruin continued for a while, not really realizing it when he had begun kissing Josh but settling in for a nice, long one anyway.

"Wow," Josh cooed. He relaxed and tried to let his concentration lapse rather than make a real effort, and found himself licking softly over Daruin's muzzle and cheeks. He knew enough to keep his tongue from getting too wet

with saliva and after a while he too ended up kissing. When it ended, he pulled his head back.

"I thought you did that on purpose."

"Not really. It was a nice touch on both our parts. Lord, this is the best lazy afternoon I think I've ever spent, and I have been doing a little more thinking on how we're going to explain you." Daruin answered as Josh put a paw on his shoulder and eased him down to lay with him.

"Oh? What's that?"

The broker's voice dropped to a soft, thoughtful tone as it always did when he was pondering something. "The way I figure it, the only way to make sure nothing bad happens is to the truth — to as many people as possible. That way, even if they wanted to, the government couldn't just make you disappear. We would only have to put up with the scrutiny for a few months or a year. After that, they would probably pretty much leave us alone."

"You mean like the press? Why? What would they want to do to me, or you?"

"Josh," Daruin began, meeting Josh's naiveté with a fatherly tone, "nothing like this have *ever* happened before. The two of us, especially you, are a medical and genetic improbability of astounding proportions. I'm sure you've heard about how tightly controlled any sort of genetic engineering is these days as a result of the past. You said I was spouting map coordinates when I was delirious. I might be a regressive, actually carrying a copy of one of the original Black Days matrixes inside me."

He paused for a slight shudder before continuing, looking back at the attentive blue eyes. "If they could, they would most likely lock us both up for study. They might anyway. I don't know exactly what their reaction will be, but I do know enough to know we *have* to be careful."

"I suppose that makes sense. Erf, the last thing I want to do is spend the rest of my life in a lab," Josh said, earning an agreeing nod, "but if we're an isolated case, would they care that much?"

"Yes."

"That's assuming we don't get eaten by wolves when we leave. Then again, we've lived this far."

"Between the two of us we should be able to fight them off if they return," Daruin offered, giving the nearest ear a playful nip.

"Woo, I liked that!" he yelped, grinning, then tucked his head onto Daruin's chest. "I'm getting a little tired, I think." Then he yawned, showing pristine white teeth and fangs.

Daruin smiled and nibbled softly at Josh's ears. "And I'm sure, when you get up, that you'll be hungry," he said with mock resignation.

"Yup, probably."

* * * * *

"Keep your eyes closed," Daruin stressed, walking toward the doorway after rummaging his way through the closet and finding what he wanted, "it's a surprise."

Pert black nose quivering, Josh tried to sniff out what Daruin was up to. He grinned and kept them shut.

"Whatever it is I hope I can eat it. I've done enough exercising today to have a whole deer to myself."

"It's not food, but it does look good enough to eat. Especially since it refuses to put pants on."

"I didn't smell anything."

"You wouldn't. Now, open your eyes."

Josh opened his eyes and, for a moment, thought Daruin was standing in front of him. Then he saw the eyes, which immediately jumped wide open. After a surprised gasp he raised his paws to his face, touching his snout.

"Oh wow! I'm...whew!" he blurted, shocked at actually seeing himself this way.

Facing him was an extremely handsome red fox, a beautiful silver winter coat gleaming from the mirror. He moved closer and studied himself, fingers following his eyes as they moved over him — eyes which were just as bright and blue as always, but now sporting slit irises.

Daruin was smiling at him from over the mirror's top edge and flicked his ears playfully.

"I told you, you look pretty good."

"Seeing myself kinda makes it all that much more real, you know? It's shocking! That's me!"

"Yup."

Josh stuck out his tongue and bared his fangs, moving his lips around with a clawed finger and eyeing things over. "Well, that explains the lisp I've had so much trouble getting rid of," he mused after pulling his tongue back in, "and my whiskers look half-grown now. Woo! My ears are so cute!"

Blushing a little, he gave Daruin's muzzle a lick. "Sorry if I'm babbling again."

"Nah, it makes you look cute, or even cuter as the case may be," Daruin offered as Josh stepped back to view his whole body, "something else to get used to."

"I'll live!"

Daruin smiled and put the mirror down, going back to sorting through the clothes he had found, and started tossing possible fits at Josh. "It's going to be some walk to the next town, so try to find something to supplement your fur."

Josh started catching and trying to sort, laughing as Daruin kept throwing more. "Hold on, will ya?" he yelled, throwing something back, "Is it still that cold? I haven't peed since morning."

"It feels below zero again," the fox answered, wrinkling his muzzle, "so if you have to go now, be quick about it or something might freeze off."

"Now I can just warm it back up," Josh joked, pulling out the waistband on the shorts he was wearing, "wanna see?"

"I'll be glad to help if you have any trouble."

Josh debated going over to him, then decided he'd better wait a little yet. Instead he went outside and did what he had to, again enjoying the simple sensation of it moving in and out of his sheath.

"It's too late in the day to do much more, so we're pretty much done until morning," Daruin said, looking around him in satisfaction and rubbing an ear, "as long as we don't make too much of a mess between now and then, we should be able to stuff the bags and head out."

"Sleeping with you has been a real pleasure, so I can handle another night here," Josh offered, walking up and

hugging him tightly, "just being with you feels wonderful. And feeling you fur-to-fur is even better."

They wrapped their tails around each other's waist, forming a kind of tail doughnut, and nibbled at one another for a few moments.

"For you and me both, love. I guess we just can't get enough of each other. Who'd of ever thought I'd fall in love with a slave?"

"I'm glad you feel that way. I know I keep repeating myself, but I can't tell you how much you mean to me." Josh agreed, licking at Daruin's lips and whiskers.

"You don't need to tell me, I can see it in your eyes, feel it when we touch, and hear it in your breath. I want you to know that you mean just as much to me, and I hope I can tell you in the same ways."

Josh felt a little dizzy, for the first time in his life actually swooning at the words of another. He had always fantasized of hearing someone say such things to him, but hearing them actually spoken, and spoken by someone so emotionally distant only weeks ago, was almost overwhelming. Recovering a moment later, he found himself being steadied by Daruin's grip.

"Sorry. I guess it just really hit me then. You have no idea what it's like for a slave — former slave — to hear someone say that. I love you, Daruin."

"I love you two, with all my heart."

There came a loud growl from Josh's stomach and they both giggled.

"Hungry?"

"Yeah, actually I am."

"Of course you are." Daruin joked.

"What's left to eat?"

"Only canned stuff, we don't have time to find another deer."

"Any more canned food and I'm going to start wishing I had something from a slave pantry."

"We could always snack on each other." Daruin proffered, giving him a meaningful nibble.

"You've become quite the tease, you know that? I have to get used to it, I guess."

"That's what you get when you toss a slightly repressed romantic into a secluded cabin with a gorgeous fox like you. What's a guy like me to do except become a tease?"

"I don't know if I'm *that* good looking. Maybe. It's hard to look in that mirror and be objective, so I'll take your word for it."

"You are, trust me. It only follows, as you were a handsome human. Remember that we furs are based on you. Look at me. I don't look exactly like a four-legged fox, but rather a mix of them and human. Besides, even if you weren't, I wouldn't care. But what do you think of me?" he asked, looking at him closely.

"I wouldn't be a very good judge of that."

"Sure you would." Daruin countered.

"Nah, it's different with us. A former master — the fox — once mentioned that a particular wolf was considered extremely handsome by just about everyone. He didn't look all that great to me. On the other hand, there was another wolf, one Master gave me to one night, that everyone thought was quite ugly even though he was well built. I thought he was irresistibly gorgeous."

"While we were, you know, he asked why I was kissing him so much, which other furs didn't do. I said, in so many words, that I was just trying to do my job well. He knew I was lying."

"And?" Daruin asked, reaching up to rub Josh's ears.

Josh murred and shrugged a little. "He made me tell him. I called him the most erotically handsome wolf I'd ever seen, and he knew I meant it. He bought me three days later."

"Ah, I see."

"He was fun," Josh said with a wicked grin, "the way he would prowl up to me and just..." His voice trailed off in a sigh before he looked back at the fox, "that was the closest I ever felt to being free until I met you. I think he loved me, but I'm not sure. Last year he died in a plane crash and I cried for days."

"I'm sorry," Daruin said, stroking his cheek.

"Oh, that's OK," Josh countered, licking his paw, "I've got you now."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"I think you're the most erotically handsome wolf I've ever seen."

"Be serious!" Daruin chided as they chuckled.

Josh sobered up and nuzzled him. "You know, it wouldn't matter either way. I don't know what other foxes or other furs think of you, but to me your face holds more for me than any I've ever seen."

Daruin grinned and started walking them slowly toward the bed, keeping Josh hugged close to him. "Why, thank you."

"So what about you, anyway? Are you sure about all of this? Me changing? I know we've talked a lot about me, but how is this for you? Are you sure you want a male enough to move me in?"

His first answer was a soft brush of lips against his, then Daruin shook his head slightly at him as they reached the side of the mattress. Another kiss followed, one that seemed to last forever and felt so incredible they both almost got dizzy.

"I've never kissed anyone like that before I met you. Not a male or female, no one."

He backed off very slightly and ran his claws tenderly over Josh's muzzle, earning a long sigh and soft shiver. He moved them lower, under his chin and down his throat, then on to uncover and stroke little circles around Josh's nipples. Josh murred loudly and moved closer, paws going to Daruin's ribs.

The broker's claws moved even lower until they reached that pristine, formerly off-limits sheath. They slid over it gently, teasing at the skin beneath the short hairs that covered it. Josh gasped and tried to stay still. Something also told him to keep it inside until Daruin, whom he felt was the dominant of them, wanted it out.

"I've never touched a man like that. I never even really thought that hard about it except in high school when I was

infatuated with that guy." He kept on playing his claws and finger pads over Josh's quickly swelling sheath as he talked, stomach fluttering at being able to touch such a pristine, stunning fox like that; and one he loved. "Yet with you I feel completely comfortable doing it, and I'd feel completely comfortable saying so to anyone who asked."

"It doesn't matter if we're male or female, only that we're together. It took quite a man to bring that out of me. I want to please you and be pleased by you. Does that answer *your* question?" he finally asked, smiling.

Josh just gulped and nodded before parting his lips to pant slightly at the incredible sensations Daruin was spreading over his entire body from just those softly touching claws. Daruin took the opportunity to lock his onto those parted lips and kissed Josh deeply and sensuously, his fingers pausing to undo the catch on the shorts he was wearing.

As the pants fell to the floor, Daruin gave Josh a look that made his heart thump. Now that he was a fox, instincts were coming into play that hadn't when he was human. The broker's features became slightly feral as the scent of arousal floated around them and he growled softly, yet his eyes remained soft.

That combination, part primal, part loving, added another, more centered sensation to those coming from where Daruin's fingers were playing. He growled softly himself, and felt a similar expression cross his own face, before being pulled into another kiss, feeling a mixture of strength and surrender that had his sheath warming even further.

"I think you should lay down." Daruin suggested, his voice thick, deep, and insistent.

Josh growled, feeling his hackles rise slightly. The mixture of feelings was incredible, the physical sensations intense, the emotions full boil. He lowered himself to the mattress, Daruin following with a paw cupped over his sheath. They settled side-by-side and Daruin looked down at what he held. Josh's instincts run deep indeed, because it must be taking some effort to stay inside like that.

He ran his finger over the top, wetting it with the sweet liquid that had started seeping heavily and filling the air with its scent. Kissing him deeply, both of them growling, he teased his finger in and out of the opening a few times before sliding his paw down to caress the plump balls below. Josh squirmed and moved his hips, kissing him with an almost desperate passion.

"Oh please, please!" Josh pleaded, his new, vulpine body alight like his human one could never have been. Daruin murred and squeezed just above the base of Josh's balls where his knot was now imbedded. It nearly leapt out, sliding almost too fast for his fingers to follow, until the entire organ was standing proud for the first time.

Josh cooed loudly and tried to glance down, but he couldn't stop arching his back and bucking his hips. With one paw Daruin had taken complete control. He was lost in ecstasy. When the paw closed around his knot he thought he would break in half.

Looking down the length of Josh's body and to the organ in his grasp, it suddenly struck Daruin just how beautiful and luscious the male body could be. He had pleased himself plenty of times, but it was different seeing someone else in such a state. A quick squirt of pre-cum leapt onto Josh's belly as he grabbed the perfectly formed bulb. All he wanted to do was give this fox he loved a great deal of pleasure, to see that body come alive.

He knew Josh wouldn't last long and nudged his snout under his chin. His fangs touched Josh's throat just as his paw stroked the new penis for the first time, bringing a loud gasp and the sound of ripping fabric from where he clutched the mattress.

Gnawing erotically at his throat, he stroked the length of him slowly twice more, his paw slick with pre-ejaculate, letting his palm cradle the knot with each pass. Josh's hips were rising rhythmically and quickly moved more insistently. He had never done so before, but surprised himself by not even hesitating when he felt the knot swell in his paw; he turned quickly and took the burning shaft into his muzzle just as it jolted with the first pulse of climax.

It gagged him for a moment, so strong and thick was the stream that slammed into his throat, but he recovered

quickly and gulped from another man for the first time. The taste, so perfect and sexy-sweet, became another surprise, as did the amount, as Josh's hips slammed up at him with each intense throb.

His love seemed to go on forever, yipping and howling like he only thought happened in the movies, until finally the hips began to relax and the spurting in his muzzle lessened. He knew what canines liked and kept him in his mouth for a few minutes, holding his knot and sucking softly until the final dribbles ended.

Releasing him and licking his muzzle, he moved back up and petted Josh's chest and belly, which quivered under his touch. He smiled and kissed him, both of them murring continuously.

"Oh my god."

"That bad?" Daruin joked.

Josh gave him a wide-eyed look and laughed in reply, stroking his chest. Daruin was basically kneeling beside him, and he looked down to find the fox very exposed.

"Maybe we should take care of yours now." he said, pulling him into a deep kiss. When it was over, he scooted a little closer, his intentions clear.

"That would be nice," Daruin said with a growl, his lust rising now that Josh had reminded him of the intense pressure coming from between his legs.

Josh nudged him with a leg, making his eyebrows rise.

"Not that."

"Why not, my love? Please?"

"Josh, you may have been accustomed to that when you were an experienced human, but now you've essentially got a new body. You're not as ready as you're used to."

Josh couldn't take his eyes from Daruin's gleaming, dripping maleness and his nose wiggled at the scent of it. Daruin was a pleasant length and nicely slender.

"I can do it if you go in easy. It worked for you, didn't it?" he asked, reaching down to run a fingertip along the length of Daruin's shaft.

"You didn't have a bulb."

"There was a first time before, there has to be one now, and I want it to be you." He found himself reaching up and pulling Daruin firmly down to nip at his cheeks and shoulders.

"Take me." he said, almost demanding it.

Daruin growled and slipped between the legs that parted for him, settling over Josh with an incredible sense of power swelling in him. How could anything possibly feel so compelling, so all-consuming?"

Ankles rested on his lower back and two sets of toes grabbed the base of his tail, making him gasp as he tried to aim himself. He licked Josh's face lovingly as he pressed the tip of his penis against the waiting tail hole and nudged it forward.

Josh hissed beneath him as he pressed more firmly and he found it harder to enter than before, but he couldn't stop now. The sudden realization that he was about to take a strong, yet virgin male fox as his own wiped away any more doubt. He pushed until he felt the tight muscles succumb, still licking affectionately at his face, and groaned loudly

as his shaft slid in to the knot.

A downward glance showed Josh's manhood again emerge, as if Daruin was pushing it out, and he marveled at his ability to get rock hard again so soon. He gave Josh a predatory grin and slowly dropped down onto him.

Claws dug into his back as he began to slowly stroke inside him. It was hard to control himself, but he managed to do so for a while as Josh became accustomed to being penetrated again. The longer they went on, the more Josh gripped, clawed, kissed, and nibbled at him.

Soon he was riding him with almost as much abandon as he had on their first night together, and Josh held nothing back either. The room was filled with the grunts, gasps, groans and yips of the two of them.

His muzzle found the juncture of Josh's neck and shoulder and clamped down there as he felt his knot begin to tingle wildly. Then his ears flicked back and he hesitated, still stroking. He wanted to tie him desperately, he *needed* to, but didn't want to hurt him. Josh saved him the trouble by biting his shoulder in return and grabbing his lower back with almost painful force.

"Make me yours, my love!" Josh insisted, his voice a snarl.

The broker couldn't take any more. Bracing himself with one arm, he wrapped the paw of the other around Josh's straining shaft. He thrust deeply and firmly only a few more times before driving in and shoving his hips against his lover's. A crescendo of delight flared from his loins as his knot forced it way into Josh, bringing a painful yelp from him.

He couldn't stop, though, and his hips pounded rapidly in short jabs. There was only a vague awareness of Josh's cries of pleasure as the initial shock of the tie subsided, and of how his paw was jerking Josh as quickly as his hips were hammering him.

The penis jackknifed in his paw and the spasm of Josh cumming hit him like a ton of bricks. It felt as if his organs were being yanked into a tight tunnel of pure sensation. He exploded with such force that he nearly blacked out, and he could feel the fangs and claws of both of them everywhere.

Finally, he regained his senses. Still panting, he curled down and took Josh in his mouth, cleaning his shaft and enjoying the soft surges of seed for a minute or so. When he looked up to Josh's face he quickly stifled an impulsive giggle.

Josh was still panting a little, his tongue hanging from one side of his mouth, arms still at his sides where they had flopped when Daruin moved down to suck him. He relaxed onto him and licked his tongue, then the rest of his face, letting a paw wander back to his lover's knot. Josh responded in kind, and while waiting for Daruin's bulb to shrink they shared a few minutes of silent, deeply moving affection.

Being tied was not a new experience to Josh, and Daruin had already done it to him once before, but now it felt altogether different. A fur's instincts run extremely deep, and Josh had never felt so completely taken in his life, like he was being held prisoner by Daruin's manhood. But he was a willing one, by far, and licked at him lovingly.

"Did that wolf ever make you feel like that?" Daruin asked quietly after he had regained his ability to think, betraying a little insecurity.

"Not hardly," Josh answered with a huff, "he was good, but not *that* good. He really did like to kiss me, though, I guess because not a lot of others wanted to. No, this is definitely way beyond anything before, my love."

Daruin smiled and nuzzled along his cheek.

"It sounds like you really liked him. I think you loved him, too."

Josh mulled that over for a moment as he stroked up and down Daruin's back, "No, I don't think I did, not the way I love you. I think in time I might have, and maybe I was starting to. When I heard that he had died it made me ache all over, but it was nothing like this."

He giggled and gave Daruin's snout a lick. "I remember one time I was waiting outside, munching on crackers he had gotten to tide me over while he had dinner with some businessman. Master must have been in the bathroom or something because the other guy came out first. He made idle chat for a few minutes, groped me now and then; you know, the usual."

Daruin frowned a bit as Josh continued talking. Every time Josh casually said something like that it gave him another tiny insight into what slave life was really like. Each instance made his ambivalent dislike of slavery move more toward outright hatred, and his justifications for being a part of the trade were becoming harder to justify.

"Anyway, he mentioned that Master seemed like a good owner and I agreed. Then he asked if I thought I'd be luckier if I had a better looking owner. That was a cruel thing to say. People think we're robots or something and don't know how people feel. I just looked at him, took a slow breath, and said 'sir...*fuck you.*'"

Daruin's ears jumped and he smiled, incredulous.

"What happened?"

"I should have gotten a good beating, but it just so happened that Master had walked up behind us and heard the whole thing. He had to make a display of it, so he faced me with his back to the guy and started slapping me, entirely for show. It was such a riot! The guy was fuming, and here's Master fake slapping me and trying not to laugh! I'm trying to look guilty and obedient but could hardly keep from laughing myself at the expression on his face. What a day. That evening he treated me like a king."

Daruin kissed him and nuzzled along his snout, removing his paw now that Josh's knot had receded. They sighed together and petted softly. The broker failed to realize that his own knot had subsided, so wonderful it felt to be inside his fox. He withdrew slowly, licking Josh's face as the new fox moaned at having his rump finally released. Careful not to pull himself in, he grabbed the cloth from the water pail beside the bed and quickly wiped himself clean.

"I can't wait to get myself treated so I can do that for you properly." Josh mused, licking his lips as Daruin dropped the dirty cloth back into the pail.

He was referring to the monthly applications of semi-permanent lubricant many male slaves receive to make anal sex clean, preventing any fecal matter from lingering in the colon. It made bowel movements easier and he had actually missed having it the last few days.

"You would do that for me? You don't have to do that anymore."

Josh nodded, pulling Daruin back to him tightly. "But I want to, especially now that I'm a fox. I just feels right wanting to do it all for you. I want to give you every pleasure, no matter how small. It's just in my nature."

"You're stronger than me."

"Physically," Josh said, agreeing and clarifying all at once, "and I guess these scratches on your back help prove it. But I know something deep inside me, something instinctive and primal. You have me. I am yours. Forget slavery, I'm talking about really *belonging*. It feels wonderful to give in to you."

Daruin smiled warmly and kissed him, then chuckled as he remembered how they got started.

"You sure are easy to light off. I won't have to try hard."

"I wasn't prepared for just how good being a fox can feel," Josh agreed with a big grin, "now I know why they always wanted me to spend a lot of time down there. Wow."

"Next time I'll make sure you last longer, my love." Daruin said with a mischievous grin.

"I can't wait."

* * * * *

"Thank goodness," Josh said, blowing a huge cloud of steam into the air as they climbed the short stairway, "I've had enough walking."

"You and me both," Daruin agreed, "now remember, let me do the talking."

"OK, boss."

The sergeant behind the desk, a fox himself, watched the two snow-covered men walk in and smiled when he saw the gorgeous young stud.

"Blue contacts?" he asked when they had stepped closer.

"Not quite," Daruin said, then looked around, "do you have a pay phone?"

"Right over there by the bathrooms," the sergeant said, pointing to their left.

"Thanks," Daruin replied with a smile and took Josh with him. He reached into a pocket on Josh's back pack and pulled out a coin, then dialed a number and waited a few moments.

"Slave barracks, may I help you?"

"Are you a slave?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sold yet?"

There was a brief pause, then the voice replied. "Yes sir, I leave tonight."

"Good. Is there another phone next to you?"

"Yes, sir." came the answer, in a now slightly confused tone.

"Do exactly as I say, understand?"

After nodding Daruin had the slave connect him through the other phone to numerous more, then on to his office. Once he had calmed down his secretary, he made sure she was recording the call and told her the story.

"Remember, call everyone and play that recording. Then print a copy and e-mail it to everyone on my address list."

"I will. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I am not crazy. Now just do it for me, please?"

"Sure thing."

"Bye now."

He hung up and looked at Josh, sighing heavily.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

They hugged and walked back to the front desk.

"I'd like to report the return of two missing persons."

* * * * *

"How are you today?"

"Bored." Josh mumbled, replying for them both. Two weeks of answering questions and having various samples taken were not what they considered a good time, unless they counted all the occasions when they had made love in their room which, thankfully, was free of cameras.

"Well, I'm not," the agent said, sitting at his desk, "just how many people know?"

"Like I've told you every fucking day for the last two weeks, at least twenty. And no, I'm not saying who. And even if I did, they would have immediately told countless others, many of which I don't even know."

The agent shook his head and then nodded to the door behind them. "All right, we'll move on. I still can't believe a gene like this popped up after six generations."

He stood and relinquished his chair to the broad-shouldered bear that walked in, then left.

The bear stood for a moment, looking them over, then dropped a thick manila envelope loudly onto the desk in front of them and sat down.

"I am a US. Marshall. You can call me Stan."

"Hi."

"Goddamned blue eyes," he muttered, growling, then tore his own eyes away from Josh and included them both in his gaze, "what a pain in the ass this has been. Couldn't your damned spunk have changed his eye color?"

"What's this?" Josh asked, pointing to the envelope while snorting back a giggle.

"That is why I'm here. As a matter of fact, that is you."

"Huh?" Daruin and Josh both said in unison.

"Your new name, your new life history, everything. Josh you can keep, because citizens do use human names now and then, but your last name is different now."

Josh looked puzzled, but Daruin caught on right away.

"Federal protection?"

"Under certain terms," the bear said emphatically, getting up. He moved around to their side of the desk and sat on the edge, poking a finger onto the envelope. "This is your ticket out. Josh will get a new life and you," he said, pointing at Daruin, "get your life back. But there are conditions."

"Such as? And do you mean we're going to be separated?"

"No, you won't be. You two are obviously in love, even a grump like me can see that. But here it is: One, you never, ever, *ever* tell another single soul what happened to make this pretty little fox, here. I didn't know it was possible until this week, myself. There are things about the Black Days and the origin of furs that don't need to be public record for a while yet. Trust me, they're not grade school material. Eventually this will all come out, but for now it's better to just let it go. And you tell your friends at work and beyond that the phone call from the police station was a big hoax or something."

"Done."

"Two, the slave died in the crash. Due to that phone call some people are going to make the connection, of course, even if we changed his first name; but they will be convinced to remain a small circle of believers within a day or two. Josh, as he is now, is someone you met while on this slave run."

"That will be easy to say."

"Three, his eyes are a recessive gene. I know it almost never happens," he interjected quickly when Daruin stirred, "but it's all we got to go on. Yellow-brown contacts can always pop out. There are isolated cases of some human attributes like that showing up, so it's not completely without precedent."

"Done."

"Four," he said, pointing to Daruin, "you will have your balls cut off if you ever again so much as kiss a human, understand? That is not a joke. Never, ever again. Make another fox or kill a slave with the transformation and you will be castrated."

"No worries there." Daruin said, giving Josh's paw a squeeze.

"That means giving up the slave trade. I see you've done quite well with it so far. Lots of savings, nice house."

"I was going to give it up anyway."

"Fine. Four, and I'm sorry, but it has to be like this," Stan began, giving Daruin a slightly softer look, "I know you've never had children but have made the required gene pool contribution. Your donation is being pulled and tagged to be monitored. If kits from it share that gene, they will be given a vasectomy or have their tubes tied, whichever applies. I thought you should know, in case you planned to follow your gene propagation like a lot of donors or have children of your own, that your bloodline will end if they share the gene. I'm sorry about that, if it matters to you. And if you ever have children, we will know."

"I hadn't planned on doing either. Well, I had debated the thought before, but made up my mind recently." Daruin confirmed, giving Josh a quick smile.

"Good. Now," he said, turning to Josh, "you will, before you leave this building, learn every word inside that envelope. When someone asks about your past, you will tell them what is in there, not the life you've lived. You have been a citizen, a fox, not a slave. That goes for you, too," he said, pointing at Daruin, "you gotta know it all too, because he's your love, right? So you'd know everything about him, right?"

"Right."

"So if either of you screw up, the mess is yours. I can only exercise so much control. Once a month you will call a number in that folder and answer questions. If you can't give me the right answer to any of them, I will have your ass in a sling. Understand?"

"Yes."

"It goes into further detail on all these points in there. If you have any questions before you leave, please be smart and call. If you don't ask and screw up, it could mean a life in the FBI's deepest, darkest laboratory, understand? You're lucky as shit to be getting what you've got."

"Absolutely."

"Good."

* * * * *

The house looked simple and comfortably cozy, the way most citizens liked them, but also modern and roomy enough. Daruin unlocked the front door, then stepped back a couple of paces, taking Josh with him.

He ducked down and swept him off his feet, cradling him in his arms and giving him a good nuzzling.

"You smell fantastic."

"So do you," Josh agreed, giggling, and licked at his ears, "raw manpower, I'd call it."

Daruin murred and, as his arms began to get tired from holding the powerfully built fox, pulled away and looked at him hopefully.

"Before I carry you through that door, through all of this there's something I haven't gotten around to."

"What's that?"

"I want you to marry me."

Josh threw both arms around his shoulders and tucked in his head, hugging him for a few moments before looking back up.

"Yes, sir!"

Daruin grinned brightly like he never had before. "Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will!" Josh answered again, feeling giddy.

"I do love you, Josh. And stop calling me sir."

THE END