

DENWORLD

BY

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PROLOGUE

"There he goes."

"Lucky bastard," Carl added.

Aaron finished entering Joe's requirements into the packet and hit the transmit button. "I didn't know you were interested that much," he said, looking back up, "why didn't you try harder?"

"Because my wife wouldn't have it," Carl said with a shrug, affecting a sneering, childish voice, "how will the kids get the right classes? What about my mother? How will we keep up with our investments? What will we do with the house? Nag, nag, nag!"

They shared a laugh and Carl shrugged again. "I don't see why we just couldn't pick up and go, but you know how women are. They refuse to believe that things often just work out."

"You really like it there that much?"

"Imagine California, but without the self-satisfied comeuppance. Remember when I took the ball and chain there for vacation last year? Most of them might look ready to eat you, but man, they are just the friendliest bunch. I didn't want to come home. Oh, yeah, we had the kids along, too." he finished with a wink.

"It may help you to know that you never had a chance, anyway. Joe practically shoved himself down every throat from here to Kansas. He was like a walking resume with an ass-kissing machine attached!"

"Oh, thanks for the vote of confidence!"

"He'll do fine for us, I am sure. He is your protégé, after all. Although you're hardly any older, he's also young and single enough to actually take advantage of the opportunities that might arise, if it suits him."

"He's like that? Wow, for some reason I never realized. Then again, I only ever see him here, and this project has been a twenty-five hour a day job. But now that you mention it, I do recall him often mentioning how he didn't get to study them as much as he would have liked because of school, his apprenticeship, and this place."

"He'll certainly be able to study them now. As for the project, it's now out of our hands and into theirs."

"Amen."

Joe sat back with a soft growl and rubbed his eyes. Interstellar travel was supposed to be dull but he wouldn't know. So far he'd spent the entire day with his nose buried in technical diagrams. Thank goodness the company was flying him business class so he at least had enough room for the three workpads he was using. The injector problem would have to wait. Right now he was trying to work out how to get the shielded sensor array aligned properly.

He took a sip of coffee and spent a few minutes looking out at the blur of sidespace. Why they bothered putting in windows he couldn't fathom. Denworld ships, the design of which this one was based upon, didn't; but then again most Denworlders were terribly afraid of heights.

Ah, Denworld. He took another sip and smiled. He had been trying to get there for years. Although he preferred a more casual approach, going on company orders worked just fine and no vacation would last as long. "Detached service — Denworld. Duration — six months." Six *local* months. One hundred and eighty local, 27-hour days. Twenty 9-day weeks. Two quarters of a year. He couldn't wait.

One Earth and one Denworld ship had met in deep space one hundred and forty-two years ago. Almost immediately the animalistic "furs," as they were now commonly called, told of how Denworld had been seeded a couple of thousand years before by a very ancient, very technically advanced, and apparently very bored race using DNA stock from Earth. Furs were bipedal and looked like half-man, half-animal versions of dozens of Earth species.

Once the language barrier had been overcome, they had quickly made it clear that they held no claim to Earth, wishing only for peaceful social and trade interaction.

Joe thought they were the sexiest things alive, helped by the fact that almost all males could be regarded as homosexual. It seems the Elders, as furs call that ancient race, programmed a rather odd trick into furry DNA. Every mature female on the planet goes into heat once a year, often, but not necessarily, in early spring (Denworld has four seasons like Earth, but they are less extreme and the overall climate more temperate). Males, on the other hand, were sexually active all year. Since a female who isn't in heat shows no interest in sex or intimacy in general, the latter pair-bond with each other.

After that fateful meeting in space, the Elders were never heard from again until four years ago. One had stopped by, apparently to check on their creation's progress. It's appearance had been huge news on both planets, and it seemed satisfied with how the two of them had gotten back together. That reunion had been the guiding principle of their nurturing of Denworld's society, and the reason they had left when it was clear the two peoples were about to make contact.

At one point the Ambassador to Earth, a regal, characterful woman, had asked the Elder what it thought of how Denworld's society had evolved. She followed with the question of what had prompted them to design in such unusual mating and marriage habits. Although lacking a physical body, the Elder had given the impression of a shrug.

"We were physical beings once ourselves, long ago. When we created furs, we hoped to touch on what we ourselves once were. They are what we made them to be. Beautiful, aren't they?"

Joe had always found most furs to be achingly attractive, and often dreamed of Denworld — a world of sexy, furry

men with a habit of lounging around nude, even in public at certain places. And now he was going there on detached service for six months. Six *local* months. At least.

Denworld's atmosphere contained a gas that did not exist in Earth's biosphere. Combining it under intense pressure with a certain mix of basic minerals, among other processes, creates a large slab commonly referred to as a "rock." Each emits a steady flow of radiant heat, enough for a bed-sized rock to power or heat a small apartment complex for about a year, depending on grade.

His company was partnered with Denworld's second-largest rock manufacturer to work on a new grade of rock that made use of certain elements from Earth, all terribly secret, and required a reworked manufacturing process. Now that the basic computer simms proved it possible, it was his job to go on-site, to Denworld, and work on the hardware and software he helped design until it all worked.

That was why he liked his job so much; he got to work on software and actually get his hands on the things he was programming for. They broke ground only two weeks ago, so only the basic production line framework awaited him.

He looked back at the diagrams and sighed, downed the last of his coffee, and went back to work.

He was jolted back to reality when a steward's voice came over the speakers to announce that they were back in normal space and now passing Womat, the larger of Denworld's two moons, and would be docking in twenty local minutes. Womat, which in English translates to "Big Brother," was the detached industrial heart of Denworld. Although it took years for Denworld's economy to rebound, all heavy pollution industry had recently finished relocating there to spare the planet itself. Within a dozen or so decades it's thin, lifeless atmosphere will have turned rank. Thank goodness rock production was fairly clean and stayed planetside. Joe saved and closed the files he had open, seeing the Denworld Visitor's Guide was still up. He didn't have enough time to browse it so he closed that too and put his things into his carryall.

Twenty-five minutes later he was standing in line at customs behind a tour group. The burly bear behind the counter worked quickly and efficiently, getting through the two-dozen humans in short order. Denworld was a popular vacation spot for humans with it's mild climate, comparatively lax social atmosphere, and countless beautiful, affordable resorts.

"Welcome to Denworld Station," the bear said when Joe reached the counter, "ID please," he finished, looking up.

"Thanks," Joe replied, handing his card over. The bear smiled, looking distracted the way busy social workers do, glanced down as he took the card, then did a double-take and the grin widened to show fang tips.

"Business or pleasure?"

Joe hesitated, caught a little off guard at the sudden change of mood. Seeing how he was now inserting Joe's ID into the reader, it was also a completely unnecessary question. He returned the smile though. "Business."

"Two quarters, whew," the bear said, nodding appreciatively, "do you have anything to claim?"

"Shipped separately. It's all in the manifest," he answered, pointing to the reader.

The bear grinned again and checked through the documentation on his card, pausing occasionally to smile at him. "The food will have to clear quarantine. That takes about a week," he said, sliding out the card and handing it to him, "otherwise you're all clear."

"Thank you."

"Will you be on the station long?" the bear asked quietly as he turned to go.

Now *that* was an odd question, but Joe had an idea of it's intent, though no idea why. "Actually, my shuttle leaves in about..." he glanced at his wristcom, already displaying Denworld time, "forty-five minutes."

"Ah," the bear said, ears moving slightly, "well, enjoy your stay."

"I hope so and, uh, thank you for asking." Joe replied with a small wave and moved off.

He muddled that whole exchange over as he set out on the long walk to his departure gate. Could a fur be hitting on him already? He hadn't even gotten to Denworld yet. There were also two very good looking men in that tour group, neither of which earned a second glance, let alone a double-take. A sudden sense of mild dread filled him when it occurred that something could be wrong. He began looking for a bathroom, fearing some giant food stain on his face or a hunk of congealed sauce in his hair.

He spotted one a short distance ahead. There were quite a few other humans in evidence but, just as with the customs bear, he was getting a lot of stares from furs of all kinds. Their combined smell filled the port with a soft, animalistic concoction of odors that he found himself liking and tried to concentrate on that as he hurried his pace. Nearby a lion, more gorgeous in the flesh than even a VR booth could convey, nudged his buck-like companion and gestured to Joe, who only just caught the exchange as he looked to the floor. After what felt like an eternity he reached the "Private Room" sign, all but body-blocked the door open, and nearly ran to the mirror.

He was actually disappointed and a little puzzled that nothing was amiss. The same old face gazed back through big brown eyes, perfectly clean. A few quick ruffles uncovered nothing in his shoulder length, dirty blonde hair either. He stood looking at himself for a few moments, trying to ignore the glances coming from the wolf at the next sink, wondering what was going on. He was twenty-six and good looking but hardly a heart stopper. Letting out a sigh he turned on the cold water and splashed his face a few times. While doing so he almost considered asking the wolf what he was looking at, but decided that might be bad form.

I have got to read that guide, he thought. Refreshed but still a little self-conscious, he dried off and headed out.

He found his gate and handed his card to the attendant. Nothing had changed once he left the private room. He was still getting looks from a lot of furs. It was really starting to bother him. He had made a conscious effort to see if other humans were receiving the same treatment and it seemed they weren't. At least, not that he could tell. Like the bear, quite a few had smiled at him. He had responded in kind and was at least glad that it was a pleasant thing earning all those stares. Better than looks of hatred, for sure, but he still felt confused. He had never been so ill-at-ease in his life.

"I'm sorry, sir," the attendant began, "but your flight planetside is running about thirty minutes behind schedule."

"Oh?" he said, taking his card back, "what's wrong?"

"The trip up was delayed while a medical evacuee was brought aboard. We're sorry for any inconvenience, but regulations require the utmost care with medical passengers."

"Oh, that's OK, I guess," Joe said with a sigh, "is there a bar nearby?"

The fur, which looked something like a badger but Joe couldn't be sure, pointed further down the hall. "It's on the

right, about 80 meters down."

Joe nodded and set off, steering into the bar and sitting next to an older human. He ordered a drink and glanced at the man next to him. "Excuse me."

"Hm?" the man answered.

Joe handed the bartender his card and took a sip. It was a good, stiff drink and he flashed a smile as his card was handed back, then returned his attention to the human.

"Hi, I don't mean to bother you, but, well, oh, by the way, my name's Joe." he stammered, offering his hand.

The man shook it and smiled. "Harry. Oh, no bother at all. What can I do?"

Joe thought for a moment, trying to come up with the right way to ask. "Have you been to Denworld before?"

"Quite a few times. I come here about five or six times a year on business. Why?"

"Well," he began, taking another swallow and aligning his thoughts, "ever since I stepped off the interstellar I've been getting, uh..." he paused and glanced at the bartender, who was now standing at the far end of the bar and trying not to obviously stare at him. Wary of those ears, he lowered his voice. "a lot of stares from furs. I don't know what it is, but it started at customs and hasn't stopped since. I've looked, and it doesn't seem like every human here is getting the same treatment. I've never been here before so, well, am I imagining things?"

The man looked at him for a moment, then smiled. "I'd guess it's the eyes."

"Huh?"

"No fur has brown eyes, and they love 'em. Oh, you'll see brown flecks in yellow eyes a lot, but not one species has solid brown eyes. Even the bucks and does have yellow. I think it was the Elders' favorite. Anyway, yours are huge, so that would be my guess. That and the wide, square jaw. They like them too."

"Oh," Joe said quietly, his brow furrowing. He had no idea about that sort of thing. Basically, he had always assumed that from a fur's point of view, a human was a human.

"Why don't you ask the bartender?"

"Oh my, no way!" he exclaimed, laughing.

"Sure, go ahead! They're much more accessible that way than your typical human."

"No, thank you. I'll take your word for it," Joe said quickly, waving a hand and taking another sip. "thanks, that's a load off my mind. I was starting to wonder."

"You going to be here long?"

"Six months, at least."

"Better get used to it, then," Harry said with a grin, then got up. "Well, my flight's about to leave and there's a pretty little woman waiting for me on Earth. You take care."

"You too, and thanks again." Joe said, shaking his hand.

Joe sipped his drink and watched people going about their business in the terminal. It felt almost surreal seeing so many furs in the flesh. VR was almost dangerously realistic but reality was, well, even more real. He couldn't help finding so many of them attractive, except the occasional fat one, though even those were good looking because the fur coat just made them look burly. Those types were rare, though, and he must have fell in love a hundred times before his drink was finished. The bar was getting busier now and he dropped a tip into the bartender's jar, a tradition that somehow had survived the centuries and crossed space, then got up and headed back to his gate. Once there, he was able to board the shuttle immediately.

Denworld was evenly divided into ten sectors by lines of longitude, with ten further subdivisions for each sector. Viewed from above the north pole, the planet would seem to be a pie cut into ten slices. The ride down to sector three was short and uneventful, except that a lion had been sitting next to him who smelled so overtly erotic he was having trouble thinking of anything else.

He had distracted himself by looking opening the window shade and watching as they sped across Denworld's main continent a few thousand meters up. Cities could be seen below, although they were hard to pick out. Furs tended to build out rather than up, and were obsessive about blending buildings into their surroundings.

As for their architecture and urban planning, most buildings were designed to be inconspicuous, with plenty of trees, bushes, and small parks surrounding them. From up here, Joe got the impression that living in one of this planet's cities would be more like living in a crowded summer camp.

Thankfully, as the lion's proximity was really starting to get to him, they pulled into their terminal without delay and disembarked.

He grabbed his bags and headed toward the concourse and a row of slim poles with names displayed on top. Below each stood one or more furs, all waiting for someone to arrive. He spied the one showing "Crowell" and headed toward it. Standing below his name was a either a spotted leopard or cheetah. Whoever it was saw him too and smiled, giving a small wave, and turned off the sign.

"Mr. Joseph Alexander Crowell," it began in English, his last name pronounced almost as a growl, "welcome to Denworld."

The feline stood with it's elbows relaxed at it's sides, forearms extended, palms up. Joe smiled and they clasped arms just below the elbows and leaned close to sniff near the shoulder. It was the typical Denworld form of greeting, one of the few things Joe had actually had the time to learn before leaving Earth. It was customary to comment on their smell if you liked it, but say nothing if you didn't. There was no offense in having a smell someone didn't like, a common occurrence on a planet full of snouts. This one smelled just fine.

"Thank you, I'm glad to be here," he began, sniffing loudly, "and glad to be smelling you."

The feline grinned, "I'm Roweth Van Cleaant, please call me Roweth, and you're wearing cologne? You may want to avoid it while you're here. You're not as bad about it as most humans, but the smell of most is quite sharp to us."

Joe frowned slightly. He had tried to put on a little as possible. "I tried to be subtle with it, but I'll take your advice. And please, call me Joe."

The name, he noted, marked the feline as a female. He almost hadn't noticed from looking at her, but now that he knew he could see the feminine bent to her features.

"Joe?" she said, eyeing him a little, "Hm, I don't know how to say this, but if that is a short version of your name like so many humans have, you may want to avoid it. In Language 'jo' means 'walk.'"

She offered to take one of his bags and he handed her the lighter of the two. It was probably a human courtesy lost on her because she was a good half meter taller than him and sinuously slender, though muscular all the same. She gestured toward the hall and started walking. "Was your flight comfortable? You seem to have passed bio with no trouble."

"It was busy," he started, walking alongside, "and yes, I'd been cleared on Earth Station and here, probably because I'm carrying about two liters of vaccines. I just can't wait to catch my first Denworld cold." he finished with a grin.

Roweth snorted, smiling, "It won't be long, I'm sure. Once the initial suffering ends you won't notice it any more than you would on Earth. Ah, here we are."

They had reached an exit with a short line of people leaving the terminal. Josh swiped his card and was cleared to enter Denworld's atmosphere. All spaceports were like this, all the better to prevent any unwanted bacteria or viruses from contaminating the local biosphere. It was the sixth and final airlock/bioscan Joe had passed through.

They entered a waiting taxi and Roweth gave it a destination. "How is your Language?"

"Not good, I'm afraid. They sort of rushed me off. I believe arrangements were made to get me a Language chip."

"I've been informed that everything is waiting at your den. Oh, speaking of that, your denmate is a, oh what is it, werf?"

"Wolf," Joe corrected with a smile. Good, he thought. Wolves were his favorite fur, "I did get an apart...den with a kitchen, didn't I?"

"Yes, his former denmate was a cook," Roweth answered, "you've brought food?"

Very few Denworlders could cook much. Almost all food was bought precooked and prepackaged, with entrees and side dishes kept separate for maximum variety. It wasn't as bad as it sounded. Once available on Earth, even though they were expensive, the offerings from Denworld nearly killed the prepared food industry. Quality and variety far surpassed most of what was locally produced and people had started complaining to manufacturers almost immediately.

Being a way of life rather than a convenience, Denworld food producers were obliged to provide a staggering array of well-prepared choices. It didn't take long for Earth's companies to get with the program when faced with the threat of Denworld transplants making human food better than any of theirs.

"Chicken, beef, pork, spices, broccoli, and a ton of asparagus."

"Asparagus?" she asked, eyes brightening, "that is wonderful! So expensive, though."

"I can imagine. It's not cheap to buy on Earth itself. But I grow my own anyway."

"Truly?"

"Yup. One of the reasons it's so expensive is that it has to grow for years before the spears sprout. How far is it?" he finished, gesturing out the window as they sped over the treetops.

"Only a few minutes. How well do you cook? Is it a hobby?"

"Sort of. I usually cook my own dinner about three or four times a week. Cooking helps me relax."

"You'll have to share some of that asparagus," she said with a grin, "I can be bribed."

Joe laughed. "Well, that won't be necessary!"

As promised, soon the taxi stopped and they began a short walk to the sprawling, one story building that was to be his home for the next six months. They were passing through a nicely landscaped park that surrounded the complex, with meandering pathways and plenty of trees. Denworld only had three species of tree, and it seemed only one was in evidence here. They were huge, with bare, purple-blue trunks leading up to a giant canopy of large, translucent green leaves the size of card tables.

Some kind of bird, vaguely reptilian with long, slender tails, flew by on occasion. Furs lounged around on blankets or played games. One small group was playing something very similar to Frisbee football. It was an odd adjustment. Everything seemed vaguely familiar — there were trees, bushes, grass, etc. — but the details were all wrong. The grass, for instance, wasn't made of individual blades but was instead what looked like an unbroken carpet of loosely balled-up green string. Right now Denworld's star, brighter and more distant than the Sun was to Earth, was getting low in the sky.

The building came suddenly into view as they rounded a large bush. He had almost missed it, so well did it blend into the surroundings.

On Denworld, housing was provided by one's employer in complexes built by the government. Pay levels seemed just a little low until one took the free housing into account. The bare minimum was far from stark, as he knew, with size and luxury increasing commensurate with income level. One was free to pay for something above what was provided, of course, or pay for certain additions to an existing level.

He knew his den, for example, was typical for someone of his income but cost him extra for a kitchen. As with his apartment back home, which was being subleased in his absence, having a roommate was the preferred way of life for single folk.

He was currently broke, having made sure all his debts were paid off before leaving Earth, but with free housing even his reduced salary was still a generous one.

As they reached the nearest entrance Roweth unclipped the workpad she was carrying and looked up his room number. "You're in den 200," she began, opening the door for him, "good, and it's close. It's early evening, in case you didn't know. Most people will be coming in for the night in a couple of hours."

Joe sighed with relief. "Good, I'm exhausted."

"I'll show you in and then leave you to yourself," she began as they reached a door. On it was a number and what appeared to be two names stenciled in Language, plus a small one-way window. "Your paw print should be on record." Roweth finished, gesturing to the panel beside the door.

Joe pressed his hand against the flat plate and the door slid open with a soft sigh. The first thing he noticed as they entered was a soft smell, like autumn leaves but somehow more animal in nature. It seemed no one was home.

The common area was simple and tasteful, cozy in size but not small. Dominating one corner was a large, multi-level lounge of cushions and soft pillows, with small tables built in to hold drinks, meals, and snacks. There were two

small workstations, one unused, one showing signs of regular use. The latter must be his roommate's. On the wall opposite the lounge was a large viewer. Another wall was covered with still image plates of what he assumed was his roommate's family.

On either side was a door, one open and one closed, leading into the bedrooms. As promised, a tidy, unused kitchenette was just beyond the lounge. Other than the food, which was still in quarantine, the boxes of his personal effects were neatly stacked in front of the open bedroom door. Roweth immediately led him to the third doorway, which opened into the "private room."

"Are you familiar with how everything works?" she asked.

"I'm not completely sure. Like I said, they rushed me here." he answered, looking around. There was a long counter with two sinks and an equally large mirror. Beside it was a toilet, and beside that a bidet-like device they called a "love seat." Joe knew its purpose and felt a little embarrassed when Roweth explained its use. There was a tub/shower opposite them with a built-in dryer.

"Well, I'll leave you to get settled," Roweth said, heading back out into the main room. She gave him sly smile before continuing. "I'm in season so I've got five dates to choose from. I will be here to fetch you at 0800. Is there anything else I can do before I go?"

It wasn't hard to imagine that she was getting a lot of attention at the moment. When they were in heat females didn't just change physically, but psychologically as well. She was obviously basking in the attention. He thought over the question for a moment and looked at his wristcom. He figured he had a couple of hours before getting to bed early enough. "I don't think so, thanks. I'll just get unpacked and hit the sack."

"Do what?" she asked.

Joe chuckled. "Sorry, a human phrase. Go to bed."

"Ah," she said with a smile, "so many ways of saying things. Sleep well, then. I'll see you tomorrow morning to take care of a little paperwork and then take you on over to where you'll be working."

"Good night." he said, showing her to the door. He turned around and looked the room over again. It was furnished in mild earth tones, his roommate seemed to have a taste for ancient architecture and, judging by the large still image on one wall, reclining, nude wolves. He wasn't about to complain. The wolf was artistically presented and sexy as hell. He moved over to the wall with all the stills and looked them over.

In the center was a portrait of two wolves, presumably his parents. Radiating around them were the rest of the family. That meant his roommate should be right below them. There were two portraits below, the second probably his brother, and he had no way of knowing which was his roommate. Both looked extremely good, especially the one on the left. He had a more predatory, almost sinister look that made Joe's heart go weak.

He glanced over the rest, grinning at the impossibly cute babies displayed on a few of them, then moved to the kitchenette. It was more complete upon close inspection, though he couldn't read any of the markings on anything. He shook his head and walked to the pile of his things.

On top was a small box marked in English. He opened it and took out the thin, featherweight headphones and the Language chip. He paused for a moment, then decided he was too tired and would rather unpack anyway. He opened the door and stepped into the small bedroom.

There was a bed, low to the floor as was typical on Denworld, that resembled a smaller, simpler version of the living

room lounge. There was also a dresser, a decent sized closet, and a comfortable chair with a reading light behind it and three small tables. Two of these were on either side of the bed and only slightly higher.

All-in-all it was a very nice, cozy little apartment and he set about unpacking his things. Once his clothes and toiletries were where they belonged he set about personalizing his half of the living area and the bedroom. The first step involved unpacking and placing the dozen or so wolf (of the Earth variety) statuettes and sculptures he prized, along with a number of foxes. Next came his clothes. That finally done to his satisfaction, he moved to the kitchen and unpacked his cooking utensils, which took up every nook and cranny of available space.

He looked around one last time, sighing in satisfaction, then grabbed his workpad and called up the translation screen. He tapped in what he wanted and started looking among the symbols for it's Language namesake. He found it on the drink dispenser, pushed the pad, and was rewarded with payo juice, which tasted almost exactly like orange juice but without the citrus bite. He mixed it with a healthy dose from the hereto unopened bottle of vodka, added a few ice cubes, and flopped into the lounge.

There was still no sign of his wolvern roommate by the time he finished his drink. A glance at his wristcom prompted a trip to the bathroom and then to his bedroom for the night; after he set his coffee maker for the morning. None of the sheets he had brought were made for oval beds, so he threw one across the bottom and another over it. He set his alarm, turned out the lights and called it a night.

* * * * *

In spite of the stress of the day before, he had slept like a rock. The alarm rudely jolted him awake. He emerged into the living area to find no evidence that his roommate had come and gone. Nothing was moved, added, or taken away. The smell of coffee beckoned so he got moving. Roweth arrived promptly at 0800 and so began his first day on Denworld.

It passed quickly in a blur of paperwork, introductions and a tour of what had been completed. Seeing the schematics coming to life before him was a real thrill and he couldn't wait to get to work. Unfortunately it was now mid-day and he wouldn't make much progress starting now. His supervisor, a reptilian breed with an almost palpable eroticism about him, granted him the rest of the day off to spend learning Language.

He took that advice gladly enough and rode a shuttle home, their den complex only a short distance from the pilot line site. He took a blanket and his headphones out into the surrounding park. Since it was a cool day he wore long clothes and didn't need sunscreen, a necessity in hot weather with Denworld's slightly harsher star. There weren't many people around this time of day so he made himself comfortable near the building, put the headphones on, and started the tutorial.

It worked by tuning into the language centers of his brain and feeding in the new language. All he had to do was follow a simple program of listening through the headphones then repeating what he'd heard. It worked in layers, so the results weren't complete immediately, but he would be fluent after a couple of days. He would always have a strong human accent, though, because humans couldn't easily reproduce the growls and other small noises that were an integral part of Denworld speech.

There was a similar course for reading, which would come next, and others for later.

He was still at it when a crowd of furs started arriving from his and nearby employers. Since the learning chip worked most effectively when you stared at something plain to avoid distraction, he had been looking down at the blanket. Suddenly he looked up and a few up front were followed by dozens behind, all apparently getting off work

at the same time. It was much like what he saw every day back home, but he stopped the tutorial to watch.

They came in all species, just about every one represented by a few people. He knew there must be females in the crowd, but he wasn't having much luck picking them out. He tried not to be too obvious, fiddling with the chip player when he thought he might be rude. Still he got a lot of surprised smiles and even a few waves, all which he returned gladly.

Most had passed except for a few stragglers. One, a wolf, paused briefly then approached. Joe had gone back to the chip but stopped it. As the wolf drew near he began to resemble the sinister looking one from the still, though Joe couldn't be sure. If it was, pictures didn't do him justice. He was quite a specimen.

"Excuse me," the wolf began in heavily accented English, "are you the Area 12 human?"

"Yes, I am." he answered as he stood, then giggled. Three straight hours of the chip had already taken some hold, and the pronoun came out as "fubu" instead of "I."

"Sorry." he added, gesturing to the player.

"Learning Language already? Good." the wolf said with a friendly smile. At least, Joe assumed it was. This one looked ready to eat him, making him feel a little intimidated. The wolf offered his hands, "I'm Toggn Paytor Kortpik, your denmate."

Joe returned the greeting, smelling the same scent as their den, only more immediate. "Joseph Alexander Crowell, but call me Joseph, please," he began, "and your smell is..." he paused, assuming that "outrageously sexy" was probably a bit much, "very good."

"Hm, you're wearing false scent," Toggn said, "but at least not as much as other humans I've met."

"Don't worry," Joe began, snapping to attention, "I won't let it happen again," he finished playfully, though he mentally slapped himself for forgetting. Again he spoke in English and broken Language.

Toggn chuckled and his eyes lit, "A sense of humor, too! You may call me Toggn. Have you eaten yet?"

Joe felt relieved. Toggn was the first person today to offer his first name, and he seemed friendly enough in spite of those predatory looks. "Actually, I completely lost track of time. I'm starved," he answered, taking off the headphones and looking at his wristcom, "I've been at it for hours."

"Well, let's eat then." Toggn said, gesturing toward the building. "So other than having your brain soaked with Language, how has your first day on Denworld gone?"

Joe knelt and gathered up his things. "Long, but I'll get used to it. Can't remember the last time I worked a normal day anyhow."

"That's right, Earth has shorter days. I almost forgot."

They started in, Toggn holding the door for him, and Joe gave him a apprehensive glance. "I hope you don't mind what I did to the apart...den, damn it," he said, finishing with a growl. Denworld terminology had to be learned the hard way, and on Denworld, everything was a den. There were no apartments or flats, only dens. There were no hotels or motels, only travel dens. There were no restaurants, only meal dens. He had to remember that.

There were also, when the words were translated into English, numerous types of mates. "Mate" was used alone

when the context was clear, but they also used lifemate (spouse), denmate (roommate), and, depending on species, kitmate, fawnmate, cubmate, pupmate, et cetera (she who bore my children).

"Oh?" Toggn asked, matching his grin.

"Well, I've sort of got a thing for wolves and foxes. Stills, statuettes and sculptures, that sort of thing. If it's a little too much for you I can move some into my bedroom."

"You can never have too many wolves around," Toggn said, "then again, after you've known me a while you may throw them all out!"

Joe laughed and palmed open their door. Toggn stepped in, looked around Joe's half, and stopped.

"Oh, *those* wolves and foxes," he said, kneeling to closely examine a large wolf statuette, "I thought you meant us. This is just gorgeous."

"Oh, well that too, of course." Joe answered, the truth hidden in a joke.

Toggn chuckled and looked the statuettes over, and then the pictures adorning the wall. "Foxes are cute," he said, drawing out the last word and grinning at him.

"Aren't they? There is a wildlife park where they let me in with them. They're just unbearably huggable."

Joe's bedroom door was open and Toggn peeked in. "I see you are as good about cleaning up your bed as I am."

"There's an ancient Earth saying: Why make it when you're just going to mess it up again?"

"Hah! I'll have to remember that one! Right now all I want to do is eat."

"You and me both."

The wolf disappeared into his sleeping room and emerged a few moments later, completely nude. Joe had been expecting this all along but had let it slip his mind.

He tried not to stare too much as Toggn walked into the main room. His eyes immediately dropped to note a plump, short, neatly-trimmed sheath and below, a large, bare scrotum. All-in-all he looked amazing, and his very presence was almost physically felt.

He smiled and looked away quickly, but Toggn had caught his reaction. His ears laid back a little and his tail swished behind him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot," he said, stopping and nodding back in the direction of his sleeping room, "would you rather I put on den pants?"

Joe immediately nodded and waved a hand, "Absolutely not," he insisted with a smile, "this is your den too. Live as you like."

"You are saying no but nodding yes."

Joe slapped his forehead, remembering that furs nodded the opposite way humans did for yes and no, and chuckled. "You better go by what I say until I get used to physical language."

"Ah. Well, I am sure you will adapt quickly. If you're truly sure you're comfortable..." he prodded, gesturing downward at himself.

"Don't worry about it." Joe asserted, stealing another glance between his legs.

"Good." the wolf agreed with a smile. He went to the food closet and started rummaging around, tail wagging. "What are you hungry for? Oh, wait. Do you have any idea? I heard you were rushed here."

"Uh..." Joe began, grabbing his workpad and bringing up a page on food comparisons, "how about that?" he asked, pointing to a picture and the indecipherable printing below it. The English display said it would taste broadly similar to red wine marinated beef.

Toggn grabbed one and something else for himself. "To go with it?"

Joe browsed for a few seconds while Toggn grabbed a vegetable. "This? Will that go with it?"

"That's banfer," Toggn said, shaking his head and holding up the package he had grabbed.

"It is? Damn, I've heard it tastes like heaven." Joe said, remembering the warning about it.

"It does," Toggn said with a grin, "unfortunately, if a human eats it they will be sent there."

Joe chuckled. "OK, how about this?"

Toggn nodded and grabbed another package, moved their contents onto plates, and shoved them into the warmer. "So you are the one we have to thank for all this overtime, eh?"

Joe feigned shock. "Me? I was just on the team, following orders. They made me do it. Held my family hostage. I had no choice!"

"That's no excuse!" Toggn said with a laugh, wagging a claw-tipped finger.

"Really," Joe said, more seriously, "I did a lot of the programming and hardware design but only as a member of the team. I can't really take credit for much of anything in particular except maybe the new injectors."

"Why did they send you?"

"Because sending me meant that I would stop begging to go." Joe answered with a wink, then grabbed the plates from the warmer. "Oh my, that is heaven!" he exclaimed when the smell of banfer hit him.

"You can smell, but don't touch." Toggn chided, taking his plates to the lounge.

Joe followed and sat next to him, putting his plates on the table. Toggn immediately nudged himself closer and started to eat. Joe cut a bite of meat and chewed experimentally. It was excellent, unlike anything from back home, with a sweet, slightly gamey aftertaste.

"I assume you're paying for the kitchen?" Toggn asked, poking his fork toward the cooking alcove.

"Yup. I love to cook," Joe answered between bites, "always have. What I've brought should be out of quarantine in a week."

Toggn's ears perked as he chewed. Joe knew that most furs chewed with their mouths open, and the noise took a little

getting used to, but of course he didn't mind. They weren't rude, just different. "Really? I've never tried. Too much trouble."

"Well, I'll have to make something for us next week. I'll need to read up on Denworld food before I try anything local."

They ate at a relaxed pace, chatting and getting to know each other. Soon the empty plates were forgotten on the table as they traded stories of growing up and life in general. Joe was a little hesitant when the conversation moved to how he spends his spare time, but Toggn was so attentive, and seemed so non-judgmental, that he was soon spilling his guts of life in the vast forest reserves of North America. He talked of how he spent almost all of his weekends there, camping, hiking, climbing, or just sitting still and enjoying the rush of a rocky stream; and how he tended to shun the usual technology-biased pastimes favored on Earth.

"I guess you could say I'm a bit eccentric that way." he finished with a sardonic grin.

Toggn had been listening intently, ears wavering and tail occasionally wagging, while Joe had been talking. By now they were relaxed back on the cushions, sitting close and facing each other.

"Eccentric? To me it just sounds as if you are closer to nature. That seems to be a rare trait in humans. You certainly shouldn't feel bad for it. Your forests must be fascinating with so much varied life."

Joe grinned, unwilling to admit why he had suddenly become subdued. Truth was, his interest in nature was part of his problem. His lifestyle didn't fit in too well with that of his friends and coworkers. It made for a lonely life at times, and he had never had a relationship that lasted more than a few months. Eventually they would tire of the woods or show little interest in the first place. But he liked who he was, and wasn't willing to compromise his love of nature. "They are. Sometimes I can lose myself for hours just poking around, seeing what I can find." He suddenly became animated. "One time a red fox spent half the day at my campsite. It was awesome! I saw him standing along a line of trees, studying me. I grabbed a package of meat and started throwing it to him. It took almost three hours of coaxing, mimicking the actions of foxes, and tossing meat before I actually got to touch him. It was almost a religious experience," he finished with a contented sigh.

"I see you like foxes, too," Toggn said with a grin, pointing to one of many fox statuettes, "do you encounter wildlife often? Earth has so many species."

"Oh I see things all the time. Once you know what to look for it's like the forest opens up to you, revealing it's secrets layer by layer. Sometimes at night I just listen for hours, learning what I hear."

Toggn was a little surprised, and a little impressed. He had never heard a human talk of nature the way this one did, and when the brown eyes lit up he wanted to fall into them. He was planning a camping trip of his own for the coming off days, and asked Joe if he'd like to come along.

"Yes! I'd love to!" Joe exclaimed, "but you'll have to be my guide, I'm not that familiar with Denworld's forests or wildlife."

"I think you'll find it easier to master," Toggn said, "our chain of life isn't nearly as diverse as yours."

"If you don't mind me asking, what does 'Kortpik' mean?" Joe asked.

Denworlders had three names like most humans, but the meanings of the second two were different. The second name was the family name, not a "middle" one, and the third was chosen by the individual upon reaching adulthood

and could not be changed.

The wolf's tail swished and his ears flattened a little in a sheepish expression. "I was a little young at heart when I picked that."

"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine."

"It means 'strong in love.'" Toggn replied, looking almost embarrassed.

Joe gave him a mischievous grin. "Well, is it still true?"

"That would now be for others to judge," Toggn replied a little evasively, "and what about yours? Crowell, isn't it? You don't pick your own third name, truly?"

Joe explained the meaning of his names and the wolf's ears perked.

"You must have been some pup! I would have named you Loata."

"What does that mean?"

"Big eyes."

* * * * *

The following few weeks passed quickly. He tried to be as useful as possible at work at first, but for a few days there wasn't much he could do until all the learning disks for reading, writing, mathematics, and programming took hold. Once that was out of the way he joined in with full steam, and divided most of his time between programming and assembling, installing, and overhauling injectors.

At one point he had to spend two days in bed recovering from an incredible cold. He almost never got sick back home but Denworld's cold virus didn't seem to care much. Once the worst of it was over, however, his usual constitution seemed to return. When others around him got sick from one thing or another, he again barely felt it.

The work days were long, with a two hour break for lunch or "light meal" as it was locally called. Joe spent most of his lunches with his fellow team members and other coworkers. Toggn also worked on the new line, but was rarely around Joe's section. Still, with security around their work being what it was, everyone involved generally ate together during the day.

Their supervisor was a chameleon named Seether. The beady, mobile eyes were a bit off-putting at first but otherwise Joe was struck by how erotic he was. Every nuance of his body language managed to be somehow sensual. It didn't help that Seether had a habit of standing very close when talking to him, smelling of salty, freshly cut grass. He also made constant, incidental contact while talking, continuously patting or touching here and there.

Joe had done a little reading on chameleons after the first couple of days and, along with observing him around others, found that this was simply a quirk of their nature. It was almost creepy, but at the same time he often found himself getting turned on.

It was also fascinating to watch him blend into his surroundings. Within a few moments of arriving at a given spot the surface of his body would begin changing. There was a running joke among all of them that Seether used this talent to spy on them. Since it was often mentioned in the reptile's presence, who gladly joined in the joke, Joe didn't

take it seriously.

Work was both exhausting and satisfying. There were constantly new hurdles to overcome; some small, some serious. After the novelty of working with a human wore off, most of his coworkers turned out to be likable and amiable. Although there were a few personalities he felt incompatible with, he was making friends quickly.

It took a while for him to adjust to the long working hours, but it was nice having three days off each week. He spent most of the off days with Toggn and other friends, who were more than glad to show him around. It could be hard at times, though. Everyone was just so damned sexy!

Being a male dominated society, certain typical male traits were more obviously a part of daily life than back on Earth. Men are pigs, after all, and have little mercy for poor physical aesthetics! Truly obese men were rare, as they wouldn't have a chance of finding someone. Part of this was just an enlightened sense of healthy personal care, but certainly male attitudes, which were fairly typical in this respect, played a part. On the other hand, even those with extra weight hardly suffered for it; a fur coat and animalistic features did wonders for them anyway.

And Joe was thanking that enlightened attitude, because he was surrounded with a veritable zoo of hunks. Even those of unremarkably average build looked fantastic due to their fur coat. After spending a lifetime on Earth with it's single land-based intelligent species, living among the smorgasbord that was Denworld had him trying to look in all directions at once.

One evening, after weeks of hard work, he and Toggn were at a night club with a few friends. Toggn sat on his right, an arm draped casually over his shoulder. To his left was a tall, breathtaking white-tailed buck with an eight point rack, a friend of Prag he had yet to meet. Joe couldn't stop glancing his way.

This was seemingly not lost on the man, who eventually rested a hand on his thigh and started showing him a little more attention. They all laughed and socialized together, but the buck was talking directly to him more often. Joe found his arousal rising higher every time the big, round, yellow eyes came to rest on him. His face was majestic.

A number of them hit the dance floor when a popular song started playing. Joe was a pretty good dancer, as were many of those with him, and he really needed to unwind.

And unwind he did. As the song played he glided rhythmically across the dance floor and found himself joined by a fox. They moved and swirled to the driving beat, hands and paws flitting here and there as they danced together.

The song ended and was replaced with one having a slower, grinding tempo. He found himself wrapped up in the buck's arms, which circled around from behind to rest on his thighs. He laid his hands on the furry forearms as the buck pressed close and he raised his head, allowing the handsome face to come to rest against his neck and upper chest.

Dancing at such a tempo with the buck at his back, heads tucked against each other, antlers hovering above, was incredibly erotic. All the drinks he had consumed didn't help his situation much. The furry hands moved constantly, suggesting but never invading.

When the next song began, a decidedly naughty one, he found himself dancing *nastily* with a bobcat. He left the feline nearly drooling by the time it was over.

Again he found himself in the buck's arms as a slow song started. He had never slow danced with a fur before. He closed his eyes and sighed, losing himself in the feel of the short fur pressing against his face, and where the gaps in their respective shirts allowed pelt to touch skin. The sensation of moving in unison against that fur, backed, as it

was, by hard muscle, made him melt.

A second slow song began and Tognn cut in. Dancing with him was even better. The fact that he was a powerful wolf, a powerful personality, and a good friend made the dance an all-to-short stay in paradise.

"I suspect that bobcat is now in the private room relieving the condition you left him in," Tognn whispered humorously while affectionately nuzzling him.

"Good grief, I don't want to be held responsible for that!" Joe replied with a laugh.

They all returned to their seats after the third slow song ended and the party went on. A little later, the buck leaned close and gave his cheek a soft nuzzle, his breath caressing the side of his face briefly. Joe tilted his head into it a little and closed his eyes briefly. A glance at the buck's expression told him all he needed to know. He was not just being socially affectionate.

The nuzzle was repeated, the hand squeezed his knee gently, then the lips slid up to his ear. It sent a warm shiver through him and his stomach fluttered when the buck whispered.

"Would you like to come to my den a little later?" he asked softly.

Joe turned to face him, again taking in those wondrous antlers, and blushed a little.

"I'd love to," he answered, almost breathlessly, "but right now I have to use the private room."

With that he nudged free of Tognn's arm and got up, giving the buck's muzzle a stroke before walking off. The private room in this club was typical, a room with stalls and a few sinks. Furs, by some quirk of personality, were painfully shy about bodily functions so there were no urinals.

After draining his bladder he emerged from a stall to see that a raccoon had joined him. He stood at the sink and, after washing his hands, splashed a little cold water on his face. He was feeling pretty tipsy at the moment. Denworld alcohol was not as potent as Earth's hard liquor, but he had been drinking heavily all evening. Did he just stroke that buck's muzzle?

"Excuse me," the raccoon said, offering his hands, "you are Joseph Crowell?"

"Yes," Joe answered, accepting the greeting, "and you are?"

The raccoon, who had a chunk of one ear missing, finished sniffing and stood back, leaning against the counter, "Manx. Forgive me for being abrupt, but I would like to offer you something on behalf of my employers."

"You get straight to the point, don't you?" Joe asked, feeling a little wary. Salesmen on Denworld were no less determined than those back home. Of course, this *was* a bathroom and the raccoon could be selling something illegal. "In a private room? Maybe I just don't want to know. I don't do narcotics, OK? Never have, never will."

"This has nothing to do with drugs, though it is good you abstain. We, uh," the raccoon began, speaking a little hesitantly, "understand that you may have a great deal of knowledge that would be useful to us."

"In what regard? And who is 'us?'"

The raccoon steered his ears toward the door for a moment, then back to Joe. "I work for a company that would be

very interested in your expertise regarding, um, certain manufacturing techniques."

Joe took a slight step backward, getting the gist of the raccoon's intent. "You work for a rival company and want what I know?" he asked, not really needing an answer.

"You have been working on...whatever it is you are doing there for months including your work prior to being sent here. We would be very interested in your knowledge and expertise. The rewards would be more than generous, I'm sure you will find."

"You want me to betray my company?" he asked, getting a little angry now that his suspicions had been confirmed. "You're bribing me?"

"We are prepared to make the rest of your life very comfortable if you were to help us, including a new and secure identity on Earth."

Joe nearly snarled, disgusted by the very idea. "No way. Good night."

The raccoon reached out, taking his arm and stopping him.

"Mr. Crowell, I don't think you understand the opportunity this is. We would be willing to pay..."

Joe cut him off by jerking him back against the counter and getting right up in his face, eyes burning. "I took an oath when I accepted this position! Integrity might not mean much to you, but it does to me! You go tell whatever bag of scum it is you work for that I am paid just fine."

He let the raccoon go and backed off, still glaring, then turned and stomped out. He returned to the table and tried to get back into the mood of things. Tognn and the buck asked what was wrong, but Joe waved them off, insisting it was not open to discussion.

He stayed a while longer, drank, laughed, and danced some more, but couldn't completely get it out of his mind.

Drinking a lot of alcohol, and surely its Denworld equivalent, had always made him less than stellar in bed. Knowing that he was too inebriated to be much good to the buck, he eventually apologized, asked for and received a com number, and took a taxi home. Wary of the suffering he would undoubtedly endure in the morning, he swallowed a neutralizer capsule before falling into bed.

He didn't suspect anything unusual when he was called into Seether's office almost immediately the first work day following the incident. He was called in often to discuss this or that about the line; and this being the first work day of the week, there would be the usual strategy meeting soon. But what he found this time was no ordinary, quick question and answer period.

"Joseph, come in," Seether said when Joe reached the door, gesturing to an older looking chameleon who was standing near his desk.

"Good morning alpha, alpha," he said, as usual using the customary term for a superior as he nodded at both of them.

"This is Internal Security Alpha Hellisk," Seether supplied as the two of them exchanged greetings.

"You do smell human," Hellisk said, his wide mouth splitting into a broad, almost dangerous grin, "but your smell is not what I am here to talk about."

"Internal Security?"

"The company sometimes feels it necessary to do certain things when a project of this importance is at stake," Seether began, looking out into the work area as he spoke, "and it is required that the associate be informed once it is done."

Joe looked puzzled, glancing between them. Since he was obviously here for a reason, he rested his gaze on the alpha.

"So I am, what was it, a bag of scum, eh?" the elder hissed, the grin widening even more. He directed a comment over his shoulder. Out of Seether's private room emerged a smiling raccoon. Unless damaged ears were common among that species, it was the same one from the night club.

The human felt even more puzzled for a few moments until it dawned on him. He looked back at the alpha.

"You set me up!"

"Numerous associates have been tested in one way or another," Hellisk said soothingly, waving his long tail idly, "and it is a common practice when dealing with such an investment as this project. Please understand that you were never under suspicion. I would have been extremely surprised, as a matter of fact, if you had shown the least bit of interest. You have proven yourself a trusted and hardworking man, so we used the direct approach," he paused long enough to point a clawed finger at the raccoon, "rather than take the time to have someone try to seduce a betrayal out of you, as we might have done. We also decided it wouldn't be necessary since you provided us with a situation where your guard would have been down."

"You mean I had been drinking heavily and dancing..." He paused, unsure of how to play it down.

"Without care." the alpha tactfully finished for him.

Joe turned quickly and a little nervously to Seether. "I had a neutralizer with me in case I was paged."

The reptile waved him off and gave him a smile, "Your conduct at or away from work is not in question. When you need to relieve some stress, by all means do so as you please."

He nodded and turned back to the alpha, his mind returning to the subject at hand. "You do that? Isn't that entrapment?"

"The police cannot entrap, but an employer can. Had you even so much as asked for an exact monetary figure, we probably would have removed you and that would have been it. We could not take legal action after an entrapment. But not to worry, we were right in trusting you." He paused and turned to Seether, "I am done here."

Seether bowed, moving to get the door, and glanced Joe's way, "Unless you have any more questions...?"

"No," Joe said slowly, still debating how he felt about the whole situation.

The raccoon, still smiling, offered his hands again as he followed the alpha, "Actually, it is Menser. It's a pleasure to smell you."

"You too," he agreed, managing a smile.

Menser leaned close again and whispered in his ear before heading out, "And any time you want to dance again as

you did with that poor bobcat, sniff me out."

* * * * *

Tognn had spent the off days in sector seven visiting his parents, and this being the first work day, was on his way out. When he saw Joe coming home just as he was leaving, he gave him a big grin and sniffed him intently. "It is about time! The buck from last off days, I am sure. What was his name?"

"No, I didn't, you satyr," Joe said, taking the opportunity to softly rub the big ears while Tognn snuffled his crotch, "and his name is Valonos. Will you stop that?" he finished with a laugh.

"You didn't, did you? You've got buck on you but not like *that*."

"I apologized profusely and turned him down, spent the night on the lounge. He didn't seem to mind at all. Now get to work before you're late."

"Why?" Tognn asked, incredulous, as he stood upright. He held out his hands, palms up and fingers curved, "They have balls like..."

Joe couldn't help but laugh. "I just...wasn't in the mood," he said evasively. He didn't want to reveal why. The truth was, he couldn't get Tognn off of his mind all evening. He had nights like that occasionally. "Now get going. I won't be in today."

They exchanged a tight hug and he was gone.

Seether had given Joe the day off, as he sometimes liked to do for workers who proved themselves beyond the call of duty. Joe had always been a tireless and conscientious worker, and Seether was a good enough manager to notice.

Now that he had been here three local months work had settled down into a predictable rhythm. They would run a test, something would go wrong, and they would set about finding out why. This process was expected, as computer simulations simply couldn't predict or accurately compute every minute detail, so Joe didn't get too frustrated when something that was supposed to work failed to.

Having nothing better to do, he packed a towel, some odorless suntan lotion he had paid way too much for, dressed for the pool, and headed out.

The pool was located a fairly long walk away, and upon arrival he was treated to a sight that had him staring for a few moments in appreciative disbelief.

He had completely forgotten what Tognn had said about how furs liked to lounge around the pool. Everyone he could see was completely nude. It was a large pool and there were a probably two hundred furs laying in the sun or swimming. They didn't seem to take any special notice of each other, although Joe suspected that a nearby female bear must be in season because she was attracting a lot of attention. Suddenly feeling a bit awkward for wearing his loose fitting swimming trunks, he found a nearby spot to lay out his towel and headed for the water.

Denworld's summer was now in full swing and the cool water felt wonderful as he waded in. At the deep end was a low diving board which was getting plenty of use, but he really just wanted to relax.

A voice caught his attention and he spied a friend from work, one of the two foxes on his team, and they played around for a while. They were more or less evenly matched, so both got dunked in equal measure as they chased each other around. Luke, his parents taking his name from Earth's Bible, teased him relentlessly about the swimming

trunks. He joked and laughed, but there was no way he was going to go nude in public. At least, not yet.

The fox had a date for dinner, or "dark meal" as it was called because it was usually eaten just as the sun was setting, so was soon off.

Many of the surrounding people talked with him intermittently, curious to meet the human they had all been hearing about. Joe had come to realize that he was something of a celebrity, in the sense that temporary duties as long as his were rare.

There were only a few thousand permanent human residents on the entire planet, not including embassy and government personnel, so seeing a human was unusual for people living away from tourist areas. All in all they seemed friendly, although everyone seemed to give his swimming shorts a curious glance. At least they were polite enough not to ask about them.

He spent a little more time wading around, enjoying the water, relaxing, and filling his eyes with every gleaming, naked body they fell upon. At times it was hard not to let his mind wander, especially at the sight of a massive, majestic lion that he would have given his soul just to talk to, and had to make sure his occasional erections stayed below the surface until they faded.

He was about five meters from the pool's edge when he noticed that a dark brown shape was circling him beneath the waist-high water. Out came an incredibly cute face, that of a beaver, which smiled at him and said hello. The fur arched backward before he could reply and disappeared beneath the surface, Joe catching a quick flash of genitalia before the compact body submerged. He was circled a few more times, then the shimmering form swam off to the edge.

The beaver reached the side and pulled himself up. He was short, probably only coming up to the human's shoulders, but simply bursting with muscle. He looked as if a tall, powerful man had been compacted into a smaller space, and could probably lift a house. The beaver turned slightly, giving the staring human a generous glimpse of his chestnut colored balls and penis, then walked over to his blanket, the broad, flat tail bobbing behind him. Beavers, it seemed, were one of the few furry species without a sheath.

Joe decided this was an invitation if there ever was one, and started toward the side himself. He figured it was about time he started getting a little into the swing of Denworld's less prudish lifestyle. Admittedly, the thought of a beaver had never crossed his mind. As with most humans, he was more accustomed to imagining the more glamorous species, like canines and felines, but Denworld had far more to offer than that. And the beaver was just amazingly cute.

He wandered over to his blanket and cast a glance to where the beaver was lying about twenty-five meters away. The fur smiled and waved him over. Joe returned the smile and gestured that he'd be right there.

After gathering up his things he had only gone a few steps when his wristcom squawked loudly enough to be heard for miles. He looked down to see the display flashing bright red. His eyes went wide and his mind suddenly raced. Flashing red meant one thing — come right now, come as you are, and why aren't you here yet?

He rolled his eyes and gave the now frowning beaver an apologetic glance before sprinting off. At a good run he could be there in a few minutes.

Joe bullied his way through security, not caring that he was wearing nothing but swimming shorts, had a gym bag slung over one shoulder, and was barely clinging to a twisted blanket flapping behind him.

He dumped them inside the door as he ran to the main console. Just about everyone was clustered around it, tails swishing madly behind them.

"What's wrong?" he asked quickly, joining the group.

Seether gave him a brief, slightly amused glance before quickly answering, "The reaction has gone completely out of control," he hissed, the humor gone as quickly as it came. He punched buttons and worked displays in consort with a couple of workers, "and we can't get it stopped. The injectors are wide open and won't close. Chamber pressure is rising rapidly. The automated countdown to critical has just started." He paused and threw up his hands, "We've done all we can do. All the backups and fail-safes have locked up for some reason."

He hissed loudly in sudden fury, his tail slapping into anyone close enough. "Elders! Damn, damn, Elders!" he shouted. He stood in thought for a few moments, hands on hips, then flipped the evacuation alarm cover.

"When the chamber blows we'll lose everything but the software and schematics. Let's hope we all don't get removed."

He punched the button.

Tognn lightly grabbed Joe's elbow and started moving toward the door as the alarm sounded. "We truly have to go."

"The manual emergency relief valve?" Joe asked, nodding to the upper level. Though it would be more easily accessed on the actual production line, here it was out of reach as a matter of expediency.

"It's too late," Tognn began, pointing at the main display, "we've less than a minute and a half. It all happened so fast after we paged you."

Joe looked at the computer's counter, then back up. "Seka!" he yelled, looking to the lion who was passing a tool shelf on his way to the exit, "the wrench, hurry!"

"Are you crazy?" Seka called back, but didn't hesitate to throw it. Joe was sprinting for the ladder the moment his fingers closed. Everyone else was crowding around the blast doors to watch.

"Joseph!" Seether roared.

He sprinted with all he could muster, clamping the wrench in his teeth just before reaching the ladder. He leapt straight up as high as he could, catching rungs at chest-height. He started climbing as if running uphill on all fours, arms and legs pulling and pushing in rapid rhythm.

When he reached the top he didn't slow down, propelling himself onto the platform with one final lunge. He ran like hell along the ledge, concentrating on his goal. All they could do below was watch, backing closer to the containment door, as Joe slammed himself down in front of the valve cover. He grabbed the wrench from his mouth and turned it on, placing it quickly on the first bolt. It rotated out in a second, followed quickly by the other nine.

He yanked off the heavy cover and shoved his arm into the cylinder, past the dispersion coils that kept his flesh from frying to a crisp, and gripped the emergency valve handle. He wrenched it a quarter-turn clockwise then yanked it towards him with all his might. It slid out with a groan just as he heard the computer's counter go vocal at fifteen seconds.

He could feel and hear the deep, violent rumble as high pressure superheated gasses vented through a meter-wide tube just beyond his hand. He heard the outside alarm sound and tried to picture the 500 meter high plume of

blistering gas jetting from the rooftop vent.

"Pressure's dropping fast!" someone yelled triumphantly from below, "it's back to amber and dropping! Elders, and the program has freed up! Someone start the emergency shutdown!"

Joe lay on his stomach along the edge of the platform, panting as he let an arm drape over the side. Below, a chorus of howls, whinnies, cheers, hisses and various other expressions rose up to him. He grinned stupidly and waved.

"Oh my, that was so *incredibly stupid!*"

It was meant to be said to himself, but every being heard it. "Yes, it definitely was," Seka, now standing directly below him with Toggn, said with a toothy grin, "but I'm sure the Alphas will love you for it!"

"Truly it was," Toggn chided, still a little breathless at watching his newfound friend almost die, "you could have gotten yourself killed. Now come on down." he finished, smiling. He wanted to be angry, but damned if it wasn't the bravest thing he'd ever witnessed. His estimation of Joe just went up a couple of notches.

"Ugh," he said as he stared into the viewing window of the main rock chamber, "what a mess!"

Inside, what was supposed to be a rock in the process of forming was a roiling mass of mismatched chemical reactions. A big lump of matter lay smoking in the mold as all around it the various ingredients, or what they now had become, swirled, bubbled, and hissed.

"It could have been an explosion and months of work lost," Seether said from beside him, rubbing his shoulder for a moment, "in my office, please," he added, and walked off.

"This is where I get in real big trouble for doing that," Joe said to Toggn and Seka, slumping, "we're not supposed to risk ourselves like that. It's borderline breach of contract."

"But you did save the entire project," Seka mentioned, giving him a hug, "I'm sure he'll make a point of both. A fine for the venting will cost the company much less than starting all over."

Joe nodded and headed off to the office.

The first thing Seether did was praise his dedication, bravery, and suggest that his actions would be justly rewarded. That done, and Joe feeling that he might not get yelled at after all, Seether got right in his face and explained, in a tone of voice that would have melted granite, that he was implicitly *never* to do something like that again.

He thanked him again and then sent him on his way, adding that he shouldn't stay long. He wanted today to remain an off one for Joe, and now tomorrow would be twice as busy. He also instructed him to send Paster, a fox on his team, in after him.

Paster was standing by the main console looking like he had just lost his only love. It was the most pitiful sight he had ever seen.

"It was my fault," Paster said when Joe reached him, his tail curled up against his stomach.

"What happened?"

"I used an injector program you had flagged as no good. It put the injectors wide open and locked up the entire system, including the backup and fail-safe subroutines. I," He paused, ears flat, tail visibly shaking against his

abdomen, eyes almost in tears, "I was in a hurry and didn't catch the flag. Now I'm going to get removed."

Joe put a hand on his shoulder and tried to console him. Paster was a funny, likable guy. "Hey, it was one mistake."

He held up a hand at the look the fox gave him. "OK, it was a big mistake, but you never make mistakes. I'm sure he'll take that into consideration. He, uh, wants to see you now."

They watched as Paster slumped into Seether's office and closed the door behind him.

* * * * *

Wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, he emerged from the private room, having just used the love seat for the first time. His Everclean had worn off and he didn't feel like going through the effort of a fresh application tonight. He found Toggn standing at the front door. A smile lit his face when he saw a beaver, the beaver, he hoped, waiting next to him.

"It's about time you got out of there, Mr. Hero," Toggn remarked with a smirk, using the nickname Joe had been hearing ever since he left the mess at work earlier, "someone would like to meet you."

"From the pool?" Joe asked as he approached the smiling beaver.

"That's me," he confirmed as they exchanged greetings, "Kotenken."

Kotenken smelled kind of like mud, but it wasn't a bad scent.

"I'm sorry I had to run off like that."

Kotenken waved him off as Joe offered for him to make himself comfortable. The beaver obliged and removed his shoes and the short pants he was wearing, stacking them on the shelf by the door. His body, though not as glistening now that it was dry, was still something to see. His short brown fur looked very thick, laying over the bulging muscle like carpet. Joe couldn't help a glance between the rippled thighs. He might be short, but he certainly wasn't lacking.

"I've got that meeting for dark meal," Toggn said, giving Joe a hug, "I'll smell you later."

"Have fun," Joe said, giving his ears a quick rub.

"He's sexy," Kotenken said with a grin after the door had shut.

"You're telling me," the human agreed, "would you like something to drink?"

"In a manner of speaking," Kotenken said, reaching up. He lightly grasped the back of Joe's head and pulled the surprised human down into a long kiss.

It only took a moment for him to overcome his surprise and begin reciprocating in earnest. Joe was glad to note that beavers did not have buck teeth. His tongue felt what was left of them; they were wide but only very slightly longer than the rest. The beaver was a good kisser, and Joe felt an immediate stirring inside the towel.

Kotenken's arms dropped to encircle him, pulling them firmly together. His grip was strong, and as the kiss deepened he draped his arms around the furry shoulders, stroking them and his head. The feel of hard muscle pressing against him behind a layer of thick, soft fur was amazing.

By the time the kiss ended, Joe's head was already swimming.

"Your body looked wonderful soaking wet, and your eyes are lovely," Kotenken said, giving his back a few light scratches, "I wanted you the moment I saw you."

"Same here."

Moments later they were in Joe's sleeping room. He was almost scared at the thought of finally being with a fur, but his apprehension soon evaporated. Kotenken was a real bundle of fun, unafraid to use his considerable strength but at the same time showing a carefree attitude.

For a while they enjoyed some playful foreplay, and all the rumors about furry pre-cum were verified. Not only was it an almost constant flow once the beaver was aroused, but the taste of it was heavenly. Kotenken was not at all bashful about spreading it around, too. Joe got the impression that it was just a normal part of foreplay and sex, not something they considered kinky. It made sense, seeing how they all possessed it. What soon came to pass was, though.

Joe tore himself away and lit the single candle he kept in his sleeping room. It was his favorite little touch to a night of intimacy, whether it was of a sexual nature or not. He turned to find Kotenken on his hands and knees, rearranging a couple of cushions.

With humans, even when he knew they were flushed with the best Denworld cleansers or using Everclean, Joe had never had much interest in rimming. On the other hand, he had always been very turned on by the idea of doing so for a fur.

He also liked rear views, and Kotenken was presenting a great one now. Joe just loved seeing a plump set of balls hanging below a muscular ass and tidy tail base.

"Don't move!" he said quickly.

"What?" Kotenken asked, freezing in place, "Is something wrong?"

"No, something is very right," Joe said with a grin, dropping and crawling toward him. His eyes stayed locked on the brown, furry ass, "you look absolutely marvelous."

Kotenken caught on right away and raised his flat tail, sweetening the view even more.

The human got the feeling that what Kotenken now suspected was just a little taboo, something one would be impolite to ask for from a person one didn't know well. Kotenken didn't say anything, just looked back at him expectantly, smiling.

Joe arrived and ran a hand softly over his ass, caressing it, brushing his fingers briefly down the patch of bare skin between his thighs, eyes drinking in the sexy view.

After a few moments he couldn't stand the wait. Turning his head, he pressed his tongue against the juncture of tail and ass, earning a cute little gasp from the beaver, then ran it straight down to those healthy balls.

He moved his body around closer, and a furry arm draped over his back to caress his own buttocks. Just about everyone enjoys the feel of a little ass play, but Kotenken seemed especially sensitive. After Joe gave a meaningful nudge against his inner thigh, within no time the beaver was straddling the human face, Joe lying on his back, the tail held high over his head. The fur's mouth dropped to lick teasingly between Joe's legs, which only fueled his own

efforts.

Even though he had always wanted to do this for a fur, he surprised himself with his utter lack of inhibition. The way it turned the beaver on, making him moan and wiggle above, drove him on without care. He used his lips and tongue to great effect, moving up and down from tail base to scrotum, pausing now and then to purse his lips and blow a stream of air across the wet pucker. Each time he did so Kottenken visibly shuddered, cooing loudly. He kept his hands busy also, running them all over the muscle-packed, furry body above.

By the time they both collapsed into a deep, satisfied sleep, there was nothing they hadn't done. It was the most fun Joe had ever experienced. Kottenken was quite a handful, but somehow still always light-hearted and a little submissive.

His cum had been amazing. There was more than one would expect from a human and Joe had lost some as the fur's hips rode his face. But, once the beaver had regained his senses, Joe had gladly and shamelessly helped clean up the mess. It was less bitter than he expected, every drop worth savoring. An equal amount eventually (over)filled his bowels.

This, his mind told him as sleep crashed over him, was definitely the life!

Work the next day was just as bad as he was expecting. He didn't get much sleep and faced a long day of rebuilding injectors with Paster and a horse. The pressure overload had burst the seals in all of them.

Seether had called him in immediately. He had Joe produce his card, which was credited with a healthy cash bonus on the spot.

He was glad to see Paster was still there, and gave him a hug before they sat down with the first set of injectors.

"I was fined heavily, to be taken from each pay for the rest of the fiscal year, but thank the Elders they didn't remove me," the fox said, breathing a mixed sigh of disappointment and relief.

Joe nodded, wondering if the amount of the fine matched the bonus he just received. He didn't mention it.

* * * * *

More weeks flew quickly by. Work went as expected except that an unforeseen problem had added what would probably be another two months to his work visa. He and Toggn spent most of their time together, whether it be alone or with friends, and grew very close.

In a way, Joe had something of a dilemma. He felt more for Toggn than anyone he had ever met. Sure, the wolf always looked like he wanted to eat him with those sinister, primal features; but he was such fun, such an attentive and generous soul, that the human was finding himself feeling more and more for him.

On the other hand, he was terrified of saying the wrong thing. He wasn't sure what Toggn felt for him. They were much closer physically now rather than just hugging occasionally. The wolf loved belly rubs, as did most furs, and Joe gladly provided them often; but beyond those, frequent nuzzles and pets, and a general sense of casual closeness, they had yet to explore.

Sometimes, during those belly rubs, it was almost impossible not to lean down and kiss that dangerously handsome face. Yet for some strange reason, Joe felt no reason to instigate, even though, by all rights, Toggn should be the one he wanted most.

He wasn't sure why. It might be the fact that he was spending some nights with Kottenken. Toggn had, of course, asked him about the beaver. Joe had implied that he didn't feel much emotionally for Kottenken, which had earned him a smiling nod, but still Toggn hadn't tried anything intimate. In addition, Toggn was having occasional encounters of his own, just like any un-mated fur.

Another reason he seemed unable to bring himself to instigate anything intimate was that he simply felt completely subservient. As far as relationships were concerned, Joe had always been somewhere in the middle with most men and it was fairly obvious that Kottenken, in spite of his powerful build, was on the submissive side.

But Toggn made him feel weak. The wolf had an aura, a sense of presence, that, when combined with his feral appearance, made Joe want to fall down and worship him. He wanted to be a slave to those virile organs, to be mastered by Toggn's exhilarating physical, mental, and sexual power.

He sighed and slumped in his chair when he heard an announcement over the speakers. The building was locked down again. The narcotics scan would take hours, and there went his chances of going out. Toggn was lying on the lounge, completely engrossed in a fiction.

Well, at least he could get some reading done. Maybe it was better to get through this before he ended up with someone else. With Kottenken, whom he spent the night with every now and then, things were clear. They had great sex. Joe reveled in munching his tight little ass until the entire furry body quaked for release. But neither tried to make it anything more. He had never had a strictly sexual relationship before, but he wasn't about to give this one up either.

With the buck, it was a slightly different situation. Although Valonos was ten years older and divorced, they had become good friends and frequently played a popular racquetball-like game when Valonos wasn't spending time with his three teenage fawns. Twice they had been intimate, both being as astounding a sexual experience as Joe had hoped. There was just something about looking up and seeing that face, framed by those awesome antlers, looking back at him that made his mind swim. It was the kind of face you could marry and never grow tired of.

And, to sweeten the deal even further, he had the kind of very large, firm scrotum and reserves of semen that dreams were made of. The buck was not playful in bed like Kottenken, but intoxicatingly intense. Having Valonos mounted over him, whether he was on his hands and knees or back, was a real thrill ride.

Valonos didn't last long between orgasms, but seemed to possess an endless supply of them. Their times together had been as deliciously messy as they were fun. Joe had swallowed entire civilizations on each of their two nights together, and taken easily as much into his bowels. On both occasions the human had to use the toilet to make room for more. A few times Valonos ended up spurting all over them, and watching it happen was incredibly erotic. Cleaning it up together before the next one hit was real fun. He couldn't help wondering just where the buck kept it all!

But, even so, they were clearly just friends. Valonos was very affectionate and trustworthy, but neither seemed to be feeling anything deeper.

He still wasn't sure what to expect from a fur if things did become emotionally serious. He didn't want to make some kind of naive mistake and ruin an opportunity. He may have to eventually go back home, but he didn't want to pass up a dream come true if he ran into it. And he didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings by having the wrong expectations. Or, for that matter, set himself up for disappointment.

He glanced over at Toggn. Speaking of dreams coming true, he thought. Before getting himself buried in furry psycho-sexual text he wanted to find out all he could about Denworld's varied physiological offerings. His reading

ability was now fine, and he found it easy to conduct his search. He found the directory he wanted and started opening files. Soon, he was as engrossed as his friend.

Tognn finished the chapter he was reading and tore himself away for a few moments. He remembered hearing an announcement but wasn't paying attention. This was quite a story, the writing style getting to his loins more than any other in recent memory. He made a note of the author's name and looked up to where his human friend was seated in a pair of den pants, about to ask him what the message had been. Joe was obviously lost in what he had on the terminal. He got up and circled around behind him.

On screen were two real life still images. The first was of a male's genitalia, the second identical but with the penis fully unsheathed. Joe seemed completely absorbed, studying the images for a few seconds before advancing to the next species; and seemed unaware that Tognn had gotten up. The human seemed to study the wolf displays a little more closely, grunting with what sounded like satisfaction once or twice. When Joe reached the final race, Tognn leaned forward. "So," he began, making Joe jump, and grinned, "what do you think?"

Joe turned in his chair. "How long have you been standing there?" he asked, then smiled, turning back around to hide his embarrassment.

"A few minutes."

"This is embarrassing." Joe sighed, spreading a hand over his face.

Tognn bent down, placing his head beside the human's, fur lightly brushing hair. "So what do you think?"

Joe tried not to think too hard about the proximity of Tognn's snout. "I think I need a cold shower."

Tognn chuckled, a deep rumble Joe felt in his skull. "I'll never understand humans. In some ways you're pointlessly prudish, yet at the same time sex is all you think about." He hurrumphed and prowled over to his chair. He sat, crossing his arms over his chest and propping an ankle on the opposite knee. "Seriously, what do you think?" His brows were raised, ears perked attentively forward.

Joe swiveled to face him. "About the sheaths or overall?"

"Both," Tognn answered with a shrug, "sheath first."

Joe thought for a few moments. "I'm not really sure how to put it."

"Be honest and forthright. It's something we honor and appreciate in ourselves."

Joe sighed, thinking some more. "OK," he began, meeting the silver eyes, "I like the way they are suggestive of maleness and virility without actually exposing it."

Tognn nodded, his brow furrowing. He had never heard such a thing said. His ears swiveled as he mulled it over. It was such a normal, subtle, unspoken part of everyday existence that no one ever really thought about it. But as he did, he could see the human's point; especially considering the human lack of one.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"Oh no," Tognn replied, his ears re-perking, "I've just never heard that put to words. An astute observation." He uncrossed his arms and leaned back, hands clasping behind his head. Joe didn't know if it was intentional, but it sure

was a turn-on. "All right," the werewolf continued, nodding at the terminal, "all in general."

Joe thought some more, picturing the animal nakedness in his mind. What he had just discovered eased his mind greatly. They didn't have penises like most animals on Earth, ones that looked more like an errant internal organ than a sexual one. A big piece of gut didn't appeal much to him. Although there was variance between races, in general they all had a gently tapered shaft which was straight or arced slightly outward when erect instead of arcing inward like a human's. The head of most was more a slight olive- or tulip-shaped bulge than a separate form.

Wolves and other canids did have a bulbous swelling at the base of the penis like their counterparts on Earth, but as he had been relieved to find, in proportion they were smaller and therefore wouldn't cause unbearable pain for someone of experience. The text had implied that most Denworld species enjoyed this little canid quirk.

But the question dealt with outward appearances, and that's where he concentrated his thoughts. The more he imagined, the more he pictured various species from various perspectives, the more he ran imaginary eyes over the shapes and textures, the more a single word wove itself through his mind. He stole a quick glance at the nude still on the wall, and the two of his own that had been added.

"Elegant."

Tognn's bushy eyebrows went up and his ears perked even more. "Hm."

"What?"

"You impress me."

It was Joe's turn to raise eyebrows. "How so?"

"You've spent the last three months looking at just about every man. Yes, I've noticed. You won't swim nude because you're afraid of embarrassing yourself; and still, getting a quick glance at someone in the right pose has you wading for five minutes while you calm down." He paused and laughed, remembering the beaver, "and then when you approach them you get an emergency page!"

Joe joined him, chuckling at his frustrations.

"Sitting in here you can't look at me without looking at my crotch...don't give me that look, you know you do! And of all the words you could have chosen: sexy, wicked, arousing, horny, erotic, virile, studly, wetting; you chose 'elegant.' I apologize, in a way I wasn't giving you enough credit. I've met plenty of humans that wanted nothing but sex from us. Not because they appreciated the male form, but just because they liked the thought of it. I was sorta thinking you were all lust and had no real...appreciation for us. Lust is fine, great even, but not for the wrong reasons. And I also know that you've turned down a couple of opportunities, because you didn't feel right."

He raised his snout, exposing his throat as most did to show deference. "I'm sorry."

Joe blushed a little. Well, it had been an honest, accurate answer. "You thought I was like that?"

Tognn sighed. "I suspected, but I was starting to feel otherwise the more I got to know you. You're hard to get to know, you know. That damned human sheltering of feelings...."

Joe laughed. "Well, I'll try to be more obvious."

"Any particular favorites?"

"You, Kokenken, and Seka." The last name came out slowly with a sigh. Seka was a nearly two meter tall lion with a simply awesome body; narrow waist, broad chest and shoulders, powerful arms, and beautiful golden fur with a gorgeous mane. He looked even better than Toggn.

"Ah yes, Seka. Now there's a tasty one." Toggn got up and padded over to the lounge. He took a seat and patted the cushions beside him. "Can we talk for a moment?"

"Sure." Joe answered, and sat beside him after rearranging a couple of pillows. This was the hardest part, sitting in the lounge with Toggn. It was charming how they all seemed to need casual physical contact, but sometimes it was hard on him, especially with Toggn. Every day he wanted him more, liked him more, and cared for him more than the day before, but didn't want to threaten their friendship. Now was definitely not a good time to be a human putz.

Toggn rested a furry hand on his shoulder and turned to face him, the perfectly formed muzzle inches from his lips. Lord, how he wanted to kiss those lips, glimpse the silver eyes closing lazily.

"I've not been the best of friends."

Joe was a little taken aback. "Toggn, you've been a great pal!"

The furry head shook. "I kept expecting you to let me down, to be just like the other lusty humans I've seen. But you're not, and while I've been finding that out, I've been letting *you* down. You may not have noticed but I know what I've been doing. I've been a little inwardly suspicious, because so many find you attractive and you've had to notice that. You get more looks in the gym than Hyora."

Joe thought back on the past months. Yes, he consistently gets plenty of looks, a few nuzzles and definite signs of interest. He just didn't want to jump into anything he may regret until he became more accustomed to Denworld's social nuances. It gave him hope, and made holding himself back that much harder. "Well, I guess at least some people find humans attractive."

Toggn's head shook again. "It's time I be, well, honest and forthright. You are emphatically not like other humans. And those giant brown eyes," he placed his hands on either side of Joe's face, gently tracing under each eye with a thumb claw, "transform your face. You are one of the most handsome men I have ever seen, anywhere."

Joe heart skipped a beat. Oh my God is he...did he really feel...?

Toggn's muzzle closed the short distance between them and the lips brushed his, sending a warm shiver through him. His heart fluttered at the touch of a paw-like hand resting on his chest. They kissed softly, Toggn's long tongue playing with his as it slid into his mouth. The paw stroked his chest and he moaned softly as it left a trail of goose bumps. He couldn't believe what was happening, that Toggn's feelings could mirror his. The feel, the very thought of the strong, furry body so close to him like this — kissing him, caressing him — made his mind reel.

A soft growl, the most erotic thing he had ever heard, vibrated from Toggn into him and before he knew it he had slid down and was almost lying prone. Still Toggn's tongue worked it's wonderful magic in his mouth, their lips locking, releasing to play with one another, then locking again. He wrapped an arm around the wolf and reached up to rub behind his ears. His mind was lost in sensation, his body on auto pilot. But lingering uncertainty buzzed its way in and, when the kiss finally faded and Toggn's muzzle pressed against his cheek, he collected himself enough to speak.

"Oh Lord, Toggn," he said quietly, sincerely, "that was a dream come true, but..."

Toggn's snout pulled back enough to show him a smile, and the silver eyes were lit like never before. "Seems it was," he said, making note of Joe's position, "I wish I had done so sooner." With that his grin widened, showing the tips of his fangs, and the lips were on him again, teasing at his throat, along his jaw line, up to his earlobes; making him go weak as the muzzle, lips, and teeth softly flitted over him. His hands stroked the furry head and upper back while Toggn's paw roamed his body freely, finally stopping to tug at the upper catch on Joe's waistband.

"But I've never done this with a wolf." Josh finished nervously when he was able. Toggn grinned again and popped the catch.

"You'll do just fine. You want this, don't you?" he asked, spreading his thighs a little and nodding meaningfully downward. Joe looked at the short, plump sheath and his mouth went dry. Seeing it casually was enough, but now that a good amount of precum glistened around the opening, he would gladly kill to get at it. And the sexy way Toggn smelled...

"Oh yes."

Joe's reaction wasn't lost on Toggn. "And you've heard the banter," he continued, popping the lower catch, "what we like, how not to rush? Do you want those things?"

Joe could barely think, and then couldn't at all when Toggn flipped off the den pants, draped a paw over his crotch and buried him in another long, passionate kiss. There was no need to reply, both knew the answer. Joe moaned again and nudged himself closer until he felt the hot wetness of Toggn's sheath on his thigh. It wasn't long before Toggn was as aroused as he.

The wolf broke the kiss, his paw fondling the human balls and inner thighs.

Then his paw stopped as their eyes locked for a moment, something strange happening. They stared at each other in silence for a minute, both their brows furrowing at a sudden, strange sensation. It was as if a switch had been flipped. Toggn's ears twitched a few times and he opened his mouth to speak. He wasn't sure exactly what to say, but tried anyhow.

"You have become my favorite friend," he asserted, a little afraid that he might be wrong about Joe and hurt his feelings. His fear turned out to be groundless as the human nodded his ascent.

"And you mine," Joe agreed, unable to believe what he was about so say. The sudden change in how he felt shocked him. Considering how intensely he had just felt, and how he had been about to experience the emotional and physical pinnacle of his life, the idea of just letting go seemed ridiculous. It was what he felt, though, and felt it also coming from Toggn. "But suddenly I get the feeling that it should stay that way, don't you? As if going on like this would be forcing the issue."

"When in fact we should just be content to be the best of friends," Toggn finished, earning another nod.

Neither moved for a time as they digested this, then the wolf grinned, his eyes glowing brightly. "Well, having come to that realization, how about we just have some good old fashioned fun?" he asked mischievously, then ducked down to bite one of his nipples.

Joe laughed and his penis leapt back to life in Toggn's paw.

"You beast!"

When it was over they returned to the lounge and relaxed together. They used the main viewer to go through most of the information on the sexual practices and preferences of Denworld's varied species. Even Tognn had learned a little as they watched the documentary-style presentation of how each species differed in its sensitivities, preferences, and sexual anatomy.

As with what Joe had seen earlier, they were all broadly similar, though there were many interesting bits of helpful information to absorb, as well as some mild surprises. The differences weren't always physical, either. There were plenty of subtle psychological traits to remember, and again, some intriguing ones.

Almost every species had internal, secondary, if you will, sexual organs that were considerably larger and more productive than those of humans. That explained the seemingly endless supply of pre-ejaculate and large amounts of semen, plus was consistent with their mating habits. Mating rarely, with a high level of competition, naturally required each male to have the best chance to pass on his genes.

Confirming the impression he had gotten from studying genitalia earlier, it was common practice to, immediately after reaching adulthood, have the fur permanently removed from the scrotum and the skin between it and the tail base if necessary. This exposed sensitive skin and removed any hindrances fur might cause. Joe had long ago done this himself, and so had every fur he'd seen so far. The documentary did point out, however, that some furs preferred to keep it.

Either way looked equally sexy to Joe, although bare skin was more fun to work with.

Also confirmed was the fact that furs had more flexible spines than humans and a slightly different configuration to their stomach muscles. These attributes made them able, with little strain, to curl down enough to easily lick as far back as just behind their scrotum.

This ability to orally please one's self was a joke friends commonly aimed at each other, although similar jokes on Earth were less kindly intended.

Included was an explanation of three drugs known as Numbers One, Two, and Three. Numbers One and Two were painstakingly developed over many years and had entered the market about a decade ago.

None were an aphrodisiac. Number One targeted the sexual organs. Humans and most furry species can only have two, possibly three fully productive orgasms in one night, depending on the means of arousal. Any more can lead to soreness the next day and a reduction in volume.

Number One prevents this by increasing the output and stamina of fluid-producing sexual organs, allowing a larger number of fully productive ejaculations without the soreness commonly felt after overexertion.

Number Two works on the lower colon and sphincter, reinforcing the inner walls and making the sphincter more pliable without diminishing one's control of it. Used less commonly, Number Two was mainly meant to prevent tearing or injury under extreme conditions.

It seemed orgies, consenting gang-bangs, and unusually thick penises were rare, but the drug was a regular seller. Joe had used it before his second time with Valonos, simply because of the soreness after their first. Being capable of five hundred orgasms a night makes a buck able to really wear you down.

Number Three was simply a combination of One and Two.

Soon thereafter they hugged and went their separate ways for the night. As Joe crawled into bed he was surprised at how secure he felt about their friendship. Once they had agreed that they weren't meant for true emotional intimacy, the rest had been purely physical and a great deal of fun. All the elements he had expected were still there; the power, sense of presence, and enthralling primal passion of a wolf, but with no excess baggage attached.

He hadn't felt the least bit uncomfortable. As Toggn had said, it was just good, old fashioned fun between friends. Of course, that now left him with no immediate prospects. Even so, he fell right to sleep.

* * * * *

They were having a little get-together in their den, about seven of them lounging around and chatting, sharing a few drinks, and generally goofing off. Included in the group was a pure-breed red fox that Joe hadn't met before. Lauriff Udintu Gromta was a friend of Seka, a construction worker, who toiled in the nearby city. As he soon learned, the fox liked working in the city but didn't much care to live there; which explained why he lived out here away from town.

Joe couldn't take his eyes from him. Red foxes were always a very close second to wolves in his mind, but this one could almost reverse that order on sight alone. He was just a little shorter than Joe and built like a diver, except for a hint of softness around the middle. His markings were typical for a red fox, which suited Joe just fine, and his coat was absolutely gorgeous. He also had a rousing sense of humor, and unlike many foxes he seemed comfortable in close groups.

He had two three year old kits at home, a boy and a girl, and lived with them and their mother. That was an unusual situation. Since females had no need or desire for pair bonding with a male, males lived separately or with other males. Both take an active role in their upbringing, the children often alternating weeks of living with one, then the other, parent. But Joe learned that since Lauriff was single and got along well with his kit mate, it was simpler to just live with them.

As he looked around it occurred to him how atypical his circle of friends was. Most, including others who weren't present, were close to his own age yet only three, Seka, Valonos, and a sleek black panther named Prag had children. Of the dozen or so people he hung out with on a regular basis, there should have been at least half with young by now, and sixty percent with mates.

Right now the seven of them were all piled in the lounge, belly rubbing each other, though Toggn left the human's lap to use the private room. Lauriff got up from the end of the lounge and stood over him, looking very inviting, and gestured to Joe's lap. He smiled and blushed just a little, knowing he had been found out, and nodded. The fox settled in, resting his puffy, lustrous tail against Joe's chest, and started softly murring as Joe stroked his tummy.

Toggn returned and looked at Lauriff. "Hey, that's my belly rubber!"

"Not any more," Joe replied with a smirk. Toggn chuckled and snuggled in with Seka and Prag, then started telling a long joke.

"Oh, by the way, Joseph has promised to cook us all dark meal," Seka suddenly announced after they had all stopped laughing.

"What?" Joe exclaimed, and threw a small pillow at him.

Seka caught it and laughed, "Truly! With lots of asparagus!"

"I'm out of asparagus." Joe lied, smirking.

"Which one of us is going to bite him?"

"Me." Prag said quickly, jokingly giving the human a sinister glare.

"You are not out!" Toggn countered.

"You can cook?" Lauriff asked, ears perking as he smiled up at him.

Joe nodded.

Everyone cheered, giving him hopeful looks, and Joe soon realized that there would be a mutiny if he refused now. He gave the vulpine form below him another long look as he stroked him from chest to navel, trying not to look at the perfect white sheath and fat scrotum, then sighed with exaggerated resignation.

"Oh, all right."

They cheered again as he sighed and worked his legs out from under Lauriff. Toggn took his place as he went to the kitchenette and got started.

When the evening drew to a close, the two of them saw everyone out the door, Lauriff being the last.

"Come by any time." Joe offered as the fox stepped out.

"Thank you, I will," he responded, "and you're a very good cook."

"I do my best," Joe said, waving as Lauriff walked off.

The door closed and Toggn gave him a smirk. "Woo! Sparks are flying!" he exclaimed, shading his eyes with a paw.

Joe poked his chest. "Give me a break. We just met!"

"Then how do you know who I'm talking about?" Toggn asked cleverly, then hugged him. "I'm buzzing and tired and going to bed. See you tomorrow."

Joe was silent as he returned the hug, having no counterpoint to his comment.

"Sleep well."

A while later, at light meal on the last work day of the week, he and Toggn met a skunk who had just been hired by the accounting department. Brill seemed a very likable guy to him, with an absolutely gorgeous, billowy tail almost big enough to serve as a blanket; but it was Toggn who really went for him immediately.

It seemed a simple hello was all it took to have them sitting close, tails mingling behind them. As it turned out, the skunk smelled especially nice to Toggn. At first the sight of a skunk and wolf so close seemed an odd combination, but he soon realized he was just making a pointless human assumption. As for the smell, it was completely unrelated to skunk spray, which Denworld furs did not possess.

Now that a month had gone by, the two of them were inseparable. They were having dark meal together now and, as he leaned against the open entrance to his den, he tried to keep the thought of them together *after* dark meal out of

his mind.

He debated going out and trying to get picked up. It had been one of those days. In spite of how busy work was, he had been completely unable to keep sex out of his mind. Seka's majestic mane, Paster's cute face, Seether's touches, muscles moving silkily beneath gleaming pelts wherever he looked; all of it had been hitting him especially hard today.

To make matters worse, no one he knew was around. He was supposed to go camping with friends starting tomorrow, but one had to leave town suddenly, another had caught the Denworld equivalent of a summer flu, and now surely Toggn would be otherwise occupied. He didn't especially want to go camping as a threesome if Toggn offered.

Every one else already had plans, and Lauriff was about to take his kits to a family park for the weekend. They had been spending a lot of time together or, at the very least, in each other's group activities. Lauriff was one of the reasons he wasn't sure about going out to get picked up.

But still, he had never been so horny in his life. Fantasizing about furs was nothing new to him, but being here made the idea all the more exciting for being attainable.

Maybe someone interesting would be in the complex's recreation area, he thought. His condition would be obvious to every snout within miles.

The door opposite his opened with a soft sigh just as he was turning to go in and get dressed. It revealed a tall, slender snake. Joe had never met him because of the snake's working hours, but had caught sight of him on occasion.

His colors and markings proved him to be a rattlesnake. In front, from the underside of his chin to the underside of his tail, he was a glossy beige. The rest was a black and brown pattern consistent with his breed.

His head was as smoothly scaled as the rest of him, the broad cheeks flaring out to house large venom glands. Those would have been capped off shortly after birth, he remembered, though they were milked on an occasional basis to prevent complications. The inside of their mouths, however, were more normal by mammalian standards despite the reptilian outer appearance, with a somewhat narrow, though not forked, tongue.

Reptiles did not have a sheath. Instead, the penis emerged from a tight yet clearly visible and slightly swollen slit when wanted. Below it they also lacked a conventional scrotum. Rather, they had a prominent, firm, smooth and sensitive bulge.

Joe felt a chill go through him as the rattler stood, tail moving around slowly, almost seductively, behind him. The widely spaced nostrils flared, and the large, slitted eyes pinned him. He must have seen Joe standing there through his door's window because he didn't seem to be going anywhere.

He felt like he was about to be eaten, yet at the same time his stomach fluttered with his desire. He didn't think he wanted to go through with this, but at the same time couldn't stop himself as he let his door close and greeted the snake.

His name was Whillen, and Joe knew there was no question in the snake's mind of the human's condition. The way the rattler's eyes drilled into him, the way his tail seemed to move with such patience, the way his head was in constant, barely perceptible motion, drew him in completely. It was fascinating, engrossing, almost hypnotic, and definitely erotic.

He suddenly felt nearly scared, so strong was Whillen's draw, but couldn't resist his own want. Unaware of having

even moved, he heard the door close softly behind them.

"You are truly in need, and I am here," the snake said, then the thin lips were immediately on his.

Joe was powerless to resist. The situation was almost frightening, such was the power the snake somehow held over him. The sharp claws pressing against his back as he was pulled close made him quiver.

A hand moved to his forehead, tilting it back. Eyes boring into his, the snake kissed down onto him with an unshakable conviction. Joe felt his body, and will, completely crumble beneath the implacable ones of Whillen.

The snake still stared intently into his eyes after freeing his mouth, sliding a hand between the human thighs and hissing erotically.

Joe did it all after that. On the spot he was eased down onto his knees to lick at the moistening slit between the smoothly scaled legs, face tilted up to watch the snake hiss triumphantly and watch him.

Somehow they ended up in the snake's nest-like bed. All the while Whillen talked quietly, seductively, shamelessly; sometimes coaching, sometimes praising, sometimes asking. He seemed to perceive Joe's every weakness, reading his thoughts back to him as if they were scrolling across his forehead.

He told him what to feel, then how he felt. He told him how much he wanted to serve the rattler's every whim, and Joe could only agree and comply.

He couldn't think or care, couldn't imagine being more comprehensively overtaken.

Although snakes did have distinct orgasms, they were less intense than with other species. Instead of strong, abrupt spurts, Whillen came in long, thick surges lasting seconds apiece. While cumming his body remaining relaxed as it straddled his shoulders. He was fed every drop, looking up to the almost evil features as he gulped thankfully. In spite of the apparent lack of intensity, Whillen obviously did not want for pleasure. And Joe was by now certain that it was as much psychological victory as physical ecstasy that thrilled the snake.

Later, face to face, Whillen took his body more completely than Joe had ever known. The rattler was not selfish, finding great satisfaction in pleasing him with an equal lack of inhibition. After sharing every other possible pleasure and leaving no sensitive area unexplored, he had entered Joe's desperate anus with an aching slowness and gently taunting words.

That maddening pace was maintained until Joe was begging for release with total abandon. His body obeyed the snake's tempo, hips slowly rocking, ringed muscles clenching, lungs panting, hands grasping. Still Whillen talked, although he himself was just as near climax, and Joe gasped out whatever was necessary.

By now the only thing the human wanted in life was for the reptile to cum inside him. Whillen knew this and paused a moment, then thrust deep, hard, and fast a few times before slamming himself in to the hilt and cumming. His back curled and his head dropped, engulfing the straining human penis which, for the last few minutes, had been off limits.

Joe came into the hot, reptilian mouth with a fierce, explosive release, hips bucking against Whillen's, ass clenching tightly and rhythmically around the hot shaft inside it.

He had no idea how much noise he had made, nor, a couple of minutes later, any idea of much else.

When he almost abruptly came to the next morning, Whillen was crouched beside the nest, watching him. The long

tail slithered around behind him, and his scaled muzzle split into a satisfied grin.

"You do sleep a lot," he said, "but that is expected. Would you like to use the bath?"

Joe sat up slowly, feeling vulnerable and unusually aware of his nakedness and the stickiness between his legs. He managed to return the smile, hoping the offer meant there would be no repeat of last night's performance. Although clearly consenting, he did feel a little uneasy at how the snake had so easily mastered him. Somehow, he felt...used.

"That would be kind, thank you," he accepted, letting his hands drop casually to cover himself.

"Good," the snake said cheerfully, "I will get a morning meal ready while you're washing."

"Actually," Joe began as he crawled out of the nest and stood, "I usually don't eat in the morning. Payo juice would be nice, though."

"Ah, no problem," Whillen began, still cheerful, "it will be waiting."

He watched the snake turn and stride out into the living area, moving with that slinky, fluid grace he remembered from last night. The change in Whillen's attitude seemed a little odd.

Of course it was normal for someone to be friendly and bright the morning after, but the rattler seemed to have completely shed all of the dark, forbidden passion of the night before. Also, Whillen hadn't been in bed with him when he awoke, and showed no signs of getting in. Furs usually liked to go right to sleep after a night's lovemaking and then share some quiet pillow talk in the morning.

He showered quickly and, while on the toilet, read the labels on some of the bottles stacked beside it on the counter. Snakes used some sort of lotion on their bodies once a week to keep the scales healthy. The label claimed that it was absorbed quickly and couldn't be felt after a few minutes, which seemed to be born out in reality.

Whillen was sitting in the lounge, eating a large helping of meat, a glass of payo juice beside him. Joe retrieved his den pants from near the door and slipped them on before joining him. Smiling his thanks, he took a long swallow, wishing it was coffee.

"Do you always wear those inside?" Whillen asked, pointing to the pants.

"Usually," he lied, hoping that wasn't an offer, "I guess you could call it a human quirk." He didn't mention that he actually wore them rarely these days.

Whillen nodded, gesturing at his plate. "Are you sure you aren't hungry?"

Joe gulped down the last of the juice, hoping to find an acceptable way to excuse himself, and grinned. "I'm fine."

"Suit yourself," the snake replied amiably, eating his last bite. He gave Joe another smile as he took his plate to the cleaner, "I really need to get this place cleaned up," he added, looking around at the slightly messy den.

Joe stood almost too quickly and held out the empty glass, finding the opening he was looking for. "I'll get out of your way, then."

Whillen took the glass and put it in with the plate. Joe was still a little surprised at the rattler's attitude as he was led to the door. There wasn't the slightest sign of interest, and that comment about cleaning up had the ring of a hint

about it.

"Thank you for a truly satisfying night."

"You too," Joe said a little uncomfortably as the door swished open, "and thanks for the drink."

"You are welcome."

Toggn palmed the door open and entered to find Joe sitting in the lounge and cradling a mug of that hot, bitter morning drink. He was nude, as he usually was in recent times. The sight of his big, sensitive human glans, much more prominent than that of most furry species, bulging within that fold of skin gave him an idea. He dismissed it, though, when he saw his face.

While he stripped Joe got up and walked over to give him a hug. He returned it gladly and gave him an inquisitive look, tail wagging a little. "You look troubled. Is something wrong at work? And what is that wonderful smell?"

The human gave him a wan smile and returned to the lounge. "Nah, its nothing. Thanks for asking, though. Oh, that's fried chicken."

Toggn followed him, sensing something was wrong. He snuggled in beside him and laid a paw on his stomach, rubbing softly. "Come now, my friend, what is on your mind? You promised to be more open with your feelings, truly?"

Joe sighed and mustered a grateful smile. "I don't know how to start. It's rather embarrassing."

"The beginning is usually a good place," Toggn teased, earning a better smile.

"Have you ever met the rattlesnake across the hall?"

Toggn's ears flattened a little as it dawned on him and he nodded sagely. A quick sniff confirmed his suspicion. "No, but I can imagine where this is going."

His friend sighed again and took a gulp before gathering his thoughts and continuing.

"I was just in a horrible state, you know? I couldn't get it off my mind. No one was around and I was standing in the doorway, trying to decide if I wanted to go out or not. Then, there he was."

He kept rubbing Joe's belly and gave him a little kiss on the cheek. "He got you."

Joe nodded.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to figure out a way to ease his friend's mind. "And he made a point of it, truly?"

Joe rolled his eyes and nodded. "The whole time."

"That is a snake's way. If you needed it that badly, and he found you, then it truly would have made his day."

"Is this supposed to be helping?" Joe asked, giving him a sardonic grin.

"Let me continue," Toggn said quickly, perking his hears and softly scratching as he rubbed, "you are certainly not the first to give in to a snake. It happens. You see, for a snake it is as much the conquest as it is the sex. They seek out someone in terrible need, like you were last night, and have their way with them. There is no shame in it, believe

me."

"The way their eyes nail you to the spot," he continued after pausing for a moment, "and the way they move, look, and act, draws you in and grips you."

That earned him a nod and an easing of the furrowed brow.

"They also have an unusually strong pheromone count, which makes them even harder to resist. As much as you'd rather not, you just can't help yourself. Please be at ease, my friend, this happens all the time."

Joe sighed and gave him a grateful lick on the muzzle. "It was so, I don't know, creepy. And Toggn, I am not exaggerating, there was *nothing* I wouldn't do! I felt so helpless. It was not comfortable. I couldn't get out of there fast enough today!"

He nodded and ran his other paw through the long, soft head fur. "Only the most submissive of men would truly feel comfortable. Unfortunately for them, snakes don't seek out that type of man. As I said, it must be a conquest for them."

Joe glanced at the door and rolled his eyes again. "He lives right across the hall. What if I run into him again? I'm going to feel ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Because of last night! I don't want to do that again, Toggn. It wasn't me."

"You won't, so don't worry about it."

"Huh?"

"He has had you. You gave in and willingly did his bidding. I am sure he made it as pleasant for you as possible also, right? To show you that he appreciated your surrender?"

"Yes, and thank you for making such a fine point of it," Joe began, giving him a light-hearted shake of his head, "but what's that got to do with it?"

"Having you again would not be a victory, only sex," he answered, "and snakes don't like only sex."

He pulled Joe against his chest and wrapped his arms around him, nuzzling into the head fur at the back of his neck. "Snakes rarely have more than one encounter with the same person. Once they have been, forgive me, conquered, they are of no more interest sexually. What was he like when you awoke?"

It felt nice to have the human settling back against him and relaxing. He had been so tense.

"Friendly," Joe answered, then turned his head around, "but now that you mention it, he did seem completely different. He acted like nothing had happened. As a matter of fact, I may be wrong, but it almost seemed as if he wanted to be polite, but wanted me out."

"That is because he knew, with the difference in hours you worked, that friendship would be unlikely. Plus he had already gotten what he wanted."

"Ugh, what a night," Joe said, shaking his head and chuckling softly.

That's better, Toggn thought to himself as Joe's attitude brightened, then said, "They never mate, either. Snakes have no need for emotional attachments. None of this is criticism, by the way, it is simply their nature. Don't you remember what the documentary said about them?"

Joe snorted that cute little human snort of his, "I didn't pay much attention because I didn't expect to be dropping to my knees at the first sight of one."

Toggn laughed, hugging him tightly, "Now that is the friend I know!"

"Have you ever been with one?"

"No no," he answered quickly, "I could never allow myself to be controlled like that. A lot of men have fantasies of doing so, though, even if they never do."

"Including you?" Joe asked him.

Oops, he thought, suddenly a little embarrassed, but now he had to answer.

"Once or twice. Everyone, even those who need to dominate, likes the thought of giving that power away once in a while. But that can be done with lots of men, and a snake is just a little too serious about it for me. I suppose I should have warned you about them long ago. I am sorry."

Joe nodded. Then he turned sideways, nudging his hip nicely against his sheath, and draped an arm over his shoulder.

"Don't be, my friend, I should have paid attention. So, what are you doing today?"

"I am meeting Brill in a couple of hours to go shopping," he answered, then thought for a moment, "want to go along?"

"Thanks, but no. I'm having a picnic with Lauriff in about," he stopped to check the clock, "an hour and a half."

"After last night, maybe you should take a Number One before you go," he suggested with a grin.

Joe pointed to the empty coffee mug, "I already have, just in case."

"Hm, one and a half hours," he mused, looking meaningfully down at his sheath.

"One, actually. I need about half an hour to get ready," Joseph replied, a smile tugging at his lips as he followed his gaze. He reached to cup it in his hand, while Toggn ran a finger around Joseph's foreskin.

"What am I going to do with you?" Joe asked, sighing.

Toggn tugged the foreskin outward with thumb and forefinger, slipping his declawed middle fingertip inside. "Have sex?"

They giggled and shifted a little.

"Unless you still feel uncomfortable..."

"I probably should, but I feel completely secure with you, my friend."

He smiled, glad to hear that the human shared his trust. Joe's hand moved to cup his balls and he again looked down, this time noticing a pearly drop at his sheath's opening.

"Then how would you like to wrap those thick lips around that?"

He moved his paw to the stiffening shaft as his friend grinned and adjusted position, then growled softly as the tongue wormed into him.

Once their lust had been sated, Toggn let the softening penis slide from his muzzle and rolled over onto his side. Joe followed, refusing to release him for a few moments, hand still gripping behind his exposed knot. His friend smiled up at him from behind his shaft before using it to clean his cheeks and under his chin.

"It never ceases to amaze me how hard you humans can suck." he said happily, watching him lick his cock clean.

"We aim to please." Joe promised, lapping the last of what had been on those cheeks from his shaft.

He leaned down and licked the human face and neck thoroughly, cleaning them properly, "And you have yet to miss. What does Lauriff think? He's never been with a human before," he asked, sitting up with him.

"Once I get started, he won't be *thinking* at all!"

"Truly!" he agreed with a laugh, then his ears twitched, "speaking of which, do we canines suck hard enough, or does it leave you wanting?" he queried, humming as his manhood relaxed back into his sheath.

The first part of his answer was a shocked expression, the second a playful whap.

"No way! Believe me, your tongue more than makes up for it. Really, if forced to choose, I'd take a wolf over a human any day."

"Truly?"

"Absolutely."

"A wolf over a human.' Interesting choice of words. One of these days soon, I'm going to ride your ass again!"

"Oh? You think so? Maybe I'll have yours!"

Joe ducked quickly and grabbed a testicle with his mouth and his ass with a hand. Toggn yipped and his ball popped free as he backpedaled.

"No!" he yelled, laughing.

Joe chased him across the lounge, groping at him. "Get your furry ass in the air!"

He jumped clear of the lounge, landing half-way across the room. Just for sport, he turned and wiggled his ass at the human.

Joe stopped giggling and rested his arms on one of the lounge uprights, propping his chin on them. "You sure know how to cheer a guy up," he said sincerely.

Toggn paused for a moment, recalling how troubled his friend had been less than half an hour ago, "What are friends

for? Now, I must get ready to cheer Brill up."

"Something wrong?"

"No," he said with an exaggerated shrug, "but everyone is made happier by my presence!"

"Oh, please!" Joe exclaimed, then perked up, "I guess you've been making him extremely happy, eh?"

"That?" Toggn asked, walking back over and kneeling beside him, "we haven't."

"Really?"

"No. I imagine you must have done wonders for Lauriff by now, though. He looks tasty enough."

"We haven't either. It's strange, because I like him so much. He's funny and charming and, you've got to admit, adorable. We've kissed and petted, but for some reason he hasn't tried, and neither have I. It just hasn't felt necessary. The Number One might have been a waste. Sometimes I just get the impression that sex isn't needed, you know?"

"Interesting. I could say much the same thing about Brill."

They looked at each other silently for a few moments, then smiled in unison.

"Nah."

* * * * *

The time for his annual physical had arrived, and Joe used an off day to fly down south to a popular beach. Due to the way it's main continent circled the globe, Denworld had literally thousands of miles of perfect beachfront. Furs enjoyed the sun and sand but rarely went into the water itself unless wearing a wetsuit, which they found extremely uncomfortable. Supposedly, getting the salt from one's coat was a real pain.

During the warm seasons there were always tens of thousands of humans vacationing at the beaches. When the first surfers had arrived, furs were absolutely stunned. Salt water sports were few and far between.

Due to the huge tourism business along the coasts most had clinics and hospitals with a mixed human/fur staff to ensure proper treatment for humans. Since humans and furs were based on the same DNA and very similar under the skin, the clinic near his den complex could take care of humans, but his company back on Earth insisted the physical be done by a human doctor.

The furs who lived and worked in the area seemed a little different. Where he now lived, experience had shown that they were not afraid to make an offer but were generally subtle about it. Here, however, subtlety was less in evidence.

Furs of all kinds were hitting on him left and right. There seemed to be a large concentration of wolves, also. He suspected that somehow this was tied in with tourism. The reputation humans seemed to have garnered for themselves — wanting sex with a fur for the novelty of it and the centuries-old popularity of werewolves — probably played a prominent role.

And if a fur, especially a wolf, found humans attractive, then a popular tourist area was the place to go. If sex with them was also all the fur wanted, then he supposed a place like this would be ideal. There were residents who didn't,

of course, and plenty showed no interest.

He politely turned everyone down, wanting to get back home as soon as possible. Lauriff was coming over later in the evening and he wanted time to get organized.

The physical, conducted by a human doctor and a lupine nurse, went fine and he was given a clean bill of health.

Arriving home, he heard a soft splash come from within the open private room door. He walked over and peeked inside. Toggn waved from where he reclined in the tub, submerged to his neck in murky water.

"What did you do, wallow around in a mud puddle?" he asked, walking in and pointing.

"It is Gloss," Toggn answered, cupping water in his hands and dumping it over his head.

"Gloss?"

"A treatment for fur. I use it about once every three months," Toggn answered, relaxing back with a sigh, "my pelt is getting a little rough, and shampoo only does so much."

Joe nodded, sitting on the toilet, "A lot of humans do something similar on occasion. Usually it's a mineral water treatment to soften and enrich the skin. Never bothered myself, though, it smells too pretty for me."

"Do you need to use that?" Toggn asked, pointing at the toilet.

"Yeah, but I can wait," Joe answered, knowing how bashful furs were about acts of nature. That's why they called it a 'private room.'

"I'm almost done," Toggn said, pouring water over his head again, "and now I'll be even more irresistible!"

"Oh please!"

The wolf soaked for another few minutes and they discussed Joe's impression of furs around the tourist area. Toggn confirmed his suspicions, hinting at a slight reputation a lot of wolves in areas like that have.

Once he had dried and rinsed the tub, Toggn headed out and Joe relieved himself, following with an Everclean treatment that was due, and then wrapped a towel around his waist.

He emerged to find that Lauriff had arrived. The fox was on the lounge, giving Toggn a belly rub. They shared a conspiring glance and smiled at him.

"Uh-oh, what have you two been up to?"

"Nothing," Toggn lied, "we were just comparing notes."

"On what?"

"You don't want to know."

"Be honest and forthright," he chided, returning the smile giving the wolf a wag of his finger.

Toggn shrugged and looked at Lauriff, who raised his eyebrows and turned back to Joe.

"He was just saying how much effort it took to keep it in when you started sucking really hard on his sheath."

Joe gaped and then felt his face get hot with an intense blush.

"There it is!" Toggn yelped, giving Lauriff a nudge, "I told you it was easy!"

They laughed at him as Joe stepped over and swatted at them. He gave the giggling fox a hug and started slowly running his tail through a hand.

"You should feel this fur," Lauriff suggested, "there's nothing like a fresh gloss."

Joe did, running his hands over Toggn's pelt with the fox. He was right, Toggn's fur was now incredibly soft and lustrous.

"I think it's time I did this myself," Lauriff mused.

Toggn was now wallowing in the attention and gave a long, soft sigh.

Joe leaned across the wolf and placed his mouth in the cup of Lauriff's ear, whispering. The fox winked as he sat back. Joe let his hand move to Toggn's sheath and started rubbing there. Lauriff moved a paw inside his thigh and caressed.

Toggn blinked and looked at the two of them. "Oh no! Thank you and I'm sorry, but I've got a bachelor party tonight."

"Oh." Lauriff said, immediately moving his paw back to Toggn's stomach.

Joe looked between them, noting Lauriff's reaction. "Am I missing something?"

"Ah," Toggn began, smiling up at the fox, "he doesn't know."

"I see."

"Know what?"

Toggn took a deep breath. "Variety is the spice of life — I believe we stole that saying from humans — and he will have it no more once mated."

Joe thought for a moment, then it dawned on him. "Oh," he said slowly, then looked at Toggn, "and you're the, uh, entertainment?"

"Well, part of it. There are eight of us."

"Eight?" Joe gasped.

"We have to give him a proper sending off before he spends the rest of his life with one man," Toggn replied with a shrug, "although two of us are wolves and there will be two tigers. Maybe we wolves and the tigers will go with him in pairs at first," he mused with a little smile, "so we don't overbalance our time. I wonder which end I'll get?"

"Eight?"

"He'll have Number Three, I'm sure." Lauriff added nonchalantly.

"Good grief. Is that normal for a bachelor party?"

"Of course," Lauriff said, "that's what bachelor parties are for. You may not completely understand, having only one species around on Earth, but here there is great variety. Of course you can have a fulfilling sex life with your mate, but one last taste of that variety makes for a great party!"

"So it's basically an orgy?"

"Oh no," Toggn answered, "it is a party. We're not all going in there with him at once!" He shifted a little, scratching lightly at both of them as they continued stroking his fur, and explained. "The party goes on for hours. Every now and then someone goes into his sleeping room with him, sometimes two. Once or twice a quick one may go on right out in the middle of the party, too."

"Wow."

"No one of the same species as his mate is allowed at the party." Lauriff added with a grin.

"Both do this, I assume?"

"Yes, one week before the mating."

"Who is it?"

"A wolf from the next town whom you've never met," Toggn answered, "I've known him for years, though the project has kept us from visiting lately. He's mating with the tallest cheetah I have ever seen. And now, thank you for the wonderful rubdown, and the offer, but I must get ready."

"Sure," they both said, letting him up. Joe nudged Lauriff down and started stroking his stomach and chest instead, giving him a smile.

"Have you ever been to one of these?"

"Sure, they go on all the time," the fox answered, murring.

"It sounds...extreme."

Lauriff looked up at him carefully, then asked, "You don't approve?"

"I understand the meaning behind it, and it sure does sound like some kind of party," he answered with a chuckle, "like a lot of fun. Is the mate-to-be the only one everyone has sex with?"

"Certainly not!" Lauriff exclaimed, ears jumping, then he smiled, "with all those guys drinking and taking turns with the bachelor, who could help it? It would be horribly rude, however, if you didn't make sure you saved your best for the mate-to-be."

Joe nodded as Lauriff's tail swished into his lap and he used his free hand to start fluffing it. "So, what do you have planned for tonight? Going out?"

"I was more in the mood to stay in tonight," the fox replied, "how about you?"

"Me too, actually. I was going to go camping with Prag, Seka, Paster and a couple others these off days but decided I should really stay in town to get some shopping done. I'm tired of being picked on for wearing subdued human clothes all the time." he responded with a grin.

"Need help?"

"I'd love some," he gladly agreed, "otherwise I'll end up with everything looking too toned down. The colors on this planet are almost painfully bright and I don't know if I can resist passing by what you consider normal."

"That's right," Lauriff said, running a paw up and down his back, "you see colors better than we do."

"Yeah, and I'm half blind at night, comparatively speaking."

"It must be strange to be human." the fox joked.

Joe gave him a poke. "Think of the money I save on shampoo."

"Yes, there is that!"

"Anything in particular you'd like to do tonight?"

Lauriff rolled onto his side, nudging Joe onto his back and running a paw over him. "Talk with you."

"A quiet evening together suits me just fine," Joe agreed, sighing, "Ah, that feels good. You just don't get enough of those back on Earth."

"Belly rubs? I couldn't live without them," Lauriff joked as he casually opened Joe's towel and pulled it out from under him, "that rules out any extended stays on Earth for me."

Joe chuckled and reached to stroke his pelt. "Whether it needs Gloss or not, your fur is absolutely beautiful. The color, and the way the white follows your contours, is perfect. I'm jealous."

"I see you like Earth's foxes."

"Foxes are beautiful, but still only animals. You are a person, and that makes you much more appealing."

Lauriff leaned down and kissed him, letting himself settle against the human before nuzzling and licking at his neck. "I've never smelled a human before you," he said after a moment, "you're a little tangy. Just enough, in fact, to be very enticing. And that," he added, grinning and looking downward, "is *so* cute."

"What?" Joe asked, following his gaze.

"Your penis, the way it is always out and has that cute little sheath on the end."

The human face flushed again, earning an amused perking of the ears from Lauriff.

"Thank you," Joe said, fighting off the heat in his face and humming as the muzzle and tongue returned to caressing his neck, "and as for scent, you should feel what it's like to be me."

"How so?" Lauriff asked, raising his head.

"I've yet to smell a fur that was unpleasant. There is this, I don't know, underlying sort of musk you all share. It's not

sharp or too strong, but always present. The difference from person to person and species to species seems to be layered over that rather than completely different. And canines are simply the best. I don't know what it is, but people like Toggn and you smell just wonderful. It must be pheromones. You, in particular, always make me want to," he paused, reached up, and encircled the fox in his arms, burying his face in the fur, "wrap you up and snuggle my way in."

Lauriff smiled and nuzzled the top of his head, working a paw into the long head fur and hugging him back, before easing them both back down to continue softly stroking nowhere in particular. He had no idea that a human, with their weak noses, could ever notice.

"Well, thank you."

"And before you ask, like Toggn did a while back, you do not smell anything like a dog."

Toggn stumbled through the door in the early morning to find the lights still on at a dim setting. The neutralizer he had taken as he left the party was starting to work, but he still felt drunk. Joseph and Lauriff were cuddled together on the lounge, sleeping like pups.

Stripping just inside the door, he took a long breath, nostrils flaring as he habitually sniffed out any lingering signs of sex. Finding none, he walked to Joseph's open sleeping room door and sniffed inside, finding nothing there either.

Grinning, he gave the two of them another glance. He himself had never been with a fox. They were very pretty, though, and the two of them looked uncommonly cute nestled together.

Giving his sheath an idle scratch, he swayed into his room and flopped into bed.

During the off days that followed, Joe, Toggn, Seka, and Prag spent a couple of them camping in a nearby forest. It was the first time in a while that Toggn hadn't been with Brill. The two of them were now always together. It was amazing how they simply clicked. He smiled a secret little smile when he saw them arm-in-arm. Toggn was falling in love, even if he and the skunk were not yet completely exclusive sexually. These were also going to be some of the very few days he himself hadn't spent with Lauriff.

After an arduous morning workout, the first was a long day of food, fun, and the Denworld equivalent of beer; followed by an evening around a campfire. Neither of them had planned on it, but after they all turned in for the night Prag ended up wildly screwing Joe's brains out. Seka and Toggn had their own fun from across the fire.

When they were finished the exhausted feline lay draped over him, purring in his ear. He had never had sex with others present before, but surprisingly had almost immediately forgotten about the other pair. He looked beyond the fire to see Toggn smiling at him, a sleeping Seka nestled against him. He winked and then curled up with the lion.

The next day was spent hiking, and they had ended up separated into pairs, Seka with Joe. Being in the forest with other men always made Joe feel horny, even more so with furs. The fact didn't escape Seka's notice. It wasn't long before Joe got to live out another dream as he served the big lion's pleasure. After gulping more than he thought possible he ended up on his back. Seeing and feeling the powerful lion mounted over him was awesome, and Seka had a seemingly endless libido. He had cum into him twice, without even pulling out between stints, before dropping his head and sucking every last drop from Joe.

The next day, as he and Toggn were packing their things into the flyer Prag had rented, Toggn leaned close and whispered.

"Seka may have wore me out, but seeing Prag wildly humping you got me all wet again! You are some sight!"

Joe gave him a playful shove. "I can't believe I did that!"

"Why?"

"Because," he began, trying to keep his voice down as the others approached, "I've never done that with others around before. But man, he gave me this *look*, the firelight flickering over his face, and I just flopped! You all look so amazing by firelight."

Toggn waved a paw and gave his shoulder a slap, "Well, now you have," then added with a leering grin, "and Prag does have a look that would warm the coldest sheath."

"You know," Joe began, taking advantage of the extra time he now had as Prag and Seka changed direction and ambled toward the toilet facilities, "something else has been bothering me a little this morning."

He gave Toggn a serious look before continuing. "Do you think I'm being, how should I put it, indiscriminate? I mean, in the last few weeks I've been with Kottenken, you, Valonos, Whillen, and now Prag and Seka. Am I setting myself up for a bad reputation?"

"Seka?" Toggn asked, surprised.

"Yeah, yesterday when we were hiking. I assumed you would have noticed or at least found out by now."

"No, I didn't. Woo, I would have *loved* to see that! A lion and big brown-eyed human..." he mused, voice trailing off.

"You are hopeless! Seriously," he asked with a grin, petting the furry back, "do you think?"

Toggn shook his head, ears and whiskers erect, and gave him a comforting look. "Truly not. Why would that be? Sure, you seem to be getting around lately, but not to an 'indiscriminate' degree. Especially considering how this is something you've wanted for so long but couldn't get over here to have. As I said just before we were together, I am sure you are not using people, and that is what matters. Enjoy yourself!"

"Actually," Joe began after sighing with relief and giving him a thankful smile, "it's Lauriff I want to enjoy more than anyone else."

"He is pretty," Toggn mused, ears suddenly moving back slightly.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked quickly, spying the others on their way back from the private room.

"Oh, nothing," the wolf said, sighing.

"Come on!" Joe prompted with a chuckle, pulling him close and bribing him with a little belly rubbing, "You can tell me, best friend. Be honest and forthright. Is it...me?"

"It's Brill," Toggn said, for the first time Joe could remember actually looking bashful, "I've tried to keep him out of my mind these off days but I just cannot wait to see him again."

Joe's smile widened and he nudged the snout around to face him, "You're falling for him, aren't you?"

Toggn sighed and gave him another bashful grin, "I could be. I thought I enjoyed being a bachelor too much to let this happen. Now I suddenly want to have some pups and settle down with him. I don't know, Joseph," he continued,

giving him a semi-serious look, "he's wonderful. He has that amazing, beautiful tail. He's strong and gorgeous and masculine and tough, yet inside and he's all soft for me. The perfect beta. I'm just not sure yet. All I know right now is that I can't wait to get back and hug him."

Joe nuzzled him and gave the wolf one of his own. "Well, it may be a poor substitute, but here's one to tide you over until Prag gets us flown home."

"Truly it is not, my friend."

* * * * *

Lauriff had been away for a couple of weeks to train on a new series of construction equipment, leaving Joe feeling unusually subdued.

He had baby-sat the kits a couple of times. Their mother was ferociously protective, but he seemed to have gained her trust. It could also be that Lauriff had put in a few good words for him.

Either way they needed constant attention, so slacking off wasn't really an option. Their reserves of energy had to violate the laws of physics!

Seeing them those times had only made him think of their father, though, a matter made worse when one of them asked an innocent question. It was the kind of open, honest question children ask.

"Do you love my daddy?" the girl had queried softly, looking up at him and smiling coyly.

Three year old children were not supposed to wonder about such things, he had thought to himself before answering.

"I think I do," he answered, leaning down and petting her head, "but I don't quite know how much yet."

She seemed to be satisfied, flashed a bright smile, and was off again, running around with her brother like a maniac.

The fox was on his mind constantly. Joe was still going out every few nights with friends, still working out with Tognn every other day, still playing racquetball with Valonos, and still doing all the things one does when not at work. He had even been intimate with the buck and Kottenken a couple more times apiece. But it just didn't feel the same anymore. Even when he was faced with a man that made his jaw drop, within moments he was making comparisons to Lauriff.

Whenever they were together he simply could not peel his eyes away. There was something about the fox that drew him in like a moth to a flame.

The kits were fun, too. Joe had rarely considered himself the fatherly type, but they were so cute, and so well disciplined (when sitting still), that he found them almost irresistible. When Lauriff had walked in one day to find him cuddled with them, reading a children's story, Joe had almost felt embarrassed. It wasn't nudity; he didn't feel comfortable being naked around children even though everyone else, and the kits themselves, thought nothing of it, so was wearing pants.

What felt funny was how, when a man had entered the room, he felt as if he had been caught at something less than manly. But he couldn't help it. Despite the effort needed to control their boundless energy, he just loved the little fuzzballs to death.

Lauriff had given him a very strange smile before heading in to his kitmate's room to chat with her for a while.

He tried to be careful with his feelings. Falling for Tognn so quickly, only to suddenly find that love was not in the cards, had bothered him for a while; and he didn't want to rush in and find out the hard way again.

With Lauriff things seemed to be different, though. The fox was simply gorgeous, to be sure, but when Joe looked at him it was like he wasn't seeing flesh and fur at all.

He was a strong man, too. Joe had come to realize that being an alpha in relationships on Earth and being one here were not one and the same. On Earth he had never been submissive. Sure, he was sometimes evenly matched, but here on Denworld just about every man he met except Kokenken made him feel like a beta. And Lauriff, although he could be gentle, caring, and affectionate, was certainly the alpha of their relationship.

Joe didn't mind at all, though, and the fact that Lauriff earned a modest salary mattered not one jot. It was only natural given their psychological makeup, and Lauriff never made him feel anything less than totally masculine. If anything, the fox's way of dominating their relationship was very subdued.

His strength manifested itself as a quiet, even-tempered and confident demeanor. He never seemed the least bit bothered by the fact that his beta made considerably more money. His affection was boundless and he treated Joe like a gift, not a possession. Joe felt he was merely responding as nature intended and genuinely enjoyed the feeling of belonging to someone like Lauriff.

He seemed to be a good father to his kits, too. Both were fascinated by having a human around. They were also almost unbelievably cute. Lauriff was strict with them, but always fair and loving. Seeing him with his kits always made Joe smile.

He wondered if there was anything about the fox he didn't like.

One time they were sunning themselves together out in the surrounding park, the fox nuzzling him warmly, whiskers brushing his cheeks. On a whim he had caught those whiskers in his lips, slowly drawing them through from root to tip. He was rewarded with a tiny, shuddering breath and an immediate, lingering kiss. That little piece of information was safely tucked away for frequent future use, as others had been. One of those was his cooking ability. The quickest way to a man's heart was through his stomach, after all.

Since his arrival so long ago, his eyes had been his greatest asset, just as the man in the terminal had suggested. Lauriff was not immune to this, and one of the reasons they had grown so close was the fox's constant gaze. It felt strange to Joe that a fox could have the same fascination for an element of human features as he could for, say, fangs.

When they kissed, or when he licked affectionately at Lauriff's mouth, his tongue always found them. Also, feeling them touch and prick his skin always made his heart flutter. The mere thought of them being there, even if they weren't visible at the time, had a subtle feeling of vulnerability tingling in him. His claws did the same.

Those fangs and claws were only the beginning, of course, as Lauriff's face was a deep well he always fell into.

It still felt odd, though, that his eyes could cause equal fascination in return. And with their eyes finding each other so often, it was only a matter of time before they began seeing what shines behind them. What Joe had found was a soul that he ached to become one with.

It was a feeling of overwhelming need he desperately wanted to satisfy. Never had anyone conjured such a fundamental, spiritual desire in him. If he could leave his body and pour his naked soul into the fox, he would gladly

give his life on the spot.

Twice they had sex, the kind of intense, passionate unions born of simple lust and mutual attraction. More importantly, on one other occasion they had also made love. Lauriff dominated, of course, but he had a generous, selfless and sensual way of going about it. His strength definitely came quietly from within.

They were falling in love, he suspected. Joe had never felt so deeply for anyone in his life, not even when he thought he was falling in love with Tognn. The fox had yet to tie him, though, which gave him pause. He wanted that so badly. Tognn was just a good friend so he didn't expect that from the wolf. It was something usually reserved for true intimacy or, maybe, a really wild hammering. The feeling that Lauriff was somehow holding back nagged him. Suspecting what it was, he went to his console, logged in, and retrieved the necessary forms.

He had actually sat and cried earlier when the realization struck him that he would be going home in a few short, precious weeks. The thought, simmering stealthily in the back of his mind for a couple of months now, had been kept in check. But now, much more so than ever, the idea tore his heart to pieces and ravaged his soul.

Earth, which had always been a home he could never complain about, now seemed like place of punishment and emptiness.

He sat back down at his terminal with a lighthearted sigh. Even if things didn't pan out as he'd hoped, there was still one surprise he could offer the fox.

He started filling out forms.

* * * * *

He and Lauriff were having another picnic. Couples and families were scattered sporadically throughout the park. It was a nice day and children were running around here and there. They found a discreet spot and Joe spread out the blanket while Lauriff set down the player and turned on some soft music.

"First thing's first," Joe said, glancing up at Denworld's bright star, "would you do my back, please?"

By now Lauriff was getting used to Joe's need for sunscreen and took the tube from him as Joe shed his shirt. Once Joe's back was thoroughly coated he handed the tube back and cleaned his paws with a towelette.

After cleaning his own hands Joe opened the picnic basket and started setting things out while Lauriff sat down beside him, tail curling affectionately around his waist.

"What is it his time?" he asked.

"Fried chicken and potato salad again," Joe said, "an old Earth picnic tradition and made fresh this morning by yours truly."

"It smells excellent, and I've been wanting it again," the fox offered, nose twitching as Joe opened the containers. Once the food and dinnerware were out, he produced a long bottle.

"Rose' wine," he announced, "and if you don't like it, I've got some mervera too."

"You do know how to picnic." Lauriff commented with a little kiss.

They sat close and ate, watching the children play. Once they were finished, the fox wiped his mouth and grinned

widely at him.

"Do you always cook like this?"

"This? This was easy," he remarked, gathering up the dirty dishes. He finished his wine and gave a nod at Lauriff's glass, "what do you think?"

"It is good, but not something I'd go looking for," the fox replied carefully, "but as for your cooking, I could eat it every day."

Joe nodded, relaxed onto his side, and patted the blanket beside him. "You look like you need a belly rub. Or is it I need to give one?" he added with a grin, "either way, get your tummy down here."

Lauriff chuckled and did so, wrapping his near arm around Joe's back and murring softly as Joe stroked the soft fur of his stomach; a stomach, he thought, that seemed a little flatter.

"Is it just me, or has your stomach trimmed down?" he asked, noting that the love handles had gone also.

Lauriff smiled up at him, ears perking. "You noticed? I've been working on it," he added, giving himself a pat, "sometimes the kits make it difficult to find the time, even with their mother around, and your cooking doesn't help. I'm stuffed! I've made time lately, though."

"Oh yeah?" Joe asked, broadening his strokes to include his chest. He had an idea of what inspired the extra effort and planted a small kiss on his lips. "I like it."

"Good."

After a few minutes, Lauriff got up to use the nearby private room booth. When he returned, they playfully argued over who should now be getting a belly rub. Joe lost when Lauriff, taking him by surprise, snapped his mouth around his throat and pinned it to the blanket.

"I give! I give!" he cried, giggling, "you can rub mine!"

They enjoyed each other's company and the sunshine for a little while, and Joe felt more content than he had since their last quiet time together.

He had been feeding crackers to a small, six-legged rodent. They were everywhere, and very tame. Their numbers were vital to Denworld's simplified food chain. This one had eaten it's fill and was now curled up just beyond the blanket.

His gaze roamed the edge of the nearby forest. In an instant, a larger, four-legged predator bolted from the brush, snatched up an unsuspecting rodent, and then disappeared just as quickly.

"Ouch! That had to hurt!"

Lauriff didn't seem to think much of it, then looked down at him with that cute, thoughtful expression he sometimes had.

"You have been hard to figure out at times, Joseph."

"How so?"

"I wasn't sure why at first, then I remembered what they taught in school of how your race evolved on a planet full of ferocious, much larger predators."

He paused to consider for a moment, still gently rubbing his chest and belly.

"That aspect of your development seems to permeate your psyche. You have a slightly defensive demeanor. Sometimes, when I try to get an idea of your feelings, you evade. Not intentionally, it seems, but out of habit. There are times when I'd like to know something but am not sure I should ask."

Joe frowned and, prompted by Lauriff's honesty, took a moment to examine himself. Certainly he had discovered that it took effort to be as open with his feelings as Denworlders were. At first he had been very uncomfortable when he felt he should match someone's openness, but with passing time he had improved. It was his improvement in this regard that had gotten him hammered by Prag's sleek, black body.

As Tognn and Seka began necking heavily across the fire from them, the panther had asked him how sex with furs compared to his experiences with humans. Rather than be mildly offended by such a question from someone he barely knew, Joe had explained how he had always been mostly dominant with humans but felt the opposite with furs, especially those based on predators from home. Somehow it just seemed right.

Prag's expression had hardened almost immediately upon hearing it and his nostrils flared. That look had caused an immediate lump in Joe's throat.

He was vigorously kissed, and the moment Prag felt he was responding and not resisting, a paw-like hand jumped into his shorts. Those were off in seconds, and soon a declawed finger, lubed with pre-cum, was working inside his anus.

He returned his thoughts to the present and smiled up at him, "I don't want to be like that, especially with you," he admitted, giving the fox's back a few scratches, "and it's something I'm getting better at. I am trying, and I'm sorry if I've seemed a little...unreachable."

Lauriff gave him a little kiss, brightening at how Joe had worded that. "Can I ask you something that I've been wondering, then?"

"Absolutely, and I promise a good answer."

Pulling out his elastic waistband, Lauriff gave him a glance at his sheath.

"How about that?" he asked.

"Yum!" Joe joked, giggling.

The fox chuckled with him, then turned serious again.

"Well, actually, I meant it. I have a friend I grew up with, a coyote, who works for a big tourist resort in sector five. Before getting mated last year he had been with quite a few humans. It's that big, fat head of your penis," he added with a sly grin, "he loved them."

Just for fun, his lighthearted nature getting the best of him, Lauriff yanked Joe's waistband up and looked. "Yes, there it is! Right inside that little bitty sheath on the end!"

Joe laughed and swatted his paw away. "Go on, silly."

"Anyway, he always got the impression that those humans liked the *idea* of being with him more than actually doing it. According to him, they never paid any attention to his sheath. They seemed to want to get him exposed as quickly as possible so it was out of the way. And then, it was the same way with his knot. They tried to just pretend it wasn't there."

"Remember that nice night we had together this past week?" he asked after a brief pause.

As opposed to the two quick, wild times in my lounge, Joe thought with an inward smile. "Every moment."

"Remember how you lightly licked and sucked my sheath for so long? You were so patient and attentive. It was very, very nice, and I thank you for that. I wasn't expecting it from a human. And you seemed unafraid of having your mouth on my knot, too. I've been given the impression that humans consider those things to be a little, well, kinky. How is it you don't?"

Joe thought that over for a few moments before reaching up to work his fingers into the long fur of his cheek. Contrary to his expectations, he had discovered that the fur on a Denworlder's sheath was so soft, and always kept so neatly trimmed short, that it almost couldn't be felt by mouth and tongue.

So it wasn't like having a mouth full of hair, even though the fur was just barely noticeable. But Lauriff wasn't asking about how it felt, rather why he was so willing. As for the canine knot, he knew it was very sensitive and liked paying attention to it.

"I don't know how well I can put it into words," he began, "but I'll try, since I seemed to get the message across to Tognn a while back. I suppose it begins with wanting to please. I know what furs like, and I want to do that for you. But I also get plenty of pleasure from doing it. I don't consider it kinky at all. It's just...fun to do. And the way it all looks is somehow...amazing. Beautiful. Elegant, even. All of you."

Lauriff seemed very relieved by his explanation. "Do you have the same feelings for similar four-legged animals on Earth?"

"No, not at all," Joe answered, "I'm attracted to people. Animal genitalia aren't quite the same, anyway. And even though some might have broadly similar attributes, it isn't the same thing to me."

"All of us, eh? And where are foxes on the list?"

"You've seen my half of the den, what do you think?"

"I think your half is overtaking Tognn's!"

After sharing a laugh the fox turned semi-serious again, "Thank you for being honest," he said, leaning in and nuzzling him.

"Of course," Joe said, then turned his head slightly and drew the long whiskers through his lips. He got the expected reaction and smiled inside.

"I'm starting to wish..." Lauriff began, then seemed to change his mind, though the pause was almost undetectable, "I'm starting to wish I had met you long ago."

"Me too."

The fox sighed and smiled at him.

"Tell me all about your life. I want to know more."

Joe did so, and they stayed in the park until it was time for dark meal. After dropping off the picnic items at Joe's den, they ate at Lauriff's and, as the fox had promised them, spent the evening with his kits.

Typical for their age, they were quite a handful. After first getting used to him over their first few meetings, they treated him like any other adult. Strange, though, how they smiled up at them when he and Lauriff hugged or did anything close.

His kitmate returned just as Joe was leaving for the night. Lauriff walked him to the outer door of his complex and gave him a tight hug, kissing deeply.

"I've got the kits all day tomorrow while their mother is out of town," he mentioned after his muzzle was free, "why don't you come over after morning meal, excuse me, morning coffee, and join us? I was planning on taking them to the south children's park. You can bring that photo album of your life you've been promising to show me."

"I'd love to," Joe agreed. He liked the way Lauriff kept inviting him along to spend time with his kids. They shared another hug and Joe headed home

* * * * *

"It's not only his eyes. He is just, I don't know, different."

"You can do better than that."

"He hardly does any VR, he loves nature and is always camping, he doesn't think of us the way some tourists do, and he really likes...well, he's just not like other humans I've heard about."

"Likes what?" the ram asked, not letting him go easily.

"You don't need to know every detail!" he cried, giggling.

"Sure we do."

Lauriff grinned a little wickedly and told them.

"Oh?" he father asked, ears perking.

"Like I said, he's not like other humans."

"What is it he does again?"

"He's a software and hardware engineer for a rock manufacturer."

"He must make really good money." the ram said, nodding.

Lauriff shrugged. "Yeah, I guess he does now that you mention it. You wouldn't know to meet him, though. His ego is very under control. He keeps mentioning this 'team' that he works with, but I had to find out from someone else

that he's actually the team's co-alpha with Seka. And other than buying a lot of our clothes and imported food, he doesn't spend much. He's very," he paused, searching for the right term, then found it and continued a little dreamily, "down to Earth, as he would say. We've spent so much time together and yet I never tire of him. I get lost in those eyes, and then snap out of it and realize he's looking at me the same way."

"Look at him. Elders, he's dazed."

"Completely."

A paw waved across the screen.

"What?"

"Nothing," his father said, grinning, "so, what is it like?"

"No more details!" he answered with a laugh, "you'll have to go find your own human!"

"Maybe we could share one," the ram said, giving the fox beside him a grin, "I hear they make nice pets."

They all laughed and Lauriff turned away to tell Jefer, who had just started bouncing on the lounge, to get in his play room. Then his ears perked toward the door as the bell sounded.

Arriving unannounced, he rang and was let in by Lauriff's kitmate. As he was taking off his shirt, one of the kits slammed into his legs, hugging him. He bent down and returned it, ruffling the fur on his head, before the boy took off like a bolt of lightning toward the play room. He watched in amusement as Jefer tackled a bear cub friend who was there.

He found the fox sitting in front of his terminal, talking to his parents. His ears folded a little self-consciously and he gestured for Joe to join him.

"Hello, brown eyes," the fox said with a smile, "I just finished telling my parents all about you."

"Uh-oh," Joe joked, earning an amused snort from the screen as he slid in beside him.

"Hello," the fox on the screen said, "it is a pleasure to meet you." Beside him sat a ram with large, curled horns, who greeted him also.

Joe recognized them both from the stills on Lauriff's wall. Visible behind them was a simple, though warmly decorated, working class den.

"Really? After he told you all about me?"

The four of them chuckled as Lauriff's parents shifted position. They had been side-by-side, but adjusted so the ram sat behind Lauriff's dad, arms wrapped warmly around him. Lauriff himself did the same to Joe, resting his muzzle on the human shoulder and giving his neck a nuzzle. It seemed a subtle show of who the alphas were was playing out.

"It's nice to meet you too. Lauriff has told me a little about you." Joe offered with a slightly nervous smile.

"Only the good things, I hope."

"That's why he said 'a little' about you." Lauriff joked.

They talked for a while, and chatting with his parents told him a lot about Lauriff. In general, foxes tended to avoid large social groups, preferring smaller gatherings instead. His parents had been mated for almost thirty years now, and being raised with a ram as one parent, especially a boisterous, outgoing example as this one seemed to be, was probably what made Lauriff an exception to that rule. His father was more subdued but no less friendly.

"Lauriff tells us you are quite a good cook." the elder fox mentioned.

Joe blushed a little, the situation making him feel shy for some reason. "Well, it's just a hobby, really."

"He is an excellent cook." Lauriff corrected.

As the conversation continued Joe couldn't help but feel a little nervous. He got the distinct impression that he was being scoped out. Some of the questions, though offered casually, were personal enough warrant careful answers. He wondered exactly what Lauriff had been saying to them before he arrived. Things became silent for a few moments when Lauriff's father made light mention of his eventual return to Earth.

Lauriff changed the subject quickly, but it seemed a point had been made. The conversation remained fun and friendly, however, and there was no sense of judgment coming from the screen.

"Well, then, Lauriff," his father began, "when are you going to bring those eyes here to cook for us?"

Lauriff laughed, "Truly not! He's doing all his cooking for me, and besides, you don't have a kitchen."

"Oh, I am?" Joe asked with a smile, turning his head a little toward the fox at his back.

"Truly." Lauriff asserted, the word emerging within a long, friendly growl.

"We'll just have to come there, I suppose." the ram mused.

"You know you are always welcome." Lauriff offered.

"We better be. You owe us after the hell you put us through for seventeen years."

"I was an angel!" Lauriff exclaimed just as Jefer and the bear cub went racing past, chased by Jefer's sister.

"See that?" his father said, pointing past them, "all day, every day. I'm glad to see you're getting a sniff of your own scent!"

"They are peaceful little cherubs." Lauriff lied. A chorus of loud squeals immediately followed the comment, making him wince, then a sharp, disciplinary yelp from his kitmate.

"Yes, I hear!" the ram exclaimed as they all laughed, "they seem every bit as easy!"

"We should be going now," Lauriff's dad said, waving a paw, "there's a meal den reservation waiting for us."

They said their good-byes and signed off. Joe snuggled back against the fox, who tightened the grip around his waist.

"Your father's mate looks like quite a specimen. Very strong features."

"I guess you could say that."

"There's a lot of him in you. But you've got your father's sense of reason."

"Oh?" the fox asked, working his muzzle under his hair to caress the back of his neck.

"Your sense of humor definitely comes from his mate, but you have your father's more reserved disposition. An odd mix, maybe, but it works. I like it."

"I hope so." Lauriff said, licking his cheek.

Joe asked him what they did.

"Father is a custodial equipment repair technician and dad is a travel den manager."

"They seem like nice people," he offered honestly, refreshed at their everyday people demeanor, "very straightforward and they seem to have a lot of common sense."

"Yes, they are now; but when I was young they were slave masters!"

Joe laughed. "Tell me all about it."

Progress at work had, over the following weeks, accelerated to a frenzied pace. Once most major hurdles had been overcome things started falling into place. The hardware was now working properly and the software seemed to almost sort out itself once the three hundred meter-long test line had begun running properly.

The company's own guards had been replaced in and around the R & D complex with military personnel, and a high-ranking officer stood just inside the door.

Joe looked down along its length again, mind racing. As his eyes traced along the mass of conduits, chambers, pipes, wiring, tracks and monitoring consoles, he said another silent prayer and hoped for the best.

"How long?" Seether asked for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"Four minutes," Joe answered.

All of them, including members from the actual production line division, were nervously gathered around the console area. Joe fidgeted while all around him tails whipped and wagged. The R & D alpha was there also, as were a few others he didn't recognize. All except, of course, the Chief Executive Alpha himself, whom everyone recognized.

They were on their fifth rock, the number required to confirm production standards. Tension had been steadily mounting all afternoon as rock after rock had been successfully created. Tognn was gripping his shoulders so hard he had to ask him to let go before the claws drew blood.

The sensor array finally came on line and they all jumped.

"Composition?" Seether snapped.

"Just a moment, it's coming through now," Paster answered, watching data scroll on his display. He grinned widely and his tail swished, "I do believe we have a rock!"

A loud cheer started, but was cut off with a quick gesture from Seether. "Let's not jump to conclusions.

Composition?"

"It is within two percent of ideal," Paster replied, controlling himself, "and production variance allows four."

"Molecular structure?"

"Absolutely stable," Joe answered happily now that his data was coming in also.

"Rate of decay?"

"Within one percent of ideal and production variance allows two-point-six."

The Chief Executive Alpha had a finger poised over a com panel button that would instantly send an encrypted packet to the patent offices on Denworld and Earth. Seether looked directly to him as he hesitated and took a deep breath, then asked the final question.

"Output?"

Joe read the display four times and then sighed, a mountain of weight falling from his shoulders.

"One hundred and nineteen percent of military grade!"

Everyone knew what that meant. With a five rocks of stable composition, molecular structure, and minimal decay, the only thing that mattered was how far above normal the output was. From the start they had been hoping for fifteen percent. They got nineteen on all five.

The Chief's finger hit the button, and then a chorus of cheers nearly brought the roof down.

When everyone quieted somewhat and stopped hugging, the smiling R & D alpha waved for everyone's attention.

"When you leave here, do not forget that you must consider these rocks 'military grade' product. No talking to anyone outside the project until the government can review its standards. Is that clear?"

Everyone nodded, many glancing at the obviously elated military officer standing nearby.

"We will have to test the larger molds also, don't forget, and there are still refinements we can make to the hardware. But not tonight! Tonight, the drinks are on me!"

* * * * *

He finished getting his room cleaned up and ready, making sure everything was just so. He couldn't wait for Lauriff to arrive for the night, and practically ran from his sleeping room when the door chimed. Toggn shook his head and grinned at the sight, disappearing into his own sleeping room.

The fox stripped off his shorts and shoes after sharing a tight hug, kissed him fondly, and murred as Joe grabbed his tail and started running it through his hand. He seemed a little troubled, though Joe had a surprise that might change that.

"If you don't mind, could I talk to you in private right now?"

"Sure, is something wrong? You look concerned," he acquiesced, leading him into his room.

The candle was the only light, and after setting his overnight bag by the bed, the fox sat Joe down on it with him.

"I have been thinking about you all day," Lauriff began, tail swishing behind him.

Joe adjusted to face him, grinning, "I've been going crazy waiting for you, but what's wrong?"

"I don't know how to begin," the fox said, looking downward for a moment, "but it has to do with you and I."

Joe waited, aware of how the bushy tail flicked nervously, and put a hand on his cheek. "Tell me."

Lauriff took a deep breath and gathered himself up. "I can't get you out of my mind, Joseph. All I have wanted for these past four months is to spend time with you. I never would have expected to meet a human like you, and to feel this way for him. You are so wonderful," he said, pausing to bury a paw in his hair.

"But," he continued, becoming a little choked up, "I don't think I can go on like this anymore. I brought things just in case, I suppose," he said, glancing at his bag, "but I don't know. Yours is the most irresistible soul I have ever met. The thought of you returning to Earth in a couple of weeks is killing me. It has been on my mind for a long time. I want to have you completely, more than anything else, but in two weeks I will *lose* you completely."

He paused to fix Joe with a deep, soulful gaze, tears welling in his eyes, "I love you, Joseph, and I don't want you to go. But you have to, so I want to...make this as easy as possible."

Joe's heart skipped a beat at his words. Lauriff too had been wanting to complete their union as only a canine could do, and needed to, but had held off because of Joe's imminent departure. To Joe, as well, it meant everything.

This was not a surprise, the human thought to himself, this was torture. Lauriff was looking down again and Joe gently lifted his snout with a finger. It was time to tell him.

"I'm staying."

Lauriff gave him a shocked expression, his tail freezing in place, "You...?" he stammered.

Joe took his face in his hands and nodded, Lauriff sitting in stunned silence as he went on.

"I've already filed all the required forms. I have an excellent position with the company waiting, Seether's recommendation, and the alpha's approval. A sidespace com packet is on it's way to Earth, including a power of attorney for my mother so she can clear up my affairs there. The immigration chips are on the way and I'll have them finished before my work visa expires. You see," he continued, gently rubbing the dazed fox's ears, "there's no way I can go back. I love it here too much. I love you too much. If Denworld was a reeking cesspool I'd still..."

Lauriff snapped out of it and interrupted him with a joyous hug, crying onto his shoulder. He returned it happily, tears of his own burning his eyes.

"I am so sorry, my love. I wanted to surprise you. I should have realized I was hurting you instead."

"No, don't be," Lauriff said quickly, and sniffed loudly, "my worries were my own doing. If I had brought this up sooner, as I should have, I would have saved myself the fuss."

"Well...surprise!"

They separated enough to share a loving kiss. Joe went to speak again, but was silenced by a finger on his lips.

"There is only one thing left to do, then," Lauriff said. He reached for his bag and removed an ornate box.

It was Joe's turn to be stunned as the fox opened it to reveal two matching engagement bands.

"Will you be my mate, share your soul with mine, and love me always?"

They wore the bands on their left wrists, to denote engagement, only long enough to enjoy the sight and feel of them. Soon they were on the table beside the bed and the two of them were making love, doing so in a way Joe had never experienced.

It was quiet and patient, attentive yet carefree, seeming to last an eternity. Their lovemaking was as much of the soul as the body. They moved in such a state of complete fulfillment that the orgasms they experienced were merely another element; and what came forth from those occasional, gasping peaks simply went wherever it happened to go, whether it was a mouth, an anus, or outside to mingle with them. There was no pressure to perform, no care of what happened or when.

Their intimacy was so profound that Joe almost completely missed it when Lauriff's knot nudged its way into him, the brief jab of pain already gone by the time he realized what had happened. As that final crescendo thumped inside him, the two of them locked tightly together in that ultimate bond, fang tips gently pricking his throat, he felt utterly complete.

When Joe walked out late the next morning, Tognn's ears flattened slightly, the wolf well used to the kind of mood Joe was usually in until he had his coffee. There was a thing or two he wanted to ask about Lauriff's behavior upon arriving last night, but it was best not to talk to him until he had downed at least half a mug.

He had been in his room but could smell that Lauriff was still here. The shower was running, so it was probably him. He caught sight of the human's distinct cheeriness and his ears perked again.

"Well, look who seems all happy and..."

He stopped short when he caught sight of the band on Joe's arm.

"Truly?" he gasped.

Joe smiled and held up his arm, admiring the band again. "Like I told you the other day, I'm staying."

EPILOGUE

Every mating had to have an alpha. As a matter of fact, it was noted on the mating license, making the alpha legally responsible for his mate. Now it would be demonstrated before everyone.

Once they had spoken their vows, which were vaguely similar to those of an Earth wedding, Joe lifted his chin. At the behest of the mating magistrate Lauriff stepped close. The fox smiled and then bared his fangs, pressing them to the human throat, working them gently against the tender skin for a moment, then slowly sliding them away.

Lauriff's domination of their relationship was a subtle one, but when Joe had read about this particular part of the ceremony, it seemed far from subtle. In practice, though, it somehow felt just right. It was an obvious, somewhat cursory symbol for a much deeper meaning. The look in Lauriff's eyes held nothing but affection, pride, and love.

Joe was so elated, so unbelievably happy to be here, right now, doing this, that he could barely contain himself.

They embraced, kissed, then raised their faces and howled together, holding each other tightly, pouring the joy of their souls into it. Mid-way through, all the canines in the audience joined them, along with a few others just for sport, and they made a deafening, glorious noise.

As the magistrate spread his arms to encompass the room, the only thing left for them to do was turn to those gathered and present their right arms. The mating bands, formerly on their left wrists, were now on the right. There they would remain for the rest of their lives.

Happily for Joe, his brother, sister, and parents had been able to come, as had an aunt and uncle. He shared a smile with all of them as he stepped down.

Tognn watched him and his new mate pass by on their way to the photographer, gave Joe a wink, then leaned closer to the skunk beside him. Moving his snout to the nearest short ear, he fingered the band on Brill's wrist.

"You are next."

THE END