

DENWORLD: IMPERFECT

BY

DAVID RICHARDS

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I pay for a basement, it waits down below
I put some things in there so no one will know
Because if they found out what I keep in stock
They all would desert me in light of their shock
The horses would whinny, the wolves would all howl
The rodents would squeak and the big cats meow
So I keep it secret and locked tight all day
'til in it at night I hide myself away
I always will have it and use it for things
Whatever my most secret appetite brings
What keeps me so happy, well, only I know
Because of the basement that waits down below

* * * * *

"What's this?"

Now that dark meal was almost ready Joe had taken to his final chore of the day, cleaning their bedroom closet. In the box of videos he had just found an unlabeled disk. He fingered it for a moment, then rooted around the bottom of the box until he found the tag.

"Oh, so that's what you are," he said, smiling at the label. On it was Toggn's handwriting, identifying it as Joe's bachelor party recording, "and you are very much so."

"Will you stop looking so nervous? If you had fur it would have all shed by now."

"I can't help it."

"It is only a bachelor party, we are not going to hurt you," Toggn said, then grinned wickedly, "unless you insist."

Joe snorted and shared a smile. "I'm just used to keeping this sort of thing private."

"It will be private, my foolish little human friend," the wolf countered, pointing to Joe's bedroom door, "for the most part. Now relax, everyone will be here any moment."

They arrived minutes later, all of them at once, and, after the usual stripping and hugging, gathered around the drinks and snack meats.

Toggn lifted a glass of gibble and signaled for everyone's attention. He made a great show of cracking a Number Three pellet over it and stirred the mixture with a finger, then grabbed his own drink.

"Are we all glad that Joseph has finally found true love?"

"You bet!" everyone chorused.

He handed Joe his drink.

"Are we all glad to be here to show him what he can no longer have?"

"You bet!"

"Are the foxes gone?"

"You bet!"

"Everyone clean?"

"You bet!"

"Everyone lubed?"

"You bet!"

"Everyone wet?"

"Not yet!"

They all laughed and drained their glasses, everyone patting Joe on the back as he downed his tainted drink. Without the Number Three tonight would be physically impossible.

After a couple of drinks Joe began to relax, though only so much because, given the purpose of the party, he couldn't stop looking at all the bare crotches around him. Kotenken, Prag, Seka, Valonos, a mostly black wolf named Relotta, and Bunfal, an equine policeman they'd befriended, had all come.

Amid the giggles of everyone else, Tognn pulled him out of the lounge and led him to his bedroom door. To Joe's surprise, Tognn stopped at the door and nudged him.

"Not me first. Let the beginning of the end match the beginning of the beginning."

With that he opened the door to reveal Kotenken, who was kneeling on his bed, tail held high, smiling back at them. Joe didn't need the second nudge from Tognn as the sight of such a studly rear view reeled him in like a fishing rod. He hardly heard the door close.

He munched under that wide, flat tail until Kotenken was quaking all over, then flipped him onto his back and lifted his legs. The beaver gripped his hips with powerful arms and pulled Joe into his quivering ass until he could go no deeper. The human humped him lustily, the beaver groping him desperately, then himself also.

Kotenken's back arched and Joe felt him clench around him as the beaver erupted in a spray of semen that quickly coated his belly. The human's balls constricted and he too offered his seed, filling the furry, brown rump.

A brush of fur brought his eyes open to find Prag licking the beaver's belly and running a paw over Joe's buttocks. He pulled free and Prag stood over him, bringing Joe's face into the slickened, black panther crotch. He licked the sweet juice from his sheath and balls while Kotenken sat up and performed similarly on Prag's behind.

In no time Joe was sucking Prag's penis with hungry passion, and the panther let loose with an orgasm that had his knees buckling.

Joe was well aware of the human ability to suck harder than most furs; and in a way this party was for all of them to bid farewell to the only human mouth most of them had access to, in addition to Joe bidding farewell to other furs for Lauriff.

Before he could wipe his chin clean, Prag had him on his back, entering him swiftly and kissing him firmly, pressing his hips hard against his ass. He grunted and then gasped as his mouth was released, noting that Kotenken had left.

"I have wanted to mount you all day!" the panther proclaimed, giving him a predatory look that almost scared him and made his heart race.

"Then don't just kneel there." he countered, giving the shaft a squeeze with his ass.

Prag obliged and began thrusting, riding him hard and fast, snarling, growling, and nibbling like a wild beast. Joe was driven quickly to climax, and Prag joined him as they bucked and rocked in ecstasy.

A quick tongue bath later, they returned to the living room and partied some more. Although it was appropriate to save the best for the guest of honor, it was clear there was more sex going on than in Joe's bedroom. Then he was pulled to his room by Valonos, the buck's need clearly demonstrated by his precum-soaked crotch. Later came Relotta and Seka, and others again, sometimes in pairs.

Bunfal had him all to himself. Hoofers enjoy a well-deserved reputation for producing vast amounts of semen, horses in particular for doing so all at once, and when the horse was finished coming Joe had to wash his entire upper body. He was wrong to think the horse was done, though, for Bunfal put him on his hands and knees and stroked that long equine cock inside him for what felt like hours.

He had never been penetrated so deeply, and the maddening pace soon had him begging to come. The horse whinnied and quickened his pace before they both exploded. Joe felt every long, thick spurt deep inside, and when Bunfal finally pulled free he had to wash his lower half, too, and use the toilet.

Toggn, being his best friend, was the last to enter the bedroom. The wolf very nearly made love to him, and Joe realized, as he lay completely wrapped in furry arms as Toggn mounted, that he would miss having sex with him. Part of Toggn's appeal was the sinister, primal features that made him go weak, but most of it was their deep friendship. Toggn was his favorite lover next to Lauriff, though a couple of recent occasions had included Brill. Toggn was right to boast of one thing — the skunk had a truly sublime manhood.

After their second orgasm, he held the fading knot for the last time and softly suckled the pulsing shaft until it, too, diminished.

It would have been a perfect ending to the party, but there was a grand finale yet to come.

Back in the living room, suddenly all seven closed on him, covering him with mouths and paws. His body was arched to present him fully. Muzzles moved all over him, one leaving his lips to be replaced with another, each feeling a little different. Someone entered him as he was eased downward, growling at the nape of his neck — probably Relotta.

Another gathered his balls into their mouth, locking them in behind the fangs to be vigorously licked. Yet another engulfed his cock right to the base. Two more worked at his nipples, two more his throat. Claws and fangs scraped him seductively all over, and the wolf's penis slid in and out of his bowels hotly. Trapped in a wall of fur, muzzles and paws, impaled by the wolf behind, gripped by the mouths in front, he couldn't move.

It was like a feeding frenzy, and he was the prey.

Every sinew of his body stood in bold relief as he felt an overwhelming orgasm shake him to the core. Relotta swelled and spurted inside him, which only served to intensify and lengthen his climax. His body spasmed almost uncontrollably, arms flung wide and grasping aimlessly.

As his cries subsided he was eased lower. Shafts were erupting all around him and he was immediately fed three spurting cocks in quick succession. He couldn't keep up and his face was soaked, but Toggn and Seka licked him clean, deeply kissing him back and forth while they did so, their cocks squirting into waiting muzzles.

Everyone stopped momentarily to look him over in satisfaction as he lay panting, completely exhausted, then fell upon each other again as he passed out.

He struggled awake the next morning to find Toggn already up. From the look of things, he had just finished cumming into Relotta's muzzle, the other wolf having apparently stayed the night.

Relotta finished licking his lips and prowled over, taking a surprised Joe into his muzzle.

"The party is over, but there is a little dessert left." Toggn said with a grin, moving over and kissing him.

Joe rolled his eyes groaned as he began to stiffen in Relotta's snout. Toggn grabbed the wolf's tail and pulled his hips around until he was kneeling over the human's face. Joe had no choice but to go to work on the enticing balls and ass now hovering over him.

Toggn disappeared, then he felt his legs being pushed apart and a tongue going to work between them. Relotta was soon out of his sheath, the slick shaft dripping. Joe opened wide and took it all in, savoring the coating of precum and the feel of it against his tongue.

Relotta rocked back and forth, cock and muzzle stroking in and around him while Toggn continued lapping between his legs. Joe grabbed the base of the wolf's tail and teased at it while his other hand toyed with his balls and knot.

The wolf groaned and shoved his hot cock down. Then Joe felt Toggn entering him, and the image of the wolf sinking his glistening penis into him fought with the actual feeling to claim first prize.

Relotta howled and came, pumping his wolven cum straight down Joe's throat. He struggled to contain it, barely succeeding as the wolf eased up and humped his mouth some more. Once his cock was drained, he slumped to the side and continued sucking him as Toggn thrust harder and deeper into his ass.

Joe almost came, but Relotta released him and taunted his cock until Toggn was stroking deep and fast. The moment Toggn's body tensed and the knot flared just outside Joe's anus, Relotta's snout descended on him and brought him off just as Toggn roared and splashed his innards with wolf seed.

They slumped together for a few minutes, petting idly, before Joe got up to drag his aching body to the shower.

When he emerged some time later Relotta was gone and Toggn was holding out a data disk.

"What's this?"

"Your party," Toggn announced, gesturing to various spots around the room and Joe's bedroom, "those eyes were not cheap to rent."

Joe was momentarily speechless, then gaped.

"You recorded all that?!"

"Right up to include this morning's finishing touch." He held up a paw and chuckled as Joe snatched the disk. "Do not worry, it has just finished compiling and no one has seen it. The software purges everything once it is all put together."

He leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"Not everyone gets one made, but I wanted you to have one, my friend. Lauriff will get one too, though he will be surprised as well. They are for the two of you to enjoy in the years to come. Congratulations, my friend, you are stuck with him for life. So to speak."

Joe smiled and hugged him, though he debated throwing the disk away as soon as Toggn was out of sight.

"Why do you people always tell me these things after the fact?"

"Because you look so cute when you are shocked."

The disk now returned to its place beside Lauriff's matching one, Joe let out a sigh and adjusted his shorts. What a night that had been. Truth be told, however, he almost never regretted being devoted to one man. It was the nature of his soul and he loved being mated.

An alarm chimed quietly in the kitchen and he closed the closet. The sauce was ready, right on time, as everyone was about to get home. He checked the oven to make sure the bribe was cooked just so and then, sure enough, the front door opened as he was straining the noodles.

He was met halfway to the door by two red blurs. They materialized into the tireless kits, Jefer and Arnaga, who hugged him and streaked off to play in their rooms. Joe chuckled and looked up at Lauriff, who had his head cocked and a fading smile on his face.

His hand shot reflexively up to his hair, which he had gotten cut earlier in the day. Having grown most of the way down his back, it was becoming a nightmare to manage. Today it had been acting especially stubborn and, out of frustration, he had swooped into the trimmer instead of passing it by. The loose waves were now resting just below his shoulders, as they did when he first arrived on Denworld.

Lauriff growled and walked over. Instead of his customary hug and kiss, he moved behind and encircled his waist, bending him slightly forward and pressing his growling muzzle against the side of his neck. Normally it would feel erotic, but Joe knew the difference.

"I know, love, you liked..."

A soft snarl cut him off, then Lauriff cleared the growl from his throat.

"Could we have discussed this?" he asked, pressing against him and squeezing meaningfully around his waist.

Joe sighed and shook his head, suddenly feeling a bit foolish and selfish. Lauriff was right, he should have resisted temptation until he had mentioned it to him. Lauriff absolutely adored his hair, something he had completely forgotten about in his frustration and haste.

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you, but it's been such a pain lately and especially today. I just got sick and tired of it and when I passed the trimmer, well, I just went in on a whim. I know you love it long, but I couldn't stand dealing with it any more."

"I know it is your body, but you could have at least thought to say something first," Lauriff insisted, still growling.

"I'm sorry, honey, I will next time."

"I hope so," Lauriff said, releasing him and turning him around, "now give me a kiss."

Joe gave him a guilty smile and did so, making a subtle attempt to prod the fox's ears back up, which didn't work. Lauriff gave his remaining hair an annoyed fluff with his paw.

"What is for dark meal?" Arnaga asked from the bedroom hallway.

"Spaghetti." Joe answered, flashing a quick smile.

"Spaghetti!" she yelled, and started bouncing around the room like a maniac. Jefer joined her and they ran around yelling "spaghetti" over and over.

Amidst the commotion Lauriff growled even louder than before and his ears flattened completely.

"Damn it, Joseph, you know I hate that! What is with..."

Joe stopped him with a hand on his mouth, smiling at the hot glare in the fox's eyes.

"I know you hate it, honey, that's why I baked you some treffin, spiced the way you like it, and a urona loaf," he said, hoping the bribe wasn't too obvious, "and don't forget that I promised the kits I'd make spaghetti this week and today is the last chance I have to cook."

Lauriff knew a good bribe when he saw one and was tempted to smile at his mate for it. He didn't want to, though, because he was mad.

But now Joseph was licking his lips and snout, so he had no choice but to let it drop.

"I will let you live this time. And I will never understand why you affectionately call me something a friend once described as 'insect vomit.'"

"Lucky me. And it's sweet, like you."

"M-hm."

"Oh, guess what?" Joe asked eagerly.

"Tell me."

"I got a birthday package from Mom today!" he announced, moving quickly into the kitchen. He grabbed a moderately large box from the stasis cabinet and turned to Lauriff, who had joined him.

"I am sorry," the fox said, giving him a kiss, "I forgot your born-on day again."

"That's fine, honey, I know it isn't a Denworld thing to celebrate birthdays and don't expect you to remember every year."

"It would help if it was on the same day each year."

"You know how it goes," Joe said, opening the box, "another two years before I can vote and have my born-on day moved to the Denworld calendar."

"What is that?" Lauriff exclaimed, jumping back with a gasp. He looked frightfully into the box from as far away as he could get and still see inside, the fur on his shoulders standing on end.

Joe giggled and tilted the box a little, making Lauriff take another step back.

"They're crabs, caught live and put in immediate stasis. I can't wait to steam them!"

"They look like giant bugs! Are those bugs?" the fox exclaimed, betraying the strong aversion to insects most furs

possess, "are they alive?"

"No, silly, and they're crustaceans," Joe corrected, giggling more. He gave them a closer look and frowned. "But now that you mention it, they kinda do look like giant bugs. Exoskeleton, eight legs..."

"Would you please put them away?"

"Sure, honey."

After the kits had finally stopped running around and went to sleep, they sat close on their bed, face to face. Typical grooming, such as facial and ear fur, was dealt with easily enough at home. Lauriff really enjoyed being groomed and Joe had offered to do so — another bribe — as soon as the kits were in bed.

He held the fox's muzzle lightly in one hand and was trying to trim the short, stiff hairs that were growing down over his lips. It was getting hard to concentrate, however, because Lauriff refused to stop toying with his foreskin.

"Lauriff, behave. I'm almost done."

"No," the fox countered, pulling the skin back to expose his head.

Joe sighed, unable to help the urge to adjust slightly, and dropped the scissors beside the bed.

"There, finished," he said, picking up a small mirror, "what do you think?"

"Perfect," his mate answered without even glancing. He pushed it aside and kissed him, nipping his neck on the way, and eased him back onto the sheets with a paw.

Sitting between his legs, he drifted his claws to Joe's crotch, smiling down at him as he began to caress and fondle.

Since arriving on Denworld Joe had always found the feel of claws raking him in the heat of passion to be incredibly erotic. Being mated to Lauriff had shown him that they could also be as gentle as butterflies, and the fox used them that way now, flitting them lightly over his inner thighs and groin, brushing them over his balls, tracing lines up and down his shaft.

He worked patiently, slowly bringing every nerve in his body to life, leaning down now and then to lick at a nipple or his genitals.

Joe was expecting to be mounted, the way Lauriff almost always did after a disagreement even though he was never rough about it, but instead he seemed to be making another kind of point; that he could command Joe's body completely without having to. It was a point well taken because Joe's hips tried to move up and down on their own, but a firm paw held them to the bed.

"Oh Lauriff," he said breathlessly, grinning up at him, then cooed as the muzzle dropped and rubbed against his scrotum, breath kissing his shaft.

Lauriff's paws never stopped their tantalizing movements as he swung around to straddle Joe's face. He took the sensitive head into his lips, holding it behind his fangs and licking slowly.

Joe gave a little gasp and reached to hug around the fox's waist, taking his tail base in one hand, and raised his mouth toward the beautiful balls above. A short grunt stopped him, indicating he should look but not touch. Even to a mere human nose, the heavy, sweet smell of the precum soaking Lauriff's sheath was hypnotic, and the sight was

tantalizing.

He didn't think he could feel any better until Lauriff's muzzle, with aching slowness, descended onto his shaft, broad tongue stroking all the way. He lifted his hips and groaned, nuzzling a furry thigh, and gripped the tail hard.

A few patient, mind-altering strokes later the tingling he felt all over flared between his legs. He shoved his hips upward in one hard thrust and erupted into Lauriff's muzzle. He cried out and stuffed his face into the vulpine ball sack, the musky scent filling his head.

His mate drained him expertly, the way only he could; lips, paws, and tongue milking him until he could give no more.

Lauriff released the shrinking shaft and turned to sit next to Joe's panting head. He bent down and kissed him, then licked his own fluid from where it had dripped onto his neck.

Joe smiled up at him, then reached and pushed the furry chest back. He leaned over and opened wide, taking in the entire drip-soaked sheath before closing around it. His mouth was filled with warm, sweet precum as he sucked it from the velvety, almost unnoticeable fur. He loved the feel of it's shape and firmness in his mouth and sucked it slowly and gently for a while before looking up and worming his tongue into the opening. Lauriff growled lustily down at him, eyes smiling, and gripped his head.

He frenched the fox's sheath patiently, hands roaming almost casually from tail base to nipples and back, until his mate could wait no more and the vulpine cock pushed it's way out.

Letting it ride along his tongue, he pressed down hard, letting his lips push the sheath most of the way back. Then, for one slow stroke, he sucked so hard he thought his lungs might collapse, bringing a series of gasping yelps from Lauriff's snout and a knot from his sheath.

Knowing the end was near, he dropped quickly down to suckle and lick the latter, earning a few soft squirts of precum, before again engulfing the burning shaft and sucking hard.

Lauriff's hips jolted and his paws squeezed, then Joe grabbed his knot the way his mate liked. He felt the first surge swell in his hand, then ride up the shaft to burst into his throat, and he gulped, sucked, and licked hard while Lauriff yipped and banged his hips up into him.

Once his climax began to subside, Joe relaxed his grip on the knot somewhat and simply enjoyed a few minutes slathering his shaft and sucking away the gentle, lingering surges of his mate's seed. When he felt the fox was finally finished, he made sure he was cleaned up and kissed the retreating penis, each smooth bulge below, then snuggled up to him.

Lauriff let out a contented sigh and kissed him, pulling him close. A few moments later he unlatched his mating band and set it on the bedside table.

Joe took his off and fingered it dreamily for a few moments.

"I wish I could tell you, somehow find the words to explain, just how much this means to me, how much you mean to me, how much I love you."

Lauriff nuzzled his cheek and licked him for a few seconds, rubbing his back.

"I love you too, my mate, even with short head fur."

Joe chuckled.

"It's no shorter than when we first met."

"I know."

"Oh, don't forget I have to go to the beach for my physical tomorrow."

"I thought you started getting them up here last year?"

"I did, but I need a blood test that they aren't equipped for up here."

"For what?"

"I don't remember exactly. It's every five years. Something to do with a gene sparked by some ancient virus cure. I should be back in time for a latish dark meal." Joe answered, resting his head on the furry chest.

"Ah."

"Sleep well, mate."

"I always do with you here."

* * * * *

Daniel leaned his hands against the wall on either side of the post and braced his feet. He pressed his fuzzy, completely grown antlers against the abrasive surface and ducked, dragging one side down.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, thrilled to finally feel his antlers scratching free. His always took longer than usual to shed their fuzz, and he hated waiting to give them a good scrape. And it felt so good!

He alternated sliding each rack up and down the post, groaning at the incredible feel and the pleasant pressure where they emerged from his skull. The sound of the door opening went unnoticed.

"Ah, there you go!" Klaran said, pressing up against his rump.

"Oh, hello love. Oh! This is *so* good!" Daniel gasped, continuing to slide his antlers up and down the post.

"That is going to be a really nice rack this year," Klaran offered, reaching up. He tugged a little piece of fuzz away and then started scratching at the top of the bobbing head, bringing another loud groan from Daniel. Smiling, he worked his sheath between the wiggling buns until it was nestled warmly there, and scratched between the bases of his antlers again.

"Go ahead, please." Daniel grunted.

Klaran looked puzzled for a moment, then remembered last year at about this time. The very thought had him instantly aroused. Daniel, bless his cute, human-named heart, just loved to be mounted while...

Hips bumped him, almost knocking him off balance, and Daniel ground his rack hard on the post. "Come on, please,

my love!"

Klaran grinned and knelt, grabbing the wagging hips and taking in the sight of that beautiful, white-furred ass. Moments later his tongue was exploring, along with his hands, over it and just about everything else in view. A loud grunt from Daniel made him chuckle and he soon stood and pressed his wet sheath against that pretty little bud.

Daniel almost knocked him over again as he pushed back. Klaran laughed out loud and again reached up to scratch his mate between the antlers. Then he pushed his straining penis out of its sheath and straight into his lover, bringing them together tightly.

"Yes! Mate me!" Daniel cried, still grinding his antlers.

Klaran couldn't refuse if he wanted, and began thrusting long and deep into the grunting, groaning buck. Neither of them lasted long after Klaran reached around and grabbed the gleaming, exposed shaft of his mate. They both came long and hard, panting at the intensity of the moment. Daniel didn't stop scraping the post in the rhythm of their lovemaking until they both stumbled back a step and Klaran hugged him close.

Daniel turned his head and they shared a tender kiss as his mate ran his hand over Daniel's slippery genitals.

"Shall we?"

"We can clean the mess up later, and I'm not hungry, either." Daniel said, answering the question neither had asked.

The tiger growled again and cursed whoever they were for the hundredth time. He hung blindfolded, suspended upright somehow, with his legs spread wide.

He bit his lip and snarled with fury when he felt one of them enter him again. Trapped, helpless and gagged, he couldn't resist them as he endured another mounting.

The worst was his own body, though. Twice now they had brought him to climax, his body responding despite his rage and struggles. No one touched him without it being his will, yet these two had him completely under control — and he hated it.

The grunting male behind him quickened his pace, and the one in front matched it with his muzzle. He felt another climax approaching even though he fought it, and knew the one behind him was also close again.

"Now!" came a gasp from the muzzle at his neck just as the first flare of his orgasm struck.

The mouth left his newly erupting penis and was replaced by a hand. Then he screamed into the gag as he felt the searing tingle of a blade across his throat.

Horror and panic like he had never known stunned him as he realized what was happening. He fought the relentless cables that held him, terrified as he felt fluids pulsing into and out of him. The muzzle returned to his penis, which still spurted reflexively, as his bottom was pounded and he felt his life flowing down the front of his pelt.

Moments later a deeper blackness closed in behind the blindfold. His pain eased, his fear faded, and soon after, his suffering ended.

Theed finished cleaning himself up and turned off the TriV. Taking out the disk, he locked it away and headed for the door. Couldn't let his friends know he was into that sort of thing.

Heading out in the patrol flyer, he picked up Bunfal and started toward the police den. Halfway there the com panel lit and they were directed south to a crime scene in the forest. No details were offered, as was standard practice, and they looked at each other.

"Before we even get in?" Bunfal asked.

"This cannot be good," Theed mused, bringing them around, "and I haven't even finished yesterday's paperwork."

A short while later they landed at the designated coordinates, crossed the crime scene barrier, and were pointed toward a small clearing in the woods.

"Enkin, what are you doing here?" Theed asked, smiling as he recognized the charcoal gray rat standing beside a soggy corpse. Above the body hovered a scanner.

"Theed, good to see you," the rat answered, smiling at him and gesturing at the body, "I am here because regulations require that 'the forensic medicine technician assigned to an original criminal instance must be permanently assigned to a case when subsequent criminal instances appear to be the result of...'"

"...a pattern killer." Bunfal finished, shaking his head. "Don't say it is so."

"It looks that way," Enkin answered as he shared a quick glance with Theed, "same as the last two. I assume you are here because regulations require that 'the law enforcement officer team assigned to an original criminal instance must be permanently assigned to a case when subse..."

"Blah blah blah blah." Bunfal brayed, shaking his head again.

"What exactly do we have?" Theed asked, stepping carefully as he knelt to examine the body.

"One adult male tiger. Thirty-one years old. In otherwise excellent health. Nude. Cause of death, single blade wound to the throat."

"He has been taralite dipped. Damn."

"And, I would guess, sexually assaulted." Bunfal added.

"I won't know that until I do an autopsy, which the taralite makes a necessary evil. I've gotten all I can here," Enkin said, turning off the scanner and swinging it aside to give Theed more room, "truly, I will let you know."

"Watch those big hooves of yours," Theed said to Bunfal as they began their inspection.

"Sure, if you promise not to fall onto anything important," the horse snickered.

Theed and Bunfal looked the body over carefully, sniffing even though it would do little good with a taralite-soaked body. Murders were rare, and crimes like this even rarer. How their killer was getting a hold of taralite to sterilize his victim's bodies was another mystery, as was how someone like that could grow up in today's society.

"I took the liberty of downloading his file," Enkin offered, holding out a sheet.

The raccoon smiled and took it, reading various bits and pieces out loud.

"Divorced, seemed to prefer submissive types, which explains him divorcing the bull, well-liked if a bit

temperamental, financially secure, spends a lot on jewelry and clothes, likes an occasional female but no cubs."

"We've got a connection, at least," Bunfal mused after he finished.

"All three are alpha males of a predator species," Theed mused

"All are confident, secure, with reasonably stable lives. Wonder what is going through our killer's mind?"

"I do not want to know, I just want to catch the soulless pelt."

"I have got to get this back for a complete autopsy, so could you two please finish up while he is still fresh?"

"Sure," Theed agreed with a chuckle, flashing the rat a wink, "we will be done in no time."

After Enkin left with the body, they surveyed the rest of the scene. They were able to gather some information, but nothing really solid.

"Something tells me the last two cases are not going to add much to this," Bunfal mused, scowling at his scanner.

"Let us hope they do."

* * * * *

Joe sat back with a soft growl and rubbed his eyes. He took a sip of coffee and stared out the window at the blur of passing scenery. Looking back down at the workpads he was using, he felt a sudden sense of deja vu. It was almost exactly four years ago that he had been in similar circumstances, his nose buried in workpads while he sat in a mass transit seat.

Things were about to take another leap, though not one so large as the one he made over three years ago. Their patent on the new rock production process would soon expire, and rival manufacturers all had shiny new production lines waiting for the clock to strike twenty-seven on the final night. In a couple of weeks everyone would be producing the new rocks with their meticulous integration of elements from Earth.

It wouldn't help them.

Joe's company had just reached number one for the first time, having edged out their biggest competitor despite the drastic pricing measures that company had been taking to keep market share. But they had not rested on their laurels, and were about to implement yet a further refinement of the new rocks, one that netted an amazing eleven percent increase over what they had already achieved.

In a few weeks, their rivals would find themselves exactly where they are today, which is about ten percent behind the game.

He smiled at the thought and fingered the envelope in the seat beside him. While wandering around town before his doctor's appointment, he came across a wolverine artist that caught his eye. If Grimal hadn't looked so striking himself, Joe might have never looked at his drawings, which immediately sucked him in with their vibrancy and sense of motion.

After staring at one arresting drawing after another, each almost alive in its posing and texture, he commissioned one on the spot. Handing over a picture of himself and Lauriff from his carryall, he spent a little time chatting with him

while the wolf began sketching.

Grimal was still a student, studying computer concepts at a nearby university. Joe ended up spending almost three hours talking about his job, offering advice, and answering questions. All along the wolf kept sketching, until the artwork was finally completed and Joe bid him farewell.

Once his appointment was over he wandered around the nearest beach resort, the sight of so many humans seeming both comforting and strange. Even more fun was to be had listening in on the conversations of various furs, who always expressed amazement at the surfing human tourists. Furs liked the beach for its atmosphere, but not much for its water. Salt was hard to clean from fur, so Denworlders never developed much in the way of sea water sports.

Denworld's two moons, Womat and Bemat, helped create excellent waves for surfing, and human tourists were at the beaches almost all year long. He would have thought that by now Denworlders would have gotten used to their human guests, but the furs around him seemed to love watching them surf.

Recognizing a familiar landmark as it whizzed passed, he snapped his eyes into focus as they rushed up on Thumper Springs, a favorite weekend getaway for the two of them.

The town was so named for the huge, stunning hot water springs surrounding it. An amazing trick of nature allowed gigantic bubbles of gas to form in mineral-rich underwater caverns deep beneath the surface. Rather than diffuse, they steadily built up enough force to overcome the dense mineral layer and suddenly rush to the surface almost completely intact, creating a loud, explosive thump as they did so.

A giant, distant plume of water and steam shot up into the air and then was gone. He settled back and closed the workpads, planning to spend the rest of the trip watching the world go by.

A few minutes passed and he began to daydream, but was interrupted by a slight jolt and the sound of a distant boom. The first jolt was immediately followed by another, more violent one, and he was nearly knocked from his seat.

He, along with many others, gasped in sudden shock when the front of their car seemed to leap upward. Joe heard the sound of stressed composites as the anti-inertia wall plates flashed to life and the car tumbled sideways, riding nearly perpendicular to the track at over three hundred clicks.

They tipped over and Joe found himself slamming onto the window, yelling in horror as he saw the surface of the raised track speeding by just below his face. Then came a series of hammering cracks as their car struck a number of the poles that looped over the track at regular intervals, passengers flopping to and fro in spite of the anti-inertia plates, and Joe's stomach leapt as he felt them begin to tip over the side.

The anti-inertia plates flickered erratically and the hull buckled and split in places, adding flashes of liquid red to the sudden chaos of bodies around him.

Things seemed to move in slow motion as they careened over the edge, and his window view showed the ground twenty meters below swoop into sight just as the car behind, also tumbling, slammed into the underside of theirs. Together they fell, Joe being dumped onto the ceiling and sliding along it as the mag-lev jackknifed and the cars toppled from the track.

He slammed into something, whether it was the floor, a wall, or the ceiling he didn't know, and took a terrified breath to scream with. The anti-inertia plates failed completely as they smashed across the ground and the wind was knocked from him. Their car seemed to tumble forever and Joe felt the flashing agony of things breaking as he was

slammed into hard objects and other passengers. The rail car stopped spinning and seemed to freeze in place for a moment, the crumpled hull standing on end. Then they began to topple, and he was finally able to draw the breath his body had been desperately wanting to scream with.

His heart skipped a beat when his vision steadied enough to see the flailing body of a bear falling straight for him from halfway down the car. Their panicked eyes met for a millisecond before the bear struck, crushing the scream from his chest.

* * * * *

Theed laughed and slapped the horse on his broad shoulder. Inwardly he wasn't laughing at all, but he had to keep up appearances. Jokes about rats were hardly rare, but it always bothered him most coming from Bunfal. A change of subject was in order.

"So when are you going to show me this basement of yours?" he asked slyly, gesturing to the locked door.

"When you grow horns," Bunfal answered with a smirk.

"Aw, come on! How long have we been patrol mates now? Almost two years? Tell me or I will bite."

"With those little fangs?" the horse asked, taking a swipe at him, "I would just enjoy it and end up mounting you like you have never been!"

"Tease!" Theed cried, "come on! You are the toughest guy I know. What are you so afraid of?"

The horse paused a moment, scratched the middle of a brown patch on his coat, and grinned.

"Nothing. And you still cannot see."

"You let that bull down there, and you are just dating him!" Theed countered, giving his tail a yank.

Bunfal lifted his hips and swatted the raccoon's face with it.

"He is special."

"Oh please! Truly, let me see."

"Truly, no."

Theed took a deep breath and sighed, giving up again. "All right, I will let you go. One of these days I am going to see it, though," he claimed, getting up and walking to his clothes.

"You leaving?"

"Yes, I have some things to do at home tonight. My denmate is out of town so I have the place all to myself."

"Who is joining you? The bear from last Off Two?"

The raccoon rolled his eyes. "That will remain a rare treat! I thought he was going to split me in half, and crush me while he did so!"

"You loved it!" the horse insisted with a whinny-like laugh.

"I *liked* it," Theed corrected, "no, no one. Just a night of peace and quiet. And," he added, pointing to the stack of printouts on Bunfal's desk, "I am not looking at any more of that tonight."

"It is truly great stuff, though. Good researching. It will be a big help."

"Thanks, and thanks for dark meal," Theed said, getting his sandals strapped, "though I'm surprised you did not scam your way into going to Lauriff's for his mate's cooking."

"He has not cooked in a while, and the last time it was that awful red stuff with the noodles that look like grass worms," the horse answered, making a face.

"What is wrong with it?"

"Oh, I forgot. Raccoons like worms."

"When they are cooked the right way," Theed agreed, "I will see you in the morning."

"Sleep well."

"You too," the raccoon offered, letting the door close. He hurried home and stripped as quickly as he could before grabbing the package that had arrived during the day.

He pulled out the disk and fed it into the TriV, then flopped back onto the lounge to watch.

It was even better than he hoped. The rats before him played out his kinkiest fantasies with an almost scary similarity. Within moments after the first erotic scene started his paws were roaming his body, teasing his nipples, brushing over his sheath and scrotum.

As he watched them he put himself in their place and teased himself more insistently, brushing his fingertips over his sheath opening and rubbing his sensitive balls. Fingers slid lower, teasing the pucker below. When one rat sank his tongue into the sheath of another, his finger did the same, stroking within himself.

Before long he was exposed and glistening, and he curled down to lick at his aching shaft, eyes never leaving the TriV, tasting the tangy sweetness of his arousal. His lips closed over the dampened tip and his tongue coaxed more fluid forth, the ringed fur of his tail standing straight out.

He leaned back and let his paws do the rest, stroking and teasing himself, tasting his wet fingers. As a rat's penis exploded into the face of its partner, his did also.

Gasping and humping into his clutching paws, he shot his load high, catching spurts with his tongue, imagining it was not his, but from one of the rats.

The video played on and he kept watching as he caught his breath. He was aroused again soon and licking himself clean, just as they were doing in the TriV, and shortly emptied his loins once more.

When the TriV was over, he finished cleaning off and went to his terminal. Although he really didn't want to, he sat with a sigh and pulled up what they had on the latest instance. The pattern killer had struck again, a wolf this time, and the weeks they had spent so far in their investigation were starting to seem like far too many. Someone had

snapped.

* * * * *

"You're not going to keep me from dark meal again, are you?" Daniel asked, smiling down at his mate.

Klaran simply grinned up at him and wiggled his tongue deeper into his sheath. Daniel tightened his grip on the table and the back of the chair, drawing a shuddering breath as Klaran's hand rubbed insistently over his balls.

The tongue stroked in him smoothly and deeply, lips sealed tightly around the sheath, and he marveled at how quickly Klaran could warm him. His hips began moving as his mate sucked and tongued him so thoroughly he thought he might burst, his balls sizzling as Klaran's hand caressed them.

He grabbed the antlers hovering before him and pulled, bringing a chuckle from Klaran that made his crotch tingle. Able to take no more, he pushed the buck's head back just enough to get the tongue out of his sheath. His mate's lips popped as his sheath was freed then immediately engulfed the rapidly extending penis.

Daniel's hips bucked hard (*no pun intended!* — *The Author*) as he gripped the antlers and fired a hot, thick volley of seed along Klaran's tongue. His mate slowed the pace to a crawl, and Daniel nearly climbed out of the chair as he continued to come.

Klaran finished him off patiently, licked his lips, then stood to present the state of his own arousal, which was considerable. Daniel caught his breath and leaned forward, coaxed by hands on his rack, and felt the hot shaft slide along his tongue and fill his mouth with sweetness. His mate didn't last long and soon filled his muzzle, Daniel gulping lustily.

"Did someone mention dark meal?" Daniel asked as he gave the buck's sheath a few affectionate licks.

"I don't remember," Klaran joked.

"Shall we continue this up here or down there?"

Klaran thought for a moment, scratching between Daniel's antlers as the buck licked him.

"Let us stay up tonight."

* * * * *

"What do you want today?" Theed asked, giving the rat a bashful smile, "you said it was important."

"It is!" the rat exclaimed, sharing the smile, "look at this," he continued, gesturing to the terminal, then grinned at him, "Well, what would be truly nice is..."

"You know I cannot handle what you want," Theed joked, then immediately regretted it. Enkin turned back to the terminal with a small smile and started to point something out, becoming animated again. But Theed had seen that little smile, and hated himself for causing it.

He just couldn't do it! What would everyone think if they found out that he desperately wanted this rat? Everyone knows what rats are like; kinky, shameless, lecherous, something rats feel no need to hide and he wanted badly to experience. Theed knew there was more to it, that rats were just as clean as anyone, could be as loving and affectionate as anyone; but a rat's face always had that bit of lusty evil to it, something most people never bothered to

look past.

Why was he, the last person on Denworld who should do so, causing that hurt little look a smile tried to hide? When would he have the guts to not care what people thought?

"Would you look, you silly raccoon?"

"Whoa! A screen full of genetic stuff! I'm amazed!" the raccoon said, recovering and rolling his eyes.

"Look," Enkin insisted, pointing, "I've got a match."

"What kind of match?" Theed asked, suddenly more interested.

"Our killer is a hooper, no doubt," the rat announced, "and with this match I was able to confirm that all the other victims were done by a hooper, too."

"What kind?"

"Just a hooper so far."

"Oh, wonderful," Theed blurted, "so we only have to search every horse, donkey, buck, gazelle, bull and zebra in the sector."

"Hey, don't blame me. It is something. And don't forget rams, moose, and elk."

"Sorry, you're right," the raccoon said soothingly, giving Enkin a friendly scratch, "that is good. At least it narrows our search considerably. It also matches the old pattern killer case I pulled out of the archives."

"From when?"

"Thirty-three years ago. Imagine that."

"But he was a skunk."

"He was not predator-based," Theed elaborated.

"Oh!" Enkin said, eyebrows rising, "someone snapped."

"Exactly. Every victim this time is a predator-based alpha. Our killer is a hooper. Same story all over again. Amazing. You would think that sort of thing would have been phased out of our genes by now."

"Some deeply seeded desire to get even with predators from back in the Earth days?" the rat asked, then grinned, "not you, I am sure."

Theed chuckled and tried not to get aroused by the look of that smile. He was partially successful.

"Not hardly! Weird how ancient genes and intelligence can combine, eh?"

"You're telling me?" the rat asked with a nudge, "I have to get back to work. You go get him."

"Do you think you will get anything more from that one?" Theed asked, pointing to the nearby corpse.

"No, the taralite doesn't leave many traces to work with, but the bite mark helped."

"What bite?"

"He was bitten on both shoulders. Not savagely, but noticeably once the fur was moved. It is in the report I just sent to your desk. The shape of the indentations is what got me on the hooper scent with this DNA sample."

"Oh, all right. I will get him, and thank you again, that is great work," the raccoon said, turning to leave.

Enkin watched him go, a fading smile on his face, eyeing that bushy, ringed tail as it wagged the way it did only behind Theed. It was just one of the details that he'd learned after two years of wanting him. He let out a long sigh and turned back to his terminal, hoping to get more out of this latest sample.

"If I was halfway down the hall, I still would have heard that sigh," said Grint as he swooped in the door and sniffed loudly, "truly, I would say a certain raccoon was just here."

Enkin smiled at the other rat and almost blushed a little. "I'm busy, leave me alone."

"You need to find yourself another rat before you grow old," Grint offered, yet again, as he set about his work, "like me, for instance."

"But I would just bore you," Enkin countered with the time-honored joke they shared, "you're too much rat for me. Besides, you already found your own. It won't be long before you are mated to him. I can tell."

"Just show up after dark meal." Grint said with a flick of his tongue.

"As if I do not have enough to do." Enkin joked, returning his concentration to the autopsy.

* * * * *

The panting rat leaned forward and tried to keep from squealing with delight. Grint was screwing him with short, quick strokes and rubbing around his stretched anus with a couple of fingers, driving him nearly mad with intense, sizzling pleasure. He licked and sucked Grint's tongue as the other rat hunched over him and then lost the battle, letting out a shuddering squeak.

Grint shifted back a little and started thrusting deeply, bracing himself on Enkin's shoulder with one paw and teasing his friend's sopping wet, pink shaft with the other. His grunts became louder and his pace faster before his back curled and his head dove downward. Pressing himself in deeply, his snout closed over Enkin's penis just as they both felt the first lightning crack of orgasm strike.

The tight inner walls of Enkin's body spasmed around his shaft and he moaned in ecstasy as the one in his mouth mirrored that rhythm against his tongue. He sucked as hard as he possibly could and let the rat fill his muzzle without swallowing, then, as their pulses faded, leaned forward. Enkin smiled up at him and parted his panting lips.

Grint, still wrapped tightly in Enkin's ass, leaned over him muzzle-to-muzzle and bared his fangs. The flaring lips let loose a flood of Enkin's seed, which the rat lapped and slurped from his mouth, enjoying the feel of some running over his snout. After a few moments, they kissed and shared the rest, tongues moving in and out of each other's mouth, spreading the liquid prize back and forth before swallowing.

Grint licked the rest from Enkin's muzzle and they shared the last of it, then he withdrew from his anus. He smiled

lasciviously and slid around so Enkin could lick his cock clean while he did the same for his ass.

Neither of them stopped when they could have, and a few minutes later their sheaths were again firm and dripping. Grint moved up onto his knees and Enkin quickly climbed up behind him. He leaned down and shoved his muzzle under Grint's bare, ringed tail while cupping the brown rat's balls in a paw. Tongue in constant motion, he slipped a finger into Grint's sheath and stroked within, prodding the head of his enclosed penis with a fingertip.

His tongue pressed harder against Grint's pucker and forced it's way in, bringing a squeal of delight and a backward shove from him. He had a thick tongue and worked it deeply, swirling and stroking with it, until Grint was squirming and whipping his tail.

He withdrew his tongue and moved up, grabbing the base of Grint's tail and rubbing. Grint hissed and rocked back, bumping Enkin's wet erection. Enkin moaned and grabbed himself, holding Grint still with the grip on his tail and rubbing the head of his cock over the wet anus. Before long he braced himself on the small of Grint's back and eased himself slowly inside.

Pinned by his tail, Grint could only remain still as Enkin's cock teased it's way in, filling him and rubbing his inner nerves. It felt like his prostate had wrapped itself around the other rat's cock, so heavy were the waves of delight rolling through him.

Enkin stroked deeply, pressing himself hard against Grint's rump with each thrust, his finger still buried in the other's sheath. He withdrew it and gave a squeeze, feeling an immediate reward in the shape of a wet shaft leaping into his palm.

Sinking himself in completely, he stopped thrusting and fondled Grint's pink cock, reaching around with both paws to rub, stroke, and tickle him from the tip of his shaft to where his own shaft invaded. Grint squealed and moaned constantly, trying to thrust his hips, but Enkin's forearms held him fast.

The smell was becoming overwhelming, along with the feel of Grint's walls gripping him and the throbbing shaft in his paws. He pulled out and pushed the brown rat over, throwing his legs up onto his shoulders. Falling onto him, he drove in deeply and humped hard and fast. A few moments later he pulled the grunting rat's head down while ducking his also.

They both assaulted Grint's dripping shaft with lips and tongues, Enkin curling his back down to tease the tip while Grint tilted his head to do the rest. When he felt Grint's body begin to tense, he grabbed his shoulders to hold him still. The brown rat gasped and jolted in his paws as the long, pulsing cock shot a stream of semen straight up. Enkin slowed his thrusting to match the pulses gripping his cock, and the two of them feasted on the spurts of seed arching over their faces.

His own burning member tingled insistently and then blasted into Grint's bottom. He arched his back briefly, snarling in ecstasy for a few gasping breaths before diving down to lap at the renewed squirts from Grint. Then he pulled out his still pulsing cock and pressed it along the other. Grint licked them both wildly until neither had anything left to give.

After giving Grint's ass a thorough licking, Enkin collapsed down onto him, resting his head on the black rat's chest and letting out a monumental sigh.

"I would have to assume that it has been a while for you?" Grint asked between pants, eyeing him amusingly, "I don't remember you ever being so aggressive."

"I truly needed that. Thank you, my friend." Enkin said, giving him a grateful smile.

"I just hope it was me you were here with," Grint suggested honestly.

Enkin finished yawning and then gave him a serious look. "Yes, it was someone else that got me into this state, but it was definitely you I was with. I was not thinking of him."

"Just checking."

* * * * *

The fox growled and managed to scoot around the big nurse, racing toward the emergency ward.

"Mr. Udintu! Please, there are things I should explain!" the bear yelled, strolling quickly to catch up, "you really should not..."

Lauriff ceased to hear him and shouldered the door open. He made it halfway across the room before stopping cold in his tracks, so stunned his breath caught and his knees went weak.

"Whoa!" the bear said, bracing him for a moment, "OK, sir, here you go. Please now, let me explain."

His head clearing, the fox let out a tortured whimper and stumbled to the side of the bed.

What have they done to my mate?

He could barely recognize him. The human was a mass of swelling and ugly bruises all the way from his face to where the sheet lay across his hips. Numerous blue bone knitter beams shown down from the panel above, focused on patches upon his skin.

Tears welled up in his eyes as they drifted over the patch covering half of Joseph's face, the bruise covering the other half, the dermal seal-covered scrapes and gashes, the oxygen tubes in his nostrils, and the horrific bruises everywhere.

Whimpering again, he wanted desperately to throw his arms around his mate, to tell him everything would be truly fine, to run his paws through his head fur. But all he could do was sit and take one limp hand in his paw for fear of hurting him or getting in the way of the medical equipment.

"Mr. Udintu," the nurse began, crouching beside him and resting a big paw on his shoulder, "let me explain."

"What?" Lauriff asked numbly, absently taking the tissue the nurse offered and wiping his eyes.

"What I wanted to tell you is that humans show their injuries much more readily than we do. There is no fur to hide things. He is stable now, so please believe that he will do fine. He is past the worse of it, so things just look worse than they are."

"Truly so, but *this*?" Lauriff wailed, pointing at his mate's prone form.

"What you have to understand, sir, is what happened to him. He had a moderate concussion, five broken ribs, a cracked sternum, a punctured lung, some other mild internal bleeding, a broken collarbone, two broken fingers..."

Lauriff let out the longest, most pitiful whimper of his life as the nurse continued, touching Joseph's face as gently as

he could with a finger. Suddenly, the whole haircut thing seemed so ridiculously trivial.

"...a broken lower leg, and a number of serious lacerations. He is lucky to be alive. Seventy-four passengers did not make it, but medics got to him just in time. Luckily the human doctor from the coast arrived quickly once ours got him stable, and without the regular self-donations he would have bled to death."

Lauriff nodded and wiped his eyes again, holding Joseph's hand lightly. "What about the anti-inertia stuff? Why is this so bad?" he asked, sniffing.

"It is being investigated, from what I have heard. There is talk that they may have been tampered with. But anyway, please trust me. He is absolutely fine, in spite of how bad it looks. In a few days he can leave and within a few weeks he will look like this never happened," the bear assured him, "oh, it looks like he is waking up. See?"

Joseph was indeed stirring slightly, and Lauriff nearly leapt from his stool to hover over him. One eye began to flutter open, the other following but kept partly shut by the swelling around it.

"My love," the fox cooed, brushing his hair lightly as the nurse raised the head of the bed a little.

Joe cracked a small smile and started to speak, but croaked instead. The nurse had a cup of water at his lips within moments.

He sipped a little, smiled, and blinked lazily.

"Hi, honey," he mumbled.

"Oh, my love," Lauriff breathed, kissing him gently on his lips, "I love you."

"Me too," Joe murmured, shifting slightly, "when did you get here?"

"Just a minute ago," he answered softly.

"When is it?"

"When were you on the train?" the nurse asked, holding a workpad.

Joe frowned for a moment and gave Lauriff's paw a soft squeeze, "I seem to remember us being through this already."

"That is good, but indulge me."

"First quarter, week seven, Fiveday," he answered, his voice cracking slightly.

"Good," the bear said, making a note of it and giving the fox a reassuring smile.

Joe took another, longer drink of water and looked up at Lauriff.

"Oh, by the way, my physical went fine."

A laugh sputtered from Lauriff's lips and his eyes watered again, this time from relief.

"You silly human."

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Daniel asked, giving him a kiss.

"Bearable, for an interrogation," Klaran grumbled, returning the kiss and getting undressed.

"It was not that bad, was it?"

"No," he agreed with a sigh, "just inconvenient."

"Dark meal will be ready in a few minutes. I need to finish cleaning up," Daniel said, moving toward the private room, "I guess it must be a pretty big investigation with the train blowing itself right off the tracks like that."

"It makes my job a bit harder, but it is a necessary evil. I won't be able to actually do any of my work for days, at least. There are five cars I need to do preventative maintenance on, but everything is impounded."

"Do you still have to go in?" Daniel asked from the private room.

"Yes, I do," Klaran answered, grabbing a piece of fruit and taking a good bite, "but there are investigators everywhere. There is an unexpected bonus, though."

"What is that?"

"Alpha recommend me to handle all the technical requests of the police."

"Truly? That is wonderful," Daniel began, then paused a moment, "is it not?"

"Oh yes, it is a nice perk and I am glad to do be the one. It helps, as all of us are under suspicion until some evidence is found or they declare that there is none."

"Which do you think will happen?"

"They will give up. There is no evidence to find."

"That is a good thing, and I hope it gets back to normal for you soon. Once they move on things will calm down quickly enough. That wreck was truly something, though."

"It was a real piece of work."

"We are out of this," Daniel announced, waving an empty plastic bottle as he emerged, "we'll have to get more before too long."

"We can probably wait a little while," Klaran began, then stroked Daniel's chest fur, "oh, you've been soaking in Gloss," he said, smiling, "you feel so soft and sultry."

"Only for you, my love," Daniel said, planting another kiss on him, "but we will need more of this. You know we can't wait too long."

"Did you have enough?"

"Just barely. I had to use it sparingly."

"OK. Time to eat?"

"It is ready."

"I am very hungry."

"You should be. We cannot seem to get a decent meal anymore. You have been quite the stud lately," Daniel comment with a grin.

"Me? What about you?"

"Guilty!" Daniel agreed with a laugh, then raised an eyebrow as he filled their plates, "so what did you do all day after the interview?"

"I was able to get caught up on administrative things, at least, and take care of a few remaining details. I will be fine. It is just a little frustrating to have police roaming around, suspecting everybody, when I have work to do."

"They interviewed me today, too."

"Truly?" Klaran asked around a mouthful, surprised.

"Apparently it is standard practice to interview mates."

"Usually that is only done when they suspect someone," Klaran added warily.

"They made mention of a court order to interview mates early in this case. It is a huge media story. I would not worry, my love."

"I won't. So how was your work day?"

Daniel sighed and gave him a tired grin. "Toilsome. I have two fox kits in my class, the ones I have mentioned before, and they do keep me busy. Both are very bright and cute beyond belief but, Elders, so much energy! Oh, did I ever mention that their stepfather is a human?"

Klaran raised his eyebrows. "Now, you did not."

"And their father is quite the handsome fox. I have met them both at a couple of parent meetings and the fox is striking."

"Really?"

"Do not worry, my love, he is nothing compared to you! Maybe we should invite them over some time?"

"A big, strong fox and his human mate, eh? Could be interesting," Klaran agreed, taking another bite, "how did the volunteer day go yesterday?"

"Oh, wonderful! Every time I go to the orphanage it is so nice see their faces light up. I feel like I am doing something truly good. Hopefully, we will be taking them to Thumper Springs next quarter."

* * * * *

"Well, you look just..." Bunfal began, taking in the sight of him.

"Lovely?"

"Hmm."

"Battered?"

"I've heard foxes can be harsh mates, but this is ridiculous!"

They laughed and the two cops gave Joe a gentle hug.

"You poor human," Bunfal said, "you look like you have been through a train wreck. OOPS! Sorry!"

Joe swatted the horse across the head and laughed again, then motioned for them to get comfortable. Leaning on a cane, he limped across to the kitchen and started gathering up the snacks.

Lauriff stopped him and started to do it himself. Joe smiled and leaned down, giving Lauriff a customary small kiss on his sheath and scrotum, a subtle little thing he liked to do as a way to pay his respects. Though it was a simple little thing, he knew Lauriff liked it a lot, and had heard indirectly that other furs the fox had told were now doing it for their mates. He just liked to do it, and Lauriff had been wonderful the last couple of weeks while he'd been recovering.

Lauriff smiled and gave him a quick nuzzle, then carried everything out. Joe took one of his pills and followed, enjoying a long glance at the huge, smooth balls nestled between Bunfal's thighs like he always did.

"So how goes the investigation?" he asked, setting his cane beside the lounge and snuggling up to his mate.

"Not as quickly as we would like, but we are making progress," Theed answered.

"How soon until dark meal is ready?" Bunfal asked.

"Is that all you ever think about?" Theed asked, elbowing him.

"No. How soon until dark meal is ready?"

Joe chuckled, "I'm running a little slow yet, so it'll be a few more minutes."

"What is it?" Theed asked, having never eaten Joe's cooking before.

"Chicken, which is a bird, and that's the only clue you get."

"It smells wonderful," Theed offered.

"It tastes wonderful, too," Lauriff added, pulling Joe down and rubbing his belly, careful to avoid the human's sore sternum, "do you think you will be able to apprehend whoever this is soon?" he asked the cops.

Theed sighed, "We certainly hope so. We are gaining plenty of evidence. What we really need is something to tie it all together."

"But we would rather talk about something else," Bunfal suggested.

"Good idea."

"OK, how soon until dark meal is ready?"

"All right, I'll get it!" Joe said, feigning grief, and got up with a boost from his mate.

"How is the leg, by the way?"

"Annoying," Joe answered, grabbing his cane, "it's the kind of break that they want to heal without knitter beams, therefore it didn't get them at the medical den. Because of that, the deep bruises, and the bruise under my breastbone I've been stuck taking bone pills, vitamin and mineral pills, and limping around for the last two and a half weeks. Poor Lauriff has to walk down to the pharmacy every day because the bone pills biodegrade in thirty hours."

"Ah yes, those. And the bruises?"

"Most were so deep it will take a few more days for them to go completely away."

"You should have seen him at the medical den," Lauriff remarked with a shudder.

"Dark meal is served," Joseph announced, pulling everything out of the warmer, "get it while it's hot."

"So, Bunfal," Joe began as they all ate, "when are you going to show us this basement of yours?"

"Here we go again," the Palomino muttered.

"He will not show me," Theed remarked, "only his boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Joe asked, "I didn't know you had one. You gonna get mated?"

"A bull, even," Theed remarked.

"Woo," Lauriff chimed in.

"Bulls are stud beasts," Joe remarked, "so big and so strong. Oh my!"

"Hey hey, mate."

Joe giggled and gave Lauriff a squeeze. "There's no more man on this planet than my little fox."

"So anyway, what's in the basement? Aren't they expensive?"

Bunfal sighed and gave them all a smile, "I am not telling. I should have never told any of you I moved to a den with a basement in the first place. And do not call when he comes over tonight," he added, looking at Theed.

"He's got big pile of hay, I bet," Joe began, "and he goes down there to roll around in it."

"What is hay?"

"Never mind. Pass me the potatoes, please."

"This is awesome," Theed said to Joe sincerely, "now I know why Bunfal is over here so much. Thank you."

"Thanks, and as for our equine friend, not so much for the last few weeks. Right about the time you moved and got that bull boyfriend, right?"

"Hey, bulls are demanding mates," Bunfal said defensively.

"Did he just say 'mates?'" Theed asked around a mouthful of fried chicken.

"Truly," Lauriff confirmed.

"Oh do shut up!"

They laughed and Theed gave the horse a poke. "Who is alpha?"

"There probably will not be one, we are pretty close," he answered with a shrug.

"Do bulls like to roll in hay?" Lauriff asked Joe, grinning.

"I'm not sure about them,"

"What is hay?"

"I'm not telling. Who's going to want dessert?"

"Speaking of not being here, where are Toggn and Brill?"

"I invited them, but Toggn won an off days trip at work and had to cancel. So did Valonos, and Kottenken moved two sectors away last quarter."

"The beaver?" Theed asked.

"Yeah."

"Bummer, he was so much fun when you hit the right spot," Bunfal mused.

Joe gave him a startled look. "You and Kottenken?"

Bunfal shrugged. "He went home with me the day after we met. Your bachelor party, if I remember correctly."

"Stud!"

"I am irresistible."

"I'm starting to get the feeling that our beaver friend sure gets around."

"You may be right."

"Irresistible, eh? You know, if I hadn't fallen in love with a fox..."

"Mate...."

Joe giggled again and gave Lauriff another nudge. As he did so, the com beeped and he started to get up.

"I will get it," Lauriff suggested, putting a paw on his arm.

"No, I've got it. It should be for me," Joe insisted, limping to the terminal, "host, answer, private."

The screen flicked on and the sight of Toggn and Brill greeted him.

"I thought it would be you," he said with a smile, "having fun?"

"Yes, but he definitely shops like a skunk!" Toggn exclaimed, earning a swat from beside him, "your face is looking better, my friend."

"Thanks, so is yours."

That earned a hearty laugh from the skunk and a mock snarl from Toggn.

"And how are you, Brill? He drive you out of your mind, yet?"

"No, not quite," Brill answered, visibly twitching, "I feel fine. Wonderful. I love my life."

Joe laughed as Toggn gave the skunk a playful bite.

"Did you find it?"

"I found that they are sold out," Toggn said, ears folding slightly in apology, "I am sorry."

"Aw," Joe groaned, "there won't be another shipment for two quarters."

"You will live, I am sure, and Lauriff will be glad that you will not get drunk and refuse him!" Brill added.

"It's not my fault that good ale makes me unable to concentrate. He can live without it once in a while."

"Truly he cannot. He is a fox."

"Truly," Joe agreed, "well, thank you for looking. I'd better go before I start to look like a bad host."

"Our pleasure," Brill said, "who is there?"

"Bunfal and Theed."

"They aren't working on the case?"

"They will be, but took a break for dinner. The poor fuzzies have been working almost non-stop for weeks."

"Are they getting close? This is such a huge thing. We're three sectors away and it is big news here."

"Supposedly, but they won't discuss it much. Anyway, wish you were here, have fun, blah blah blah."

The two of them chuckled and Toggn kissed the screen on his end.

"Take care, my friend."

"You too," Joe said, smiling and giving his screen a peck for each of them.

"Mount Lauriff for me," Toggn added quickly.

"Yeah, right! With this leg!" Joe exclaimed, "now get off the com and have fun."

"Be well."

"Take care."

"How are they doing?" Bunfal asked as Joe sat down.

"Brill is shopping their fortune into the ground," Joe said with a smirk.

"That skunk...." Lauriff mused.

"Oh, he knows when enough is enough," Bunfal said.

"Dessert, anyone?"

* * * * *

The bull finished his drink and looked up at Bunfal. On their way up, his eyes ran across a sandy pink, fully dropped penis.

"Was it something I said?"

Bunfal chuckled and leaned down. He grabbed hold of the bull's horns and pulled him into a long, deep kiss. When it was over, he was still grinning.

"No, you just walked in."

Pallafon looked it over again, giving the length a brush of his finger and inspecting the head.

"At least it is still dry."

"I'm sure you can fix that. Not in the mood?"

"Not in the mood *yet*," the bull corrected, smiling, "though that sight makes it hard to resist. How about giving me a belly rub first?"

Bunfal nodded and got down, the horse rubbing Pallafon's broad, hard stomach and chest softly while they chatted and had another drink. It felt nice to have an evening free and he let out a long sigh.

"Elders, that was quite a sigh. Maybe I should be rubbing yours. This case is draining you, my sexy horse."

"You may drain me too after this belly rub," Bunfal suggested.

"Why do I get the feeling that you have one thing on your mind tonight?" the bull asked, glancing at the equine penis draped over his hip, "I do so enjoy our philosophical studies."

"Because I do not want to think about anything else but you tonight."

Pallafon smiled and reached up to scratch Bunfal's ears, "Thank you. But what about the newest acquisition

downstairs?"

"Want to see it?"

"Truly," Pallafon agreed eagerly.

"A little later," Bunfal suggested, rubbing lower, "have I ever mentioned that you have the biggest, most beautiful balls I have ever seen?"

"Yes, and it worked then, too," the bull noted with a wink.

Bunfal let his hand stroke over them for a moment before moving back to his belly.

"Do you not love me for my mind?" Pallafon asked.

The horse laughed and dropped his head to kiss the bull between his horns. "I may have only one thing on my mind tonight, but I like everything about you. So far."

"So far?" the bull exclaimed, laughing.

Bunfal chuckled and nuzzled him, "Let's go down before this thing," he began, gesturing at his penis, "gains a mind of it's own."

"I can't wait."

* * * * *

The raccoon ran a paw over his ears and moved to the next den on the list. Tail flicking, he pushed the call button on the wall beside the door.

The gazelle he was expecting answered and, after seeing his identification, invited him in. He looked around quickly, taking in the details of the den, while the hooper waited. A large, beefy rat sat in the lounge, watching an erotic TriV. Theed tried not to stare as the rat turned the volume down.

"What can I do for you?" the gazelle asked.

Theed tore his eyes from the rat, noticing as they swept to the hooper's face that the gazelle had a tight ring around the base of his scrotum.

"You are aware of the current pattern killer investigation?" he asked, clearing his throat.

"Yes."

"Are you aware that a court order has been issued allowing us to question without warrant?"

"Not really," the hooper answered, frowning.

Theed opened the file on his workpad and showed the hooper, flashing a glance toward the rat as he did so. The rat flicked his eyebrows and spread his legs a little.

Swallowing and feeling his heart race a bit, Theed turned back to the gazelle as the workpad was handed back.

"I see," the hooper said.

"Please answer honestly and quickly. This should only take a few moments," Theed said, connecting the lie detector clip to the hooper's finger.

"Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on the evening of last Fourday?"

"Yes," the hooper answered after thinking for a moment.

"Where were you?"

"I was in here all night."

Satisfied that his scanner was showing a truthful answer, Theed continued.

"What were you doing?"

The gazelle's eyes snapped quickly to the rat and back, then he looked a bit sheepish and flicked his ears nervously.

Theed waited a few moments until it looked as if the hooper wasn't going to answer.

"Sir, I know that is an invasive question, but your answers are, by law, completely confidential. I will not allow unauthorized access to this recording."

"I was with him," the gazelle mumbled.

Theed looked at the scanner out of habit, but then the answer hit him and his eyes darted to the rat, who winked at him and curled his bare tail in his lap suggestively. He blinked, felt his heart race, and quickly looked back to verify the gazelle's truthfulness.

"I see," he mumbled as he checked the readout, "all night?"

"Yes," the hooper answered, looking at him fleetingly.

Theed removed the lie detector from the gazelle's finger and saved the file on his workpad. He couldn't help another glance at the rat, kept smiling and flicked out his tongue.

"Thank you for your time," he told the hooper, voice shaking a bit as he felt heat flow through his ears. He left quickly and leaned against the wall outside to catch his breath. His heart was still racing and took forever to slow down as his mind refused to stop picturing the rat and gazelle together.

Eventually, his imagination waned and he moved to the next address.

* * * * *

"You really like Bunfal, don't you?"

"I guess so. What makes you say that?"

"You look at him a lot, like you used to with everyone when you first got here."

Joe finished brushing his hair and gave Lauriff a sidelong glance. "Honey, I am not straying."

"I was not implying that you were, love," the fox said, snuggling up to him carefully, "but you look at him a lot."

Joe smiled inwardly. Lauriff was jealous, how charming.

"My love, I do not want to have sex with Bunfal."

"Yes you do."

Joe rested his hands on the paws around his stomach and leaned back into him a little, returning his gaze in the mirror. "Of course he's attractive, and those balls are majestic, but sex wouldn't be enough anymore. I need *you*. And I'm sure you've looked at a few horses yourself. You like their smell even more than I."

Lauriff smiled and nuzzled his neck. "Horses do have nice, big, smooth ones, I must agree," he said, pausing a moment to work his nose under Joe's hair, inhale, and let his breath out in a satisfied sigh, "am I enough for you?" he asked suddenly.

Joe raised his eyebrows and turned, keeping Lauriff's arms around him. "Now what brought that question on?"

Lauriff looked a little indecisive, so Joe went on.

"Sometimes you are *too much* for me!" he joked, then sobered again, "yes, honey, horses are sexy, I have a mild thing for antlers, and lions have a face to die for. But *you*," he continued, adding emphasis, "you are *the* sexiest, I have a *major* thing for *lots* about you, and I'd die a *thousand times* just to see *your* face."

"Truly?" the fox asked, smiling warmly.

"Lauriff, my love, what have I done?"

"Nothing, I was just wondering."

"Because I look at Bunfal's balls? There's got to be something else bothering you. Don't I show that I love you?"

Lauriff was quick to answer with how there was no question of that, and how Joe had very quickly improved in his openness after their mating. "It is just that, well, I know how different it is for you as a human. The fact that you had such a brief sniff of Denworld's variety before mating to me is not really fair."

"Oh, phooey!" Joe exclaimed, "if it's bothering you I'll behave and stop looking at Bunfal."

"You don't have to stop looking," Lauriff insisted, "it is natural to and no one has to fight their nature. Forget I said anything, I am being a foolish alpha."

Joe smiled and hugged him closer, "Nothing about you is foolish, love. I know we joke about other men, but we've never really discussed it seriously, have we?"

"No."

"I need to get off this leg," Joe said, moving them into the bedroom. Lauriff followed and they relaxed onto the bed.

"It's my understanding that it is acceptable for mates to share someone, as long as it is a very rare thing?"

"Are you suggesting that we should?"

"I'm suggesting that we should talk about it because I think it's what's on your mind."

Lauriff frowned a little, then perked his ears. "I suspect you know me too well, mate."

"Me? Nah. So tell me, what do you miss about other furs?"

"Nothing. I have told you that before."

"Truly? Then why are we talking about it?"

"Because you brought it up."

Joe sighed and rubbed the fox's ears. "Let me tell you what I miss about humans. Nothing. Now let me tell you what I miss about other furs. Nothing. How do I explain? As far as intimacy is concerned, when I look up from there I want to see your body, your face. And I don't just mean a fox's. I mean *yours* — every little nuance that makes you unique. When I'm with you, no matter what we're doing, it's you that's important. It's you that makes it complete. I could suck and lick other men but it wouldn't be half the satisfaction of pleasing you, I could see, touch, taste and feel their malehood and only wish it was you, and I could be mounted by other men but it wouldn't be half the experience of being yours. Other sheaths and cocks might look good, but only yours take my breath away."

Lauriff nuzzled him, eyes glowing in the dim light.

"You are wonderful, and I say all the same things of you."

"Is it females?"

The fox didn't answer right away, and Joe raised his eyebrows.

"Your kitmate?"

Lauriff sighed and stroked fingers along Joe's back. "I suppose I became used to living with her. When she would be in season, it was always convenient..."

"You miss that?"

"No, truly," Lauriff asserted, "but there is something. It is hard to explain. I don't desire anyone but you, but when an in-season female comes along, I want to, then I do not, then I do again."

"I was under the impression that it was natural to for you. Do you think it's wrong, against your nature, to have only a male?"

"Absolutely not," Lauriff answered emphatically, "you are all I need. I just *want* a female occasionally. I suppose that is what was really on my nose. There is nothing more I could ask of you. You are a man's dream come true, my mate. I suppose it is really just me making something of nothing."

"I wouldn't call it nothing if it concerns you enough to bring all this up. Have you entertained the fact of asking me to let you have a female on occasion?"

"No," Lauriff affirmed, "well, OK, it did occur to me once or twice, but I immediately dismissed it as foolish. As I

said, you are all I need, and there is no kind of happiness you have not given me."

"You are the sweetest man I've ever met," Joe said softly, kissing the top of his muzzle, "I don't deserve you."

"Of course you don't, but I keep you around for the fantastic sex."

They both laughed and Joe pulled him close, adjusting his bad leg.

"You deserve only the best, mate, and I try to be," Lauriff said.

"You are, handsome fox, you certainly are."

"And what was that about my sheath?" the fox asked, his eyes seeming to grow in intensity.

The human felt his heart rate climb a little and he ran his hand softly over it. "What, this? It's about time someone asked for dessert tonight," he said slyly, "but I don't know if I can get myself comfortable with this leg."

"Then stay right here on your back, and I will make it easy for you," Lauriff whispered, then moved up to straddle his shoulders.

Joe pressed his nose against the plump sack before him and took a deep breath.

"Ah," he said softly, "another day in paradise."

* * * * *

Theed rubbed his eyes and frowned.

"Why will this not add up?" he began with a frustrated growl, "we have been over and over all of this," he finished, gesturing to the evidence spread around the room.

"Because we are missing something," Bunfal suggested.

"Oh, thank you, wise one! Thank the Elders you are here!"

"Just trying to help," Bunfal replied with a smirk, dropping a workpad onto the desk, "I would like just ten minutes alone with whoever this is. He would not do this again, and after sentencing I would be there to administer his hormone therapy personally — with a garden hose."

"Hey Theed," came a voice from the door, "I think you should get down to the lab right away."

"Why is that? Has he found something new?" the raccoon asked, perking his ears.

"I do not know, but I heard quite a bit of noise from there a minute ago."

Theed jumped from his chair and rushed past the wolf, running through the halls and down to the laboratory level. He rounded the last corner and headed straight for the lab door.

Just as he reached it there was a flash of dark gray. They collided and tumbled backwards, falling onto a small couch across from the door in a tangled heap, both yelping a "sorry!" as they dropped.

A moment later, Theed found himself lying beneath Enkin, their noses only centimeters apart. They stared for a few

moments, speechless and panting, each becoming more and more aware of their position as the seconds ticked by.

Theed's heart now raced for a different reason, and he blushed deeply, heat filling his ears. Enkin smiled and, with what looked like a little reluctance, began to extricate himself. Almost immediately, the rat became extremely excited.

"Theed! I was just coming for you! You have got to see this!"

With that he grabbed a paw, pulled the raccoon up and dragged him into the lab.

"What is it?" Theed asked, his head clearing.

"Our latest victim, look!" the rat insisted, swinging them around to the terminal, "a second sample!"

"What do you mean by 'second?'"

"This victim has another sample. Can you believe it? Elders!"

Theed dropped his face into his paws and groaned. "A new sample? Elders is right! Now we have to look for a new killer?"

"No," the rat stressed, pointing out the display, "a second sample *from the same victim!*"

"Him?" Theed asked, pointing to the leopard lying dead on the examination table.

"Yes! They did not use enough taralite! Getting sloppy, I think. Anyway, I was able to extract two distinct samples from him!"

Theed's mind began to race, weeks of searches, crime scenes, and pieces of evidence swirling through his head, trying to add this new information. Enkin went on.

"One sample matches the others, and it's better so I could factor out rams, zebras, and gazelles. The second is another hooper, but that is all I can tell. But now we know we have two killers working together!"

The raccoon stood silently, eyes going distant, as he fought to bring it all together. Two hoofers, it made much more sense; obviously in some place private and where they won't be heard, access to a flyer, possibly mated.

His eyes snapped and he looked at the rat.

"What? What?"

Bunfal.

He shook his head, thought a moment, shook it again. "No, it cannot be."

"What?" the rat pushed.

Theed threw his arms around the rat and hugged him. "This is fabulous! Great work! I must go!"

With that he rushed out, leaving Enkin smiling in a daze. All the way upstairs his mind went wild. Having two killers made all the difference, but on the other hand, the direction this new evidence pointed sent chills down his spine.

He fought the urge to jump to conclusions and rushed back to their office. Bunfal was waiting with his ears perked.

"We are looking for *two* hoofers."

The horse looked surprised. "Two? Another killer?"

"Working together," he clarified, then filled him in on what Enkin had found. They immediately started running new simulations and re-evaluating evidence in light of this new find.

After a few simulations, numerous pieces of their puzzle began snapping together. But disquieting gaps still remained, like the time of death on their latest victim.

The leopard had died three hours after they left Lauriff's.

"You are rubbing your face. What is wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," he lied, running his paws back over his ears and taking a sip of ice water, "I just wish this would all come together!"

"Well, we know to stop thinking explicitly in terms of the skunk case."

"I truly was not expecting two killers."

"Indeed," Bunfal mused, his ears flicking as he thought, "wait a moment. What about this?"

He turned to the map and pointed where the bodies had been dropped. "See anything now that we know there are two?"

Theed stared for a few moments and then shook his head.

"Assuming one killer, we have been searching for a central starting point common to all these sights, truly? But since their navigation beacon is undoubtedly disabled, we have no record. There is no way we can find a common plot for one killer, but what about two?"

The raccoon squinted and tried to find some kind of relation between the five dots.

"I do not see what you mean."

Bunfal grinned and poked a finger at the map. "Two different flyers. Not two people using one, but two separate flyers."

"Only one flyer per den is allowed at any den complex," Theed added, ears perking as he rose from his chair.

Bunfal grinned and drew a line with his finger. "Given their location, these two victims, the second and fourth, were probably dropped from a flyer berthed at this," he emphasized, jabbing the map, "flyer lot. It is the only public lot that fits in with the other evidence."

Theed was now at the map too, staring intently. "So they dump one, three, and five straight from home. Two and four they dump after picking up the second flyer at the lot!"

"So, we add the second flyer from this lot to the simulation. That will give us only the hoofers that have two flyers

with one birthed here. Damn, I am good!"

It was then that another possibility flashed into Theed's mind. He had completely forgotten to consider the differences in how various people think.

In that past case, which had formed the basis of their investigation, the skunk had taken a wooded route to where he dumped his victims. Since wooded sights generally fit the scenario now, they had been thinking along the same lines. A quick, direct route had been another assumption, but hoofers wouldn't take a straight, wooded route, they would fly over fields.

The map snapped into focus. There *was* a plot that would fit a single flyer, if one took indirect flyer routes that predominantly passed over fields rather than forests. He shook his head, not knowing which scenario to believe, and decided to keep it to himself for now.

"Ready?"

"Absolutely."

* * * * *

"Are you sure this will work?" Theed asked, looking around the room a little nervously.

"Of course it will," the sector alpha hissed in a matter-of-fact tone, "if we are indeed on the right scent."

"Do not worry, my little worm eater," Bunfal said, clapping him on the shoulder, "you will be backed up fully if anything happens, and you will probably have a few days to prepare yourself."

"Why me?" he asked the alpha, "I'm not the right type."

The snake shrugged. "Because the right types are all staying home at night until our hoofers are caught, lest they be the next victim. If our killers need another soon, they will settle for someone close to their ideal. You are the closest who is on this case. We are fairly certain that the act itself, even with a less predatory victim, will be enough for them. And you know the regulations about bringing in outside officers to be targets."

Theed slumped.

"Let me rephrase that," the snake began.

"No, no, do not bother," Theed said, waving him off, "if I am to be a target, then let us call me one so I have the right frame of mind."

"That is the spirit!" Bunfal proclaimed.

"Here we go," said the station doctor, holding up a large, oval capsule in front of the raccoon.

"That does not..." Theed began, dropping his tail between his legs.

"What?" the bobcat asked innocently, pulling a tube from his pocket.

"No!" Theed cried, backing away.

"It will only hurt for a moment," the doctor chided as Bunfal grabbed him and pulled up his tail.

"Let me go!"

Everyone laughed and the bobcat put the tube away, almost doubled over giggling. A moment later he pulled out a neural manipulator.

Theed looked around for a moment and then chuckled nervously. "I do not need this," he said, shaking his head.

"Now, just relax and open your muzzle," the doctor said, turning serious.

Theed did so and the bobcat guided in the neural probe. He pressed a sequence of pads and Theed felt his throat go numb.

"Stay still...."

He didn't feel a thing as the probe was removed, the capsule attached to it, and reinserted. Moments later he did feel a small lump land in his stomach. Satisfied, the doctor pressed a few more pads and feeling returned to his throat.

"All done."

"Now we will know your every move," Bunfal stated.

"Wonderful. Why is it so big?"

"Because it is full of nanites," the bobcat answered.

"What?!!"

Bunfal chuckled.

"Within thirty minutes they will have hatched, found their way to your senses, and interfaced with the processor and transmitter, which remain in your stomach."

"No one said anything about those!" Theed complained, shivering.

"This is a huge series of crimes and a major investigation. The best equipment must be used."

The raccoon shivered unconsciously again and rubbed his belly. "How do we get them out?"

"They expire in a few weeks. Do not worry about them."

"How are they deactivated?"

"Dial 777 on your wristcom. That will turn everything on and off. A reply of zero means they are activated, one means they are off. Only your wristcom code will work them, so no one is going to be sniffing in on your personal life."

"This is creepy, and it all still may not work."

"Let us hope it does. Remember to keep it on while you are wandering at night, and remember to keep to a schedule

to make yourself obvious. And do not forget to act accordingly. They want strong men."

"I know, alpha."

"He is a strong man, I can assure you," Bunfal added helpfully.

"Everyone knows their roles, truly?" the snake asked one more time, looking around the room.

A series of yes's came back and the snake nodded.

"Good. We are expecting, if Theed catches our killers' noses, for it to take at least a few days before they strike. That does not mean that you do not take absolute care starting right away. Understood?"

"Yes, alpha," everyone answered.

"Then let us hope this happens quickly, and that we have the right complex. Best of luck, especially to you, Theed, and for Elder's sake, be careful!"

* * * * *

He awoke to the startling reek of smelling salts, and the feeling of hands roaming his chest. A muzzle pressed against his cheek and he felt the lips move as his captor spoke.

"We've been wanting a lion, but you will have to do," it cooed maliciously.

Theed tried to snap out a response, but discovered that he was gagged as well as blindfolded. He struggled and his heart began to race. Was that deep voice Bunfal's ram or someone else?

"Yes! You are a spirited one! I think you may make a fine substitute. You should be glad, because tonight we have a bonus," the voice said, obviously excited, "shortly you will have a nice, vulpine companion. Maybe we will let you watch while we teach him a lesson for what his kind have done to us before. If you like that, then you might enjoy it more when it is your turn."

Theed snarled and struggled mightily, bringing a chuckle and a long, suggestive grope from his captor.

"You are strong! I am sure tonight will satisfy us for quite a while, my handsome little..."

* * * * *

Lauriff grumbled as a thin, misty drizzle began to drift down all around him. It probably wasn't heavy enough to activate the sidewalk canopies, so he was going to get wet. Serves him right for not checking the weather report before leaving.

For almost five weeks now he had been walking to the nearest pharmacy every night to get bone pills for Joseph. He didn't especially agree with the doctor's insistence that Joe's leg be allowed to heal without knitter beam treatment, but then again, he wasn't a doctor. One thing was for sure; he was getting sick and tired of having to walk down there and back every night, and now he was getting rained on. At least this was the last trip. Being highly addictive, the bone pills Joseph was on had to be administered in decreasing doses, and tomorrow's would be the final dose. Thank the Elders.

As he left the open area around the den complex next to theirs, the sidewalk moved a bit farther from the road to take

advantage of the small wooded area that lie before the next complex. A figure approached from the other direction, wearing a rain robe, and they shared a small wave while passing.

A moment later he heard the hooves at his back, then felt a firm pressure against his muzzle. Strong arms coiled around him and he fought, but a sudden stinging burned his nose and fizzled its way through his muzzle, making his vision blur, and he suddenly found himself buckling.

There was a flash of green, then nothing.

* * * * *

His captor's voice cut off with a gasp when the sound of the basement door gave way to the sound of numerous paws rushing down the stairs. Then came shouting, the scuffles of a struggle, and the unmistakable hiss of a sleep injector.

After a few moment's silence, he heard hooves approach and held his breath. There were hands at the back of his head, then the blindfold fell away to reveal his partner.

"Well, well, don't you look truly cute hanging there like that," Bunfal said with a snicker.

Theed's lungs collapsed in a sigh of relief and gratitude.

"Will you please get me out of this thing?"

"But you look so cute!"

"Bunfal!"

The horse gave him a whinny-like chuckle and started unfastening cords while others began searching the room, Theed bracing himself on the horse's shoulders as Bunfal unbuckled him.

"You truly came at just the right time," Theed said, grunting as his foot paws finally hit the floor.

"We had to make sure your biological readings indicated the right situation," Bunfal said, handing him a set of clothes.

Theed tapped in the code on his wristcom — it hadn't been removed by his captor — to turn off the nanites. Then he looked around the basement, noting the extra sound insulation, the harnesses bolted to the ceiling, and various painful-looking sexual devices.

"Thanks, partner, on both counts."

"What are friends for?"

* * * * *

Someone was slapping his muzzle. It felt odd that he couldn't do anything about it. Then he heard a hiss and his mind seemed to clear, snapping into focus. He jumped back, hit something, and bolted sideways.

"Sir! Mr. Udintu! You are OK! It is the police!"

Arms were holding him and eased their grip as the policeman's words filtered in. As he stopped struggling, his eyes

focused on a large bear, who was smiling at him reassuringly from under a cop's hat.

"It is OK. How do you feel?"

Lauriff sneezed, then did so again.

"My head is killing me, as my mate would say," he answered, then shook his head, "my mate! How long have I been here? What happened? Does he know..."

"Only a few minutes," the bear answered, holding up a paw to calm him, "so he doesn't even miss you yet. Are you sure you feel well, other than the headache? You caught a glancing blow of the stunner, too."

"I feel fine, otherwise," Lauriff answered, furrowing his brow as he was helped to his feet. There was a brief bout of dizziness but it passed quickly, and he shook some of the wetness from his coat.

"What happened?"

"He pressed a cloth soaked in ether over your muzzle," the cop answered, gesturing to where a large, bound buck was being helped into the back of a police flyer, "you were almost our pattern killers' next victim. You really should not have been out here at night," he admonished.

"Then again, if we hadn't been watching you, we might not have caught him," he added, poking a thumb toward the flyer as it took off.

"Watching me?" Lauriff asked, fighting off the shakes as he thought that "next victim" comment over.

"For the last two weeks. But this is not the place. Your name is Lauriff Udintu, truly?"

The fox nodded.

"Answer out loud, please."

"Yes."

The bear opened a small workpad and read aloud from it.

"Mr. Udintu, in accordance with law and procedure regarding the arrest of a suspect apprehended in the act of committing an offense, you are required to immediately accompany law enforcement officers to the police den nearest this location. Do you understand?"

Lauriff was pacing, adrenaline running wild through him as the realization of what almost happened struck him. They had almost *raped* him! And then killed him, too!

"Mr. Udintu..."

"Yes, I understand," he snapped, still pacing, "but what about my mate? He needs those pills for tomorrow morning. I have to..."

"We have that on record and an officer will act on your behalf to obtain the prescription and deliver it to your mate. You, however, must come with me."

The fox slumped. "Can I call him and let him know?"

"He will be informed. This is a most serious case, Lauriff. Please come with me now."

Joe's leg was killing him but he couldn't stop pacing. He had been up all night trying to occupy his mind and keep himself relaxed. Toggn, bless his wolveren heart, had come over for a while to calm him.

"I will tie you to this lounge if you do not stop," the wolf chided for the hundredth time, smiling, "the officer who brought your pills said he was fine. Why not just relax?"

"Because!" Joe snapped.

Toggn hugged him again and led him to the lounge, laying the human across his lap and beginning a soft belly rub.

"Why don't we keep watching the news and try to be patient. I know it is not easy, friend, but try, OK?"

Joe sighed, giving him a wan smile. "OK, I'll try," he answered. He was only partially successful and soon Toggn left for work. After downing his pills he was again pacing and cursing when the front door opened.

Lauriff had barely gotten one foot paw in the door before Joe slammed into him, hugging him fiercely and practically dragging him into the den.

"Miss me?" the fox asked, murring and nuzzling him ardently.

"Oh honey, I've been going out of my mind!" Joe answered, kissing him passionately. He stepped back afterward, looking him over. "Are you sure you're OK? They said you were but then again, they would."

"I am fine, my love. The kits?"

"With their mother, who wants a call."

Joe had the TriV set to come on automatically for any news update and they were interrupted by its activation.

"Now that their den has been searched and recorded, and charges officially filed, civil authorities are releasing a significant amount of information about the pattern killers who have had the streets of Subsector Two empty at night for weeks."

The two of them walked over arm in arm and eased into the lounge, still nuzzling.

"Authorities are now confident that the two bucks arrested last night are the pattern killers. Yes, the police had been withholding their suspicion that there were two killers working together, but have now released that information. Also, in an exciting development, they are confident that they can link one of the bucks, Manfar Allegen Venewil, to the mag-lev bombing in Subsector Ten five weeks ago. Mr. Allegen works for the mag-lev bureau as a maintenance technician, and on the bombed train was a rape survivor returning to Subsector Two under police protection. Both he and the officer were killed in the crash."

They looked at each other in shock and Lauriff turned off the TriV.

"Small world, eh?" Joe asked.

Lauriff wrapped him in his arms and pulled him as close as he could, cooing and murring, feeling exhilarated that

both of them were alive.

"They almost got both of us!" he said, growling angrily, "we were both almost their victims. Elders!"

"I'm so glad you are OK. I love you, handsome fox."

"And I you, mate."

* * * * *

"Are you relieved that it was not me?"

"What do you mean?" Theed asked, taking another very long swig of gibble.

"The killers."

Theed looked at him oddly for a moment, wondering how the horse could possibly have known.

"What are you talking about?" he asked evasively.

Bunfal took an equally large gulp and stood, pacing over to his basement door.

"One childless horse who lives in the area has a basement, he will not let anyone see it except his boyfriend, and his boyfriend is a ram. Two hoofers, one basement, and one suspicious raccoon."

"Hey, I know you could not..." the raccoon began defensively.

Bunfal chuckled and motioned him over. "If you had not been suspicious, I would not respect you so much. How closely did you have us watched?"

Theed shuffled over, smiling a little sheepishly, "Only enough to satisfy one small, nagging doubt, then that was it. A day and a half."

"Ah," Bunfal said, still smiling, "good. At least I know my partner is thorough and knows not to let his personal feelings affect such a monumental criminal investigation."

With that, he palmed the door open.

"Want to see?"

"You do not have to show me anything!" Theed insisted, taking another long pull from his glass, "let us just celebrate until I am too drunk to walk home."

"Host, lights, dim," Bunfal said, pushing Theed to the stairs, "raccoon, go, down."

Theed giggled and started down the stairs, making it only four steps before Bunfal warned him.

"If you tell anyone, I *will* kill you. Host, lights, full."

The raccoon blinked and suddenly found himself positively awash in bright colors. Bunfal's basement, from one end to the other, as well as on shelves along each wall, was filled with...stuffed animals.

"Oh, um..." he began, a sudden grin splitting his muzzle.

"Laugh at me, and die."

"I'm not laughing!" Theed insisted, fighting for control, "I am just surprised! I mean, you are so, well, butch and alpha and serious and everything and here are all these..."

Bunfal rolled his eyes.

"I'm not laughing!" the raccoon insisted again, managing to eventually fight the smile away, "seriously. I just was not expecting it. Hey, is that one from Earth?" he suddenly asked, one of them catching his eye.

"Quite a few are," Bunfal confirmed, quickly becoming more animated than Theed had ever seen him about anything as he pointed out a few. Then he flashed the raccoon a smile and pulled down a moderate-sized, puffy gray item.

"This is almost five hundred years old. It is a raccoon from some ancient Earth TriV that I have not been able to track down yet."

"It is cute, and that old? It just be worth a fortune."

"Joseph is supposed to have the complete history on it for me soon."

"I thought he did not know either?"

"He does not, but I asked him about the TriV. Once his mother tracks down the name from the information I gave him, I will be able to find out the rest. Including its real value."

"Wow," Theed said, handing it back. He gave the room another scan, glanced at the horse, and smiled again.

"Now, about your secret," Bunfal suggested.

"Me? What secret?"

"You can tell me. I just showed you this," the horse suggested, waving to the abject cuteness surrounding them.

"I do not know what you mean," Theed declared nervously.

"Did you know that your scent changes every time you are around Enkin?"

Theed gulped.

"How long have you loved him?"

Pausing to look around the basement again, Theed took a deep breath and shook his head. Bunfal knew, so there was no sense in denying it.

"I have wanted him since I got here, and I think I have loved him for about a year now," he admitted, letting out a long sigh. Saying so seemed to remove a weight from him, especially as Bunfal's expression now betrayed none of the shock he was expecting, so he went on, almost gushing.

"I have always wanted rats, and Enkin especially. I do not know why, but there is something about him that makes

my heart race. I guess you were not expecting something like that."

"Whatever makes you happy, partner," Bunfal said honestly, then snorted, "uh-oh."

"What?"

"I guess the jokes were not so funny to you, were they?"

"Possibly not," Theed admitted with a chuckle, then they both went silent for a few moments.

"So," Bunfal began, "when are you going to ask him out?"

The raccoon gaped a little, then shook his head. "What will people think?"

Bunfal didn't answer.

"Everyone knows what rats are like. You know. I do not want people looking at me funny when we are together and obviously, well, you know. What if he eventually asked to mate with me? Would people snicker at me behind my back? There goes that raccoon who mated a rat. I bet he likes being that kinky rat's lust toy."

"Now you are being silly."

"Am I?"

"I suppose what you must do is what you feel is best for your soul, my friend. You would not be the first non-rat to mate with one, and people would get used to it; especially after they meet him."

Theed thought for a few seconds and sighed again.

"Maybe you are right. All I am sure of now is that I want him so badly, body and soul."

"Then go get him."

"Maybe I will. Now, let us get drunk!"

* * * * *

A big, toothy smile and perked ears greeted him.

"Theed! Come in! I am surprised to see you."

He returned the offered hug gladly and stepped in. For the first time in his life, he felt a little odd as he stripped and stacked his clothes on the shelf by the door. Also, he had never seen Enkin in the nude, and found that the rat possessed a mouth-watering array of equipment.

Gathering himself, he flashed a smile at the fox sitting in the lounge and turned a little nervously to Enkin.

"Can, um, well, can I talk to you alone?" he asked, flicking his eyes at Enkin's bedroom door.

Enkin raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Sure. Is there something at work?"

"No, it is not that," Theed assured him as the rat led them through his bedroom door, long tail waving behind. They

stepped through and the rat closed the door behind them.

"Have a seat," Enkin offered, waving to the small sofa next to his bed.

The raccoon smiled and looked around as he settled into the couch. Enkin's bedroom was much like he expected, with small, usually shiny trinkets displayed on almost every flat surface. Many were erotic in nature, which he also expected, as were some of the stills on the walls, a couple of which were downright kinky. All of them featured a rat, whether he be alone or with someone of another species.

Enkin settled in close beside him, eyes shining in the dancing candlelight, and smiled.

"Those are a nice touch," Theed offered, pointing to one of the candles.

"I like them."

A few moments passed before Theed met the rat's eyes again, and he took a deep breath.

"Can I get you something, by the way?" the rat suddenly asked.

"No, thank you," he replied, then took another deep breath. "I need to talk to you about something."

"I assumed as much," Enkin replied, giving him a playful smile. He had an idea of what was making the raccoon so nervous, but tried not to smile at how the bushy tail kept flicking, or assume too much. His heart rate did pick up, though, and he couldn't help hoping a little. He dare not suggest it himself.

"Enkin," Theed started, then paused, then started again, "how long have we known each other?"

The rat shook his head, his smile widening further, and wagged a finger.

"Do you want to try again?"

Theed laughed nervously and shook his head also. "OK, fine. Would you like to, you know, be more than just friends with me?" he finally blurted.

Enkin's heart soared! He sat stunned for a moment, even though he had suspected what the raccoon was up to. Then he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Theed's shoulders, hugging him close and nuzzling under his chin. Theed returned the favor and asked, "Is that a 'yes?'"

Leaning back, Enkin looked at him lovingly for a moment before turning more serious and leaning his face on a paw.

"Are you sure?"

Theed blinked, confused. "Enkin, I've been wanting to ask you that for a year! Of course I am sure, I have just been a coward. Why do you ask?"

"Because I am a rat, and you are not. Do you know what your friends will think?"

"I have thought a lot about that while sobering up the last couple of days."

Enkin leaned close, speaking earnestly but quietly, sincerely. "Some may think you are the sex toy of a lecherous rat. They might even make fun of you behind your back. Not everyone by any means, but some. I have the same needs and desires you would expect. I *am* a lecherous rat, and no different from other rats that way. Even if you like me as

a person, I simply cannot stop being a rat for you."

"I do not want you too," Theed countered quickly, "I want you for who *and* what you are."

"Truly?" Enkin asked, delighted but guarded.

"I should admit, I have always been attracted to rats. And the more I got to know you, the more I have wanted you. I do not want you to become something or someone else for me. I want you."

It took great effort, but Enkin managed to not throw himself around Theed on the spot.

"But what about what people will think? I know it is not always easy to be involved or mated with a rat when you are not one. People accept how we are when we stay with our own kind, but do not understand why anyone else would want one of us. And when they do go with us, half the time it is for a cheap thrill, something to tell their friends they did when at parties."

"I do not care."

"Forgive me, but that is easy to say."

"Truly, I have decided that I will not let my fears and insecurities hold me back any longer. I feel empty, Enkin, and it is because I have been letting everyone else's opinion dictate my life. No more."

He paused and sighed, then looked Enkin right in the eye. "I am not demanding anything from you. We can always be friends. You can just say no, but I am here for you if you want me."

The rat's eyes glazed over and he pulled Theed into a fervent kiss. Almost a year of pent-up desire was unleashed and the kiss became more and more passionate, paws gripping each other as their tongues roamed lustily. It seemed to go on forever, the two of them sinking onto the couch, and Theed was breathless when the rat finally released him.

"I love you, handsome raccoon."

"I love you too, handsome rat. Now, will you go out with me?"

Enkin shook his head and quickly, deftly slid a fingertip over the anus he had so desperately wanted for so long.

"I want to stay in tonight."

Theed shivered, cooing softly at the rat's touch, and spread his legs a little.

"I was hoping you would say that."

* * * * *

The frail old man sat on a stool, tears streaming down his wrinkled face. Thin wisps of long head fur hung around his cheeks and a gnarled hand rested on the empty shell before him. Minutes passed silently before he spoke, not looking up.

"Is everything arranged?"

The lawyer turned and nodded solemnly.

"Yes, sir."

"Then please leave us." the old man said, his voice a fragile whisper.

The tiger nodded again and stepped out, mumbling a "good day, sir" as he left.

Moving slowly, weakly, the old man shuffled himself forward, then leaned down and rested his head on the sunken furry chest.

Silence.

The tears flowed more freely, soaking the lovely white fur, and he began to sob openly. A lifetime of images rushed through his mind; their first belly rub and first kiss, the nights of passion and of quiet affection, watching the kits grow and have those of their own, the picnics, the vacations, the moments when the fox's eyes spoke volumes of the love they shared. For seventy-seven beautiful years the last thing he had heard each night was the beating of his mate's heart.

Now there was nothing.

An empty shell.

His soul cried out, along with his body. It hurled itself at the empty shell, craving what it once had. It howled with sorrow and wept with grief. It cast about desperately to feel complete again.

And then, with one final, gasping sob, it leapt free.

Mating is forever.

THE END