

Integration

Part Nine

Lightning flashed and lit up a familiar room. A lone figure stood at the window, staring out into the endless, dark forest beyond. His eyes were wide, just one more mark of the fear etched across his features. It was coming. He knew. He knew because he was awake. Impossibly tall trees surrounded the lone house. One tiny, ruined, tattered house ripped from the suburb and lost in the unending storm with three terrified, hurt people and one sentinel to defend them. A single unprepared, incapable, outmatched, and useless soldier to challenge the unstoppable, destined to lose.

The gun in his hands rattled as he shook. It was always out there, and it liked to play when he was awake. The lightning flashed again. He flinched, but didn't look away. He saw it. Deep in the thick forest, there it was, a movement between trees. It always came, and it liked to tease.

A flash again, but this time he didn't jump away. He stared, and it stared right back. It always got what it wanted, and it was ponderous when it could be. He had to do something, had to move. He had to face it. It hated him when he challenged it.

His hands shook harder. One left the front of the weapon to clutch the other at the grip, stilling his shaking and cradling the gun. He couldn't bite back the pathetic whimper. It was just a dream. Just another chance to try to win. It wasn't real. He took a deep breath to try to calm himself, then turned around. His three charges were there, like always. The couple laid there in the blood-soaked bed. The man had fresh stitches. Awake or not, he always helped.

"I have to go now," he simply said, as if they could talk. They never spoke when he was awake. So without waiting for a response he headed for the door.

"Wait," someone uttered. The soldier jumped in surprise and whirled around to face the man. He was standing now, staring at him. "Don't face it. You've done so much already." The soldier swallowed warily as looked at the man. This one never mentioned it. He always said there was nothing out there. He looked towards the window. He had done so much but it wasn't enough. He had to do more. He was the only one that could do more. These people couldn't, so he had to. He had to face it. He always had to face it.

When he looked back at the man, he found that he had returned to his seat where he simply sat quietly, clutching the bandage at his neck. The medic watched for a few seconds to see if anything else would happen, but the man didn't even meet his gaze.

He quietly turned back around and walked through the door and down the long hallway. His boots started to make heavier thuds than they should have, he started to hear every little rustle of his equipment, and the rain outside seemed unhindered by the walls. His pace picked up and his head ducked low. It was just another odd shift in the dream.

That thought lasted all of a second before a whisper came down the hall and reached his ears, "Let her in." This stopped him in his tracks and he turned his head slightly, towards the room. He heard the latch of the door close, then his hearing suddenly returned to normal. He hesitated a moment, but carried onward. It was toying with him. Let her in? It always got in, anyway. What would it matter if he let it in?

He thumped down the stairs and stepped out the front door and down into the muddy ground with wet plods. Rain pattered down onto his helmet. A glance up showed that it was a dark, cloud covered sky. But there was light. He could see in the darkness. He looked down to his weapon and shifted it from its cradle to tuck the butt into his left shoulder, ready to raise and fire. He gently pulled the action back to reassure himself he had one in the chamber, as if it would do anything to calm his nerves.

The weapon settled firmly into his hands as he stared ahead into that forest. The trees looked like they went on forever into the sky as they shot up towards the clouds. Trunks as thick as buildings were ahead of him. He would be but one tiny thing in a forest of giants. He felt his hands shaking again, but he didn't halt them as he marched forward to meet his fate. He had to end this. He was going to fail, but at least it would end.

It was all impossibly massive. The gnarled roots of trees all around created impassable barriers. He felt like he was being herded. He probably was. It was always in control. If it wanted him to go somewhere, then it would. For many long minutes he walked until he was utterly lost. The route back seemed to vanish, and he couldn't see the house any longer. He half expected to see mist roll in, just to haunt him further.

He glanced down at the gun, the weapon that may as well be shooting spitballs. He sometimes wondered what would happen if he turned it on himself. Perhaps it would get him out of this place. But the one time he ever tried it, he just couldn't pull the trigger. Either it wouldn't let him, or he just couldn't do it himself. He doubted it could control him, so it must be him. He would never end himself like that. Not in reality and not in this waking nightmare.

He walked for a few more minutes, but it felt painfully longer than that. It was playing again. Letting him wallow in his own misery. It loved suffering. His knees started to shake as he moved. It knew what it was doing.

His mind wandered back to that whisper. 'Let her in.' Maybe he should go and do that. At least it would stop this miserable game. But why her? He knew she was no longer in this nightmare. She just wasn't among his terrors. It couldn't use her, as well as many others now. So, why her? It made no sense. She was the guardian, not the monster.

Before he could dwell on it any further he felt the ground tremble beneath his boots and rattle him to his core. He squeezed the weapon tightly as he brought it up to bear. It was here. It was time to face it again. He did a slow circle with the barrel of the weapon aimed high. It was all he could hope to do, aim high and hit something important. But could a dream even die? It was probably a useless endeavor.

He did several full circles and each one just made him more anxious. He couldn't see it; why couldn't he see it? He stopped his movements and just listened with his head canted to the side. He listened closely to what was around him. The patter of the rain, the groaning of the trees, and his breathing all reached his ears with total clarity. He took note that the thunder stopped, but the flashes still broke across the world.

"Let her in," whispered through the trees. He tensed up and a feeling rose up in his gut, an oddly comforting one. He heard movement behind him, so he spun around, gun up and was just about to squeeze the trigger before he caught himself.

There she was. The white wolf only a dozen meters away, standing many times taller than himself. Her

seemingly glowing blue eyes were locked onto him. They had a soft look to them, not like the malice that he normally saw in his nightmare. She slowly crouched down and he started to back away when she began to stretch a hand out towards him. He couldn't bring himself to shoot her. The gun instead slipped from his hands to land on the muddy ground with a squelch. No, no... this wasn't right! She wasn't the monster! She didn't belong! She shouldn't be here! As those fingers closed in he slipped in the mud with a yelp and landed on his rear. He raised his arms up in a vain attempt to shield himself, shut his eyes and turned away. A few seconds passed by, but he didn't feel any powerful digits wrap around his body. Nothing happened at all. He warily opened his eyes to look at her, but found nothing. Not even paw prints in the earth where she stood. It was like she was never there.

He sat there on the wet ground, staring at where she stood. He felt an odd mix of relief and regret. He was glad that her form wasn't going to tear him apart, but he hated to see her gone. At least she wasn't going to be tainted by that damnable beast. Or, not yet. It could still take her form. He scowled as he got to his feet, covered in mud, and collected his weapon. It could take her form if it wanted. It wasn't going to work. He wasn't going to fear her.

He was in the middle of wiping the gun down and checking the action when loud screams of terror erupted behind him. He whirled around to see the house only a hundred meters away with a clear path out of the forest. A massive, dark scaled figure of a lizard, several times taller than the building, stood in front of the ruined husk with a cruel, bloody grin across its face. Its red eyes seemed to twinkle with delight when horror crossed the soldier's face. It didn't even face him this time. It just went straight for the house. He failed them, like always. But worse, he abandoned them, too.

He trembled with a mix of rage and absolute terror as he went forward to meet it. It simply watched him as he approached, its tail thrashing about behind it. The soldier stopped when he was only a giant's step away. He looked up at the beast and one of his hands went up in a fist and he extended the middle digit with a hateful glare.

It chuckled from that, and the medic cut it off with a single gunshot up towards its head. It showed no reaction as it grinned again, then started to crouch down. He was about to fire off the rest of his shots, but its form started to flicker before him. It used to go through many shapes before it settled on one. But this time, it immediately took the form of a red vulpine. It lowered its head down, looking like it wanted a better look at him. Its muzzle nearly touched the ground as it turned its head to focus a single, massive yellow eye on him.

It looked curious, as if someone was looking over a small interesting item. Nothing more. The medic didn't dwell on that as he took his chance. He stepped forward and practically shoved the barrel of his gun into that eye and squeezed the trigger. He flinched when to his actual surprise, it exploded into a gory mess that rapidly started to spill down its face. But it didn't even react, not immediately. After a few moments of watching him with its ruined eye, it pulled its head away and reached down.

He finally started to fire the weapon for all its worth with thunderous booms and flashes that drowned out the storm with its false might. For all its show, it did nothing and that hand swooped down to his legs and snatched one of the limbs up between two fingers. With a loud cry the soldier was lifted into the air. His weapon slipped from his hands and dangled by the sling for a few short moments before slipping loose to fall dozens of feet below as the monstrous vulpine lifted him up to eye level. It switched between its ruined eye and good eye several times as it observed the thrashing, dangling man.

The soldier's hand went for his handgun and he pulled it from its holster, only to fumble with it and

watch it fall from his hands. He let out a frustrated yell and kicked with his free leg at a claw tipped finger that came in to poke at him. He didn't beg, cry, weep... he was done for. It was just a dream, anyway. Instead, he just yelled obscenities at the beast. He just wanted to get in his defiant spew before it decided what to do to him. He still felt terrified, though. He knew it wasn't real, but it still tore at his mind and heart. He had to get out of here.

After a few more curious prods the testing hand grabbed at his kicking leg with a couple of fingers. The medic's eyes widened when he realized he found himself in a dreadfully familiar position. He watched as the vulpine gave him a few experimental tugs, then started to pull. Just a dream. It was just a dream. He was going to be fine. Just a dream. It was just a dream! It wasn't real! Please wake up!

A terrified cry carried through the barracks and Dylan felt some hands on him and multiple presences around him. He thrashed and felt one of his own hands wrap around a throat and his other ball into a fist. Before he could drive it into someone's undeserving face, he realized where he was. He was awake. He was in the barracks. He was safe. He was about to punch a commando, he realized, as he had his hand on Russell's neck.

The man didn't even seem perturbed by this as he asked, "You alright, son?"

It was then that Dylan finally realized he was breathing heavily, covered in sweat, he had obviously been crying. His hands relaxed as he wiped at his face and nodded. "Uh huh... j-just a bad dream."

"One crazy dream," said a German soldier, Corporal Dieter Bauer, he managed to recall in his muddled mind, "Your screaming woke the barracks."

The medic tried to bite back a sob as he closed his eyes and tried to stop some of his tears. "Y-yeah. Sorry..."

Russell shook his head sadly and looked up at Cody on the other side of the cot. "Let's leave him be. Shaw, could you stay with him for a tad?"

The Canadian nodded and got down on his knees next to Dylan's cot as the rest of the soldiers left to crawl back into their beds. He held up one of his hands and Dylan clasped his hand into it and squeezed tightly. "It's alright, man," the corporal said to him, "It was just a dream... you're fine."

Thankfully, he didn't go asking about the dream. He just kept muttering out comforting reassurances as the medic laid there, calming down. He was glad Cody was here. But he knew he wanted someone else right now. He wanted his guardian.

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Kira sat on a bench in the washroom as she ran a brush through her leg fur, still damp from her morning shower. She had slipped in her Yutri's second audio bud into an ear while the device itself sat in the other, playing some slow music. She quietly sang along with it as she worked.

She checked the bristles on the brush as she got lower to her paws, and smiled to herself at the lack of fur collected in them. There were only a couple of loose white strands missed during her wash. As she got back to brushing down to her feet she recalled when one of humans asked her how there wasn't fur all over the base. Apparently he wasn't very knowledgeable in basic fur care. That was to be expected,

she supposed.

Of course, when it came to fur as thick and well kept as hers, basic wasn't enough for her standards. She took it as a compliment from the little soldier. If she didn't take good care of her fur she probably would bury Dylan in shedding. She giggled softly to herself as she imagined that.

Thankfully she wouldn't let that happen. With all of her conditioners, shampoos, and brushing, she hardly shed anything outside of her regular fur maintenance, as should any hygienic furred one. She had her process down to a regimented science. She was quick but thorough, often finishing before many that went for lesser fur care.

However, as quick as she, and even if she went for the bare minimum, she'd never be able to beat one of those Arkatians. Their scales were so easy to maintain that it was worth envy. Yirshan had already left to go see the lieutenant regarding this evening while the Lupari was still getting shampoo rubbed into her fur. Now she came back while she was finishing up.

The Arkatian sat down next to her on the bench with a big grin on her muzzle. "So, we're going out this evening."

Kira switched to her other paw and glanced up at the other sergeant. "Really? With the humans?"

"Those that want to go, yeah. And I got Cody for the day."

Kira wrapped up her brushing, put the brush into her grooming bag, and zipped it closed. She smiled toothily at her friend and paused her music. "That's great!" Her grin faltered for a moment. "Er, does Trikil know?"

One of the dragoness's ears flicked. "I sent a message to his and Cody's Yutri. Trikil didn't respond, though. Cody seemed excited and wants to come with us."

"I don't think Dylan will want to come," Kira said with a tinge of disappointment. "But hopefully I'm wrong."

"We'll see," Yirshan said and stood up from the bench. "You're done, right? Let's go find out. I want to whisk Cody away. Like, now."

The Lupari grabbed her bag and stood up with her friend and both strode back out into their platoon's quarters. Kira paused to put her grooming kit into her footlocker while the dragoness went straight for the transfer pad, where a couple of guardians were already collecting their charges.

When she got there herself she was surprised to find Trikil there, holding Cody with Yirshan frowning at him. "What are you doing?" the Arkatian sergeant asked the Falashai.

"I'm taking my human," he said with a shrug.

Yirshan growled softly. "Your charge. He's not 'your' human." His ears wilted a small amount as she went on. "Didn't you get my message?" she asked him with a cocked head, then looked down into his hand at the little human. "I know you did. Why did you get into his hand?"

Cody sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. “Er, he told me to.”

Yirshan frowned and glanced up at Trikil with a mildly upset look. “You don’t have to follow his orders like that, you know. Not for stuff like this.” She then nodded at the transfer pad and looked Trikil dead in the eyes. She had a bit of a height advantage over him, she knew she could intimidate him. “Put my charge back onto the transfer pad, corporal.”

Trikil’s ears folded slightly. “Oh come on! Nobody asked me about giving him up for the day. Don’t I get a say?”

“No, you don’t. It’s a random cycle. I got Dapeng yesterday and Nahni was fine with that. Why can’t you?” From what Kira understood of Yirshan’s newly christened floating guardian status, her training continued as usual, but she was randomly assigned a different charge each day. Ideally, it would mimic an unexpected change in guardians, something that could easily happen in a unit on a combat deployment. The only human exempt from this was Dylan, as he didn’t react very well to being close to anyone but Kira. How long that would last before he’d be required to go through with it anyway was actually up to Duntay.

“I had plans with him today. We were going to do something in the sims.”

“Nahni did too. Talk to Dahashi, he’ll reschedule for you.”

The vulpine growled softly. “Fine.” He then lowered his hand down for Cody to hop off. The human scrambled off with what looked like a little too much hesitation, then when Yirshan lowered her own hand his hesitation was even worse, taking a few seconds for him to finally decide to climb on after casting a wary look at his normal guardian.

Yirshan shallowly bowed her head as she lifted her hand and tucked it to her stomach. “You’re welcome to join us this evening. You don’t have to be separate from him.”

The vulpine shrugged again. “Nah. The one you’re going to serves alcohol too late for me.” He looked down at Cody. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.” Without even waiting for a response from the human he turned around and padded off to leave the barracks.

The two guardians shared a look. “We can’t report him for that, right?” Yirshan asked.

“No, not unless we see it more,” Kira responded and looked down at Cody. “Does he normally ‘tell’ you to do things?”

The little corporal looked up at her and shook his head. “No...” He then looked down at the dragoness’s scaly palm. “Not really.”

“Not really?” Yirshan asked curiously. Her thumb moved to lightly stroke him. Curiously, the man seemed uncertain how to respond to the touch, as if he’d never had it done to him before. However, it only took him a few seconds to figure out he enjoyed it as he leaned into it. “So he’s done it before?”

“I didn’t say that,” the human said back defensively.

“Right...” Yirshan decided to stop blocking the transfer pad and stepped away from it. “I’ll see you this

evening,” she said to Kira and headed out.

Kira dipped her head slightly to her then turned to the transfer pad to find Dylan already standing there, waiting. She immediately set her hand down for him, and he just about jumped into it after they exchanged their quick hellos. She smiled slightly from that and lifted her hand away to head out of the barracks herself. They had another training session at the hive to do, so that was her destination. Normally she would go to the mess for breakfast, but when she woke up she found a message on her Yutri from Dylan, written out in broken Common, asking if they could avoid the mess this morning. She found it odd that he said ‘we’ and not just him, but she was willing to oblige. So a quick military ration was her meal for the morning.

“That guy’s odd,” Dylan commented after settling in for the ride.

“Trikil?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think of him?” she asked, slightly worried for Cody. There was certainly something unusual about him, but his charge didn’t seem or even smell like he was frightened.

“Seems kind of controlling. He called Cody ‘his human’, and did you see how Cody reacted to the petting? He looked like he’s never been petted before. I was under the impression that most of you couldn’t resist the petting.”

As if to confirm his point, Kira’s thumb shifted towards him to do exactly that. But rather than let her get her fill then push it away, he actually grabbed the digit and adjusted it. Kira had to bite back a little adoring whine from seeing that. “That depends person to person, of course. But a Lupari like Lieutenant Tahsah or I, we’re almost guaranteed to want to pet.”

“Right. I remember that from the class on your species. Even the males are affectionate.”

Kira chuckled. “Yes. So if you ever manage to end up with Sior...” She stopped herself and rapidly changed the subject. She was certain her charge would be fine with that line of conversation, but she didn’t want to make him uncomfortable thinking about it. “Ralai can be rather affectionate. Do you think Ufurin pets Mitchell?”

“Uh...” He paused, thinking about that. “Hm... I have a hard time imagining it. I actually think Sam would be the bigger problem. He’d probably light his fur on fire if he tried.”

The Lupari laughed at the mental image of Mitchell lighting the nuzzling major’s face fur aflame with one of his smoking drugs. “Maybe we should ask them.”

“Let’s not,” he said flatly.

“Yeah... “ She couldn’t help but grin at the image of the big major petting the little sergeant, minus the fire. “Anyway, you’re right, something’s matted about him. I imagine Yir is going to talk to Cody about it in private.”

“Wait, matted? What?” he asked curiously, taking a moment to look up at her.

“Sorry, slang. Hum...” she thought for a moment on how best to explain it. “Ah, it just means odd, really. Any self-respecting Lupari would never let their fur get matted, and really no other furred race would either. So if I ran into one, I may think they’re a little weird.”

“So matted equals crazy. Got it.” She opened her mouth to say it didn’t mean that, but snapped it closed when she realized that grin meant he was just playing with her. Seeing that she wasn’t going to rebut him, he went back to the topic at hand. “Not sure Yirshan will learn anything. I’ve talked to Cody myself. He insists everything is fine.”

“Perhaps it is,” Kira said with a shrug and her thumb pulled back from its petting.

Dylan was slow to respond, and when he did he quietly said, “Expect the worst.”

Kira looked down at him curiously. That seemed awfully off for him to say. At least around her. Her nostrils flared slightly. Anxiety. She swore he seemed a bit anxious. “Are you alright?”

She felt him scoot over in her palm to touch her thumb, running his hand through the fur. “I’m alright. Just thinking about stuff.”

That sounded like a one fanged truth, but she decided to let him be for now. If she knew her charge, he was probably still shaken up from a bad nightmare. This would probably explain why he didn’t want to go to the mess, either. So naturally, it wasn’t a good time to ask him about going out to the city this evening.

Thankfully, she was already nearing the hive building, so the silence with him petting her thumb fur didn’t last long. Dahashi didn’t meet them this time, so it was just a quick matter of dropping her charge off and heading straight for her assigned pod. She allowed her worry for Dylan to relent and put herself in the mindset for instructing him in all the wonderful ways to hurt people as the pod closed and she entered the simulated world.

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Their training ground was the huge arena once more, which was fine with Kira. The space was open, the sun shown in, breezes swooped down into the structure, and she liked the sand under her paws. It was a good place to train. On top of that, Dylan still seemed to love the place. Just like yesterday he gawked at it when they loaded in.

But she didn’t let him gawk for long as she immediately started a small review of yesterday’s lesson. She was very happy to see most of it stuck very well. It was clear that he would make a great student; it was really the opposite of what he claimed his experiences with formal schooling were like. His kicks were sloppy, though, so she had to spend time correcting his form. She didn’t expect perfection, but she did expect him to get the movements right.

Once she felt he had a solid handle on all the motions, she started a more aggressive method of half-sparring with him, then assessing and correcting him. This went on for several hours, and by the end of the lesson, they were almost genuinely fighting, although any respectable martial artist would see just how much Kira was holding back and how inexperienced Dylan was.

Unlike some students, he didn't take his constant failure to get around her defenses as a big problem worthy of getting frustrated. His spirits actually seemed to improve. He was having fun with this. She really couldn't ask for a better student.

When it came to calling it to an end, the wolfess finished it off with a quick demonstration of her skills, just like before. She did train his defenses some, but obviously she had to go easy on him to build up his skills. This time she didn't. When he tried a palm strike after a series of attacks, she deflected the blow to the side, giving her an opening to bring her leg up towards his head in an impressive show of flexibility. Then her lower leg bent forward, wedging his head between her calf and thigh, and with a hard shove she slammed him down sideways into the sand with a heavy thud. She followed it up by immediately getting down on top of him, grabbing his arm, and twisting it around to the point of almost dislocating it.

She giggled when he groaned out his strained surrender, and she promptly released his limb. She then bent down and nosed at his neck and gave it a lick once more.

"Is this going to be a thing now?" he asked her as he turned his head slightly to look at her with her muzzle in his neck.

Her ear flicked and her tail wagged behind her as she pulled away. "What thing?" she asked innocently.

"The whole nosing and licking the neck after you kick my ass thing."

"Yes."

"Ah."

"Do you want me to stop?"

He shook his head, still in the sand under her weight. Recognizing this, she slid off of him and sat down onto the ground next to him as he picked himself up. "Nah... it's kinda nice," he said as he dusted himself and seated himself by her side. "It's just nosing and licking people isn't... quite a thing for humans."

She flicked an ear. "We Lupari are rather forward with our affections."

"Is that what you call them? Affections?" He grinned at her.

She looked slightly taken aback. "What did you think they were?"

"Gloating, maybe?"

She scoffed. "Hah, no. I don't gloat. I like you too much for that, anyway."

"Aw... I like you too." It was clear in his voice that it was just a little tease, but it still set her tail wagging.

She growled playfully at him as she turned and lunged at him, tackling him back down to the ground

onto his back, causing him to yelp in surprise. Her nose nearly touched his as she stared down her muzzle at him. “Do you now? Well then. Do you know what that means?”

He looked mildly confused. “What?”

“More affections,” she said sweetly. Before he could say anything, her tongue slipped out and started to lap at his face with gusto. Her tail was almost a blur as he sputtered in surprise.

He tried to turn his face away from her licks, but he couldn’t escape as she followed and just kept licking. “Ack!” he cried when she wouldn’t stop. “You’re like my old dog!”

She paused for a moment, about to ask him about his dog, but he interrupted her by using his unpinned arms to reach up and roll her off of him and himself on top of her, effectively swapping places. She grinned up at his slobber-covered face as he tried his damndest to look upset. But she knew he was having fun. “Could you tell me about your dog?”

He didn’t seem to know what to do with her now that he was on top, so instead of just sitting there he slid off of her, allowing her to sit up again, going back to sitting beside each other. “His name was Meatwad.”

“Meatwad?” She chuckled softly, which got a silly grin out of him.

“Yep, Meatwad.”

“You’re cruel, you know that?”

“The worst,” he agreed, chuckling himself. “He was eight years old, but still ran around and acted like a puppy, getting fired up over absolutely nothing. He liked to climb into bed with folks and sort of... cuddle them. Or maybe he just liked beds, he tended to take up the whole thing by sleeping in the middle. The bastard. He was a licker. He’d lick and eat anything. It was pretty gross. I won’t get into details.” Kira listened to him ramble on about his pet, listening closely but not interrupting. He was lost in his reminiscing. “He sucked at fetch, though. He’d got fetch the ball, then bring it back and refuse to give it to you. He loved tug of war the most, so balls were always a fight to get out of his mouth. I’m pretty sure that was related to his love of using his mouth for everything.” He glanced aside at her. “Your breath is a lot better than his, by the way.”

“Aw... thanks!” Her eyes widened slightly and she cocked her head. “Er, wait... I don’t think the sims simulate mouth smell very well.”

“I’ve been close enough to your muzzle at normal size. It’s like... minty. Alien minty because I have nothing better to say.”

“Is mint good?”

“They don’t say ‘minty fresh’ for no reason.”

She smiled toothily at him. “I freshen my mouth with uliah. It feels and smells great.”

“Sounds like mint,” he said with a shrug. “And it does smell great, at least in your mouth.” Her tail

thrashed behind her a few times. It was good to hear he liked it and she didn't overwhelm his tiny little nose with uliah overload. "So anyway. Meatwad. He had stinky breath. We'd try to clean it out but nooo... he'd go find something terrible and ruin it all over again. He'd eat ANYTHING. Normal for dogs, I suppose. But I swear there was something wrong with him. Everything must have tasted wonderful, from garbage to broccoli. Broccoli! I never heard of a dog that liked broccoli!" He paused and shook his head, an amused smile on his face.

"Maybe he liked chicken." Kira could barely hold back a giggle as she said that with the straightest face possible.

His smile widened as he looked up at her. "Well, everything does taste like chicken."

Now she let out a small laugh as she flicked her ear. "Everything, even you!" His smile faltered and he looked down at the ground as it slowly vanished. Kira's own faded and she placed a hand on his shoulder as she leaned over and nuzzled his headfur. "I'm sorry, that was wrong of me to say."

He shook his head. "No, no, it's fine. I know it was just a joke. Still, just got me thinking."

"Oh." Her ears folded slightly. Bad memories, then. She mentally scorned herself. What a way to ruin a pleasant moment.

To her surprise, he actually went on. "Remember that nightmare I mentioned to Duntay?" She flicked an ear. "Well, got me thinking about that. I had it last night. A... pretty lucid one. They're the worst. They get... really, really twisted around compared to the regular ones. But I stay in them. I don't want to wake up."

She canted her head confusedly at that. "Why not?"

"I have to beat it. I can't do that by running away," he said back with a slight quiver in his voice. Surprisingly, he smiled softly at her. "You were in this one." She opened her mouth to say something, but caught herself and it snapped closed. It was no time for her to talk. Let the human speak. "Knowing my usual dreams, I thought you were there to do something horrible. I didn't want that. I could never really control that nightmare but... I didn't want you there. You don't belong there. You're not the monster. So... you vanished. And after that... I kinda regretted it."

When he didn't elaborate, she posed the question. "Why?"

"I don't know," was all he said back with a shake of his head.

"Maybe... you thought you made a mistake?"

He frowned. "I don't want you to be the monster."

"Was I being a monster for however long I was there?"

He looked like he wasn't sure what to say as he thought about it. He was quiet for a few moments before saying, "Uh, well, you were reaching for me. That never works out well in that nightmare."

So this wasn't going anywhere good. She decided it was best to redirect the matter. "Heh, well, maybe I

just wanted to pet you. Do you have any idea how hard it is to resist that?" She winked at him. "Let's change the subject then. I apologize for probing."

He ignored the last part as he said slowly. "Wait... maybe? Maybe you were. The monster it... it never even pays me mind until it gets the other people." They were both quiet as he dwelled on that, then shrugged. "That dream was a big mess. A lot of things were different. It was probably just a new way to mess with me. Right, yeah, change the subject."

She looked him over for a few moments. She did want to ask him about going out with her and some others. It would have been a perfect moment to ask him before that damnable nightmare came up. However... he didn't seem to be really distraught. He looked perfectly eager to continue chatting about mundane things with her. She decided to go for it. "Yes, different subject. So you know Torsiah, right? The city outside Kiallish Field?"

"Isn't the base technically outside Torsiah?" He asked with a grin.

She nudged him with an elbow. "Don't be a tailtugger."

"But I'm not tugging your tail..." He leaned back a bit and looked at the furry appendage.

She growled softly at him with a tooth filled grin. "Are you asking for a pounce?"

"I'll be good."

"Aw..." She whined, but continued, "So the approved pubs list came in. That means we can bring our charges to them. But, humans or not a bunch of us from the platoon are going out this evening and we're seeing if any of you little ones would like to come. I know Fahne is bringing Russell, Cody is probably going to come, and I'm certain some of the other guardians will bring their charges out, too. Would you like to come with me?"

"You're asking me if I want to go to a crowded place full of giants I don't know?" he asked with a cocked brow.

Her ears wilted slightly as she flicked one. "Yes..."

She saw a mix of worry and excitement cross his face, just as she expected. They had only known each other for a couple of weeks, but she knew him quite well already. The idea of so many giants made him anxious, but there was still that eagerness to see new alien things. She sorely hoped it would be able to override his anxiety. "Alright, sure." Her ears shot back up and her tail got to wagging. "Seeing what civilian life is like for aliens would be awesome."

She knew it! She felt some pride at knowing her friend well enough to be able to predict that, but she mostly just felt happy that he would come along. "Great! Let's call this a session, then, and get out of here? We have plans to make."

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Dylan sat on the edge of his bunk, gazing down at his Yutri. He was silently mouthing out Common from his learning program, trying to brush up on his skills before the evening out. He wanted to give

reading the surely massive amount of things one could find in a city. Signs, advertisements, directions, and maybe even the menu if this place they were going to could serve them anything.

He had a knot in his stomach. Anxiety over a public place full of giants was downright terrifying to think about. But he figured he could take it. Seeing an alien city and visiting an alien club was just way too exciting to allow his frayed nerves to mess this up for him. Besides, he'd have Kira and the other guardians keeping an eye out. Yirshan and Fahne, as Arkatians, and a couple of Neishor were among the largest in the unit. So their presences could hopefully make things a little better as well. Although it was the Neishor homeworld, Sartah, so there were likely to be many of the big equines among the civilians, as well.

He came to a new word, some bonus section on the side about slang. "Taitlugger..." he said aloud. He read the little section on it, and suddenly had an amused look cross his face. She called him a smartass! He scoffed in amusement and was continuing on when the door to the quarters slid open. He looked up to see Cody striding in. The man appeared terribly pleased with himself with a big dumb grin on his face. It turned out to be rather contagious as the medic smiled and nodded at him.

Seeing the other soldier's attention on him, the corporal approached him and simply stated, "Yirshan's great."

Dylan put his Yutri to sleep and slipped it into a pocket. "Yeah? What'd you guys do?"

Cody sat down on the adjacent bed. "Sim stuff. I told her that was Trikil's plan and she asked if that's what I wanted to do. Pretty cool that she let me decide. So, we went to the hive and we played a racing game!"

"Racing? What do aliens race?"

"Hover car... things! I crashed immediately. So we went back to basics. Switched to like... a living room or something. Played with controllers on a couch."

"A video game in a video game. How redundant."

Cody laughed and nodded. "After a bit of that, it got kinda boring. I asked to see if I could ride shotgun in the simulated version. We did. She's a really good driver. After that she asked if we could do a real size session, like what I did with Trikil yesterday." His smile seemed to get impossibly wider and Dylan had to motion for him to go on as he seemed caught up in thought. "Right, uh, well chose some crazy big meadow for the room. Then we just talked with me in her lap, petting me and stuff. When our time was almost up she held me up and asked if she could nuzzle. That was pretty nice."

Dylan looked at him with some suspicion. He was acting as if a nice chat in the hand was brand new to him. "What did Trikil do in his session?"

His mood soured slightly as he responded, "He connected with a few friends of his back home and sat me on some table. Then they just kinda... talked about me." The medic let out a small breath of relief. He was imagining some not so gentle handling. It was still odd that the pair didn't seem to be getting to know each other like the rest of the guardians and charges. Dylan was about to ask what they talked about when Cody hastily moved the conversation onward. "She also asked if I wanted to go into Torsiah with her and others. I said yes to that." He hesitated for a moment, controlling his excitement

before asking, “Did Kira ask if you wanted to come too?”

Dylan smirked. Cody hesitated to ask the head case about something everyone was expecting him to refuse to want to do. “She did, and I’m going.”

A surprised look crossed the other man’s face only to quickly be replaced by excitement. “Good for you, man. It’s gonna be great.”

“Did I hear that right?” Someone laying on a nearby bunk said. Both soldiers looked over to see one of the German soldiers sitting up, looking at them. Private Erik Kuster was grinning at them. “You’re coming out to... to... ah...”

“The Stripeless Kaishor,” said the other German next to him, Corporal Stefan Beich, who put down his book to join his fellow in basking in the revelation that the barracks trauma patient was doing something crazy.

“Yes. That.” Erik nodded then said more loudly, probably for the rest of the men to hear. “That’s great news! Glad you’re coming, Dylan, the more the merrier!”

The resulting revelation to the rest of the human troops had Dylan grinning and nodding at the plethora of encouragement, and a few pats on the back. He felt a bit like an idiot as he was basically being congratulated for showing his face in public. Which sounded silly. However, with each passing moment he felt more and more relieved. It was good they didn’t hold it against him.

The door to the barracks slid open once more, admitting a few more of the charges followed by Sergeant Samuel Mitchell and the officer that’s been assisting in the language classes, Lieutenant Andrew Fletcher. The lot of them, short of the commandos that matched the other officer’s rank, stood up and offered the across the chest salute, immediately followed by a more traditional human salute.

He returned the gesture as he and the sergeant came to a stop at the end of the rows of cots. As the men settled back down he asked, grinning, “Did we interrupt something?”

“Nothing at all,” said the French commando, Lieutenant Matthieu Lafond. “We are simply pleased that our medic has decided to join us this evening.”

That got an impressed look out of Samuel and an approving nod from Fletcher, who went on to say, “Good to hear. Time out in public with your guardians is a great way to build trust. It’s also damn fun. Is there anyone that won’t be going?” He waited for a response from the nineteen of them present, but got nothing. Dylan idly wondered if any would have stayed behind if he chose not to go. “Excellent!” he exclaimed happily after a few quiet moments. “Now, let’s discuss what all we’ll be doing tonight.”

“I love field trips!” hollered a Marine, Private Isidoro Mendez, Dylan recalled after a glance back at him. A few chuckles swept over the quarters as the men gathered round to discuss their first adventure into UTO civilian life.

There were a couple of good reasons the ‘Stripeless Kaishor’ was so far the only pub in the whole city approved by the military for guardians to bring their mechless humans to. For one thing, the owner actually went out of his way to be able to serve humans. The establishment also had a reputation for having few fights and a low level of aggression among its customers; it helped that it didn’t start

selling alcohol until shortly after dark. It wasn't exactly unique, but this, coupled with its steps taken to serve humans, meant it was easily at the top of the list for whoever was in charge of approving these kinds of outings. They'd be there mainly during the dry period, but they were allowed to stay some time after the taps opened, too.

Dylan felt a bit better, knowing these details; The lieutenant surely knew what he was doing. Giants were unnerving enough. Drunk, unknown giants were terrifying to think about. After their little briefing on 'Operation: Field Trip' as it became known, it was time to head out. They filed out of their quarters to find their guardians and much of second platoon waiting for them.

Once the medic made it into Kira's hand, the wolfess backed off to the side to wait for the rest. Dylan rested his back against her stomach and asked, "What are the others waiting for? They don't have charges."

"They hoped you would be more comfortable if more of us made up the crowd."

He was silent for a few moments as he wrapped his head around that. All he could muster up to say was a questioning, "Really?"

"Yep!" she chirped, smiling down at him. "They want you to have a good time, so they're coming along to make sure it happens."

Yet again he was slow to respond. He was overwhelmed with astonishment at just how so many were trying to make this whole thing easier for him. He already felt good about it after the encouragement from his fellow humans. His platoonmates taking the extra step just left him feeling immensely grateful. He couldn't say he knew them like he did Kira, but they didn't leave him anxious like giants he didn't know. "I don't know what to say."

Her thumb moved inward, closer to him, and he began to pet at her fur. "You don't need to say anything." He smiled to himself and tugged at her thumb, bringing it in closer and allowing her to stroke him. He could almost feel her smiling hugely down at him.

He watched the rest of the pairs get together. He quickly noted a lack of Major Mahjal, Mitchell's guardian. The sergeant's mech was turned towards the catwalk, its chest plate open just over the railing. The machine suddenly pulled away from it without closing its front until after he turned towards them. Dylan made eye contact with the man in his neural rigging as the chest plate rapidly closed up.

He knew for a fact Mitchell would be joining them. He didn't know it would just be in his mech. The autonomy the machine gave him was fantastic. As much as he enjoyed Kira's presence, he couldn't wait to be able to have that. It's like learning to drive and getting your own car all over again, just quicker! All it would take was getting his neural implant, some calibration and test runs, and he could have his own second, giant body. Then training with manual controls and without some functions, like the optics. Manual piloting with the chest open as your only sightline was said to be very tricky, a drawback to having a humanoid mech.

The only problem he had with the whole thing was getting that implant. When they were briefed on their future in the program, the human doctors weren't yet qualified to administer the implants. He blanched at the idea of a giant doctor poking him in the neck with a needle or whatever the process was like. If people his size weren't ready for it by the time he got there he'd probably just flat out refuse. He

leaned back into Kira's stomach at the thought and rapidly moved onto thinking about something else.

He caught sight of Andrew with his guardian, Lieutenant Anacha Tahsah. The grey wolfess had the man raised up to her muzzle, where she was affectionately nuzzling him. He was reminded of what Kira said when they thought he was being shipped off to that hospital. He looked up at her to see she was looking over at the pair, seemingly envious.

He looked back down at her black padded palm, feeling mildly upset with himself. Perhaps if he was more like Cody's overly open and excited self he'd be more receptive to her affections. She touched her nose to his chest once before. He was too caught up in his thoughts to really think about it, but when he looked back on it he shuddered at the fact he was so close to her mouth. Instincts were a tough habit to break.

"Is something wrong?" Kira's voice filtered down to him, making him look back up to her once more.

She had a gentle, if a little worried, look on her face. He smiled at her. "I'm fine. Just thinking about some things." Sometimes he felt like she was too in tune with his feelings. That nose of hers, constantly on the alert for changes in his moods, seemed to pick up nearly everything. If something was off, she nearly always said something to him. Then there was him. He should have said something when he noticed her envious look. He wanted to believe he had to play catch up with that Lupari openness he learned about, but he knew he simply didn't feel like he could handle her desires for this relationship.

He looked back down and forward again, hiding his rolling eyes from her. He could be quite the selfish bastard. He owed her one nuzzling or a few, but that just wasn't going to happen. Not now, anyway. At least she understood that.

Thankfully, his train of thought on his inadequacy as a charge when faced with such a wonderful guardian and platoon mates was interrupted as Yirshan approached them with Cody in hand, followed by Fahne with Russell. At least the two dragonesses weren't nuzzling them. He wouldn't know what to think if Yirshan already got to showing public affection on the first day with her temporary charge.

"So," started Yirshan grinning hugely, "Looking at this turnout it looks like we'll be annexing the whole pub."

Fahne chuckled and fluttered a wing. "Is this the part where I make plans for a defensive perimeter?"

Her attention was drawn to Cody when he 'awed' in protest. "But that would keep the civilians out. I'd like to see some."

"That was a joke," she said back to him, winking.

"Oh," he said flatly and squeezed himself against Yirshan's stomach, which coaxed a giggle from the red dragoness and her finger coming in for a petting.

"Hah!" A laugh came from Russell as he looked at Cody meeting the dragoness's finger, and beyond that at the two instructing officers still in an affectionate bout. They had to be trying to set an example at this point. "Heads would roll in a human military if any of that happened."

That got the attention of the two sergeants, who looked at the dragoness and Englishman curiously.

Kira was the first to ask, “Do you two not do anything like that?” She nodded to Yirshan still petting Cody.

“No,” answered the guardian officer. “I don’t understand the appeal. It feels very odd doing that to a person you call friend and a soldier.”

Russell shrugged. “I don’t much like being treated like a pet myself.”

That earned a canine whine from Kira and Dylan felt her eyes on him, and her thumb that was resting next to him pulled away. When he met her gaze she asked him, “Do I make you feel like a pet?”

“Uh...” he said and started to fish for an answer. That was his reasoning when he first asked her to tone down the petting. “Not really. I find it reassuring and nice.” She stared at him a for a few moments, assessing his honesty, before deciding she was satisfied and her thumb placed itself next to him once more.

Yirshan, however, seemed more stricken by the comment as she said, “If they like it and the guardian likes it, then I see no problem.”

The golden dragoness held up her free hand and she bowed her head. “I didn’t mean offense. It’s simply how I feel.”

The other Arkatian huffed and got right back to petting Cody. “Besides. They’re adorable like small pets! If you don’t like to, then you clearly are not a sisi person.”

“What?!” cried Fahne with a bemused smirk on her muzzle. “I’ll have you know I still have my sisi from my hatchday!”

Both dragonesses fell into a silly argument over a traditional Arkatian pet that somehow managed to carry on all the way to the bus waiting outside. Then the whole ride to the city became a big group discussion on the wonders of domesticated animals. Dylan only paid it half a mind, as he was more interested in the idea of a giant floating bus and the ensuing window candy. Kira made sure to get a window seat and rested her arm on the armrest with her palm up, letting her charge see everything. Every human ended up stuck to their windows, gawking at the sights of an alien city.

Dylan couldn’t even recall any of the chatting on the bus, he was so caught up with looking at Torsiah passing by. He watched the people on the sidewalks, looked up at the massive buildings, watched the cars in traffic, and of course asked Kira a battering of questions.

He expected to see mostly equines. They were definitely the most numerous, but the smattering of all of the races together outside of the military really hit home just how much of a melting pot the UTO truly was. Perhaps one of most interesting things he saw were a couple of odd looking wingless Arkatians. Wingless dragons were perfectly common, and he had seen a fair few in the base, but the ones he saw on the streets as the bus sped by made him wonder if they also had a genetic twist like how some wolfish Lupari were much more small framed and closer to their coyote-like brethren.

Before he could really get a good look at them, his attention was suddenly grabbed by Kira. “Maybe one day we could take a walk through the city. Perhaps in your mech.”

He peeled his face off of the window to look up at her. “Probably in my mech, yeah. You’d have to excuse me if you have to drag the thing by the arm while I gawk like an idiot.”

She folded an ear to the side. “Like now?”

He snorted and returned his attention to the window. “If the mechs have windows, sure.” He then made a show of actually pressing against the glass to go right back to looking like an enamored child as he watched the alien world go by.

It was all too much to see for a short bus ride. When they came to a stop in front of the pub, Dylan found himself almost disappointed that it was over so soon. However that feeling lasted all of a moment when Kira carefully lifted her carry hand off of the armrest and tucked it and her charge to her stomach as she stood up and filed out of the vehicle. The human was instantly hit by all of the sounds that were muffled on the bus. The chatter of the patrons inside and the soft hum and the whoosh of passing vehicles in the street truly hit home what was happening.

He was in an alien city. The fact it was a city of alien giants didn’t do too much to dampen his excitement. A look at the other charges in their guardians’ hands showed he wasn’t alone. It was like going into space all over again.

As the party of soldiers started to enter the building, with the non-guardians going first, Dylan got a good look at the pub. The facade of the one level structure was a mix of gray stone and green wooden grid-paneled windows. The stone formed tall arches with the windows in between them, filling the spaces entirely. They rose high, at least twice as tall as Kira, with the glass going all the way down to the ground. Etched and painted into the stone along the arches were a bunch of different alien scripts. Dylan recognized some of them from his studies of the other species in the alliance, but the only ones he could recognize were a few in Common that advertised what the place had to offer, which if his broken handle on the language didn’t mess him up, was apparently hot food, games, and alcohol as well as warm welcomes.

The door itself, Dylan saw as Kira moved towards it, was green wood with most of the arch filled with the material. It was also on hinges and had a handle, something he hadn’t seen from the aliens before.

When Kira walked through the first thing Dylan noticed wasn’t the homey interior, but every patron that paid a lick of attention was gawking at the human soldiers. It was unnerving just like any other time a giant stared, but this time it was a whole bunch of them. His guardian picked up on his discomfort and thankfully raised her other hand to hide him from view.

He gladly kept himself hidden away as she moved. He heard some chatter from what sounded like people directing the soldiers to their tables. He felt Kira sit down and her hand lifted away, revealing that his guardian had sat in a nice, dark red padded booth with a brown polished wood table that she placed her hand on top of for him to step out onto.

The medic hopped down along with several others - Cody, Russell, and, to his surprise, Lieutenant Fletcher. The grey wolfess, Tahsah, was seated right next to his own white furred guardian. That didn’t concern Dylan, however. She and her charge were among the language instructors and she was the one that taught them about the Lupari, so he was fairly familiar with her.

A scoff from Russell drew everyone’s attention and he jokingly said to his fellow humans, “Have you

lot ever felt less like men than you do now?” He waved towards the three female giants and one not so female.

Yirshan was the only one that didn't look confused as she giggled. “I always did like my men smaller than me.”

Cody laughed as he headed over towards the edge of the table. “Think of it as needing to be a special kind of man to handle women this big.”

Andrew Fletcher joined him at his side as they both looked out over the bar. “I like that attitude!” The other two soldiers headed over to the edge as well where all four of them lined up side by side to take a gander out into the much too large pub.

Yirshan lowered her snout and stared down her muzzle at the corporal. “Oh yeah? I'm way too much to handle for an Arkatian male. How's a little thing like you going to do it?”

“With a mech?” he said back to her.

“Hah!” The dragoness pulled her head back and laughed. “That's the spirit.”

Yirshan and Cody started to go back and forth with their quips, but Dylan paid it no mind as he took in the sights. Even as the evening sun started to wane, a lot of light came in through those gigantic windows, casting a warm glow across all of the patrons. There was a lot of wood. Wooden tables, chairs, stools, the bar, wherever wood was perfectly feasible. It was strongly opposed to the usual idea in movies and games where the future was made of sleek metal. The floor was wooden as well, though it was smooth, worn, and it was covered in what looked like scratches from years of claws and hooves, though it was interrupted by regular, intricate dark colored rugs. Hanging from the walls were random odds and ends like paintings and ornaments. However, what he enjoyed the most were the tapestries. He wasn't sure if it was just a part of this bar, a Neishor thing, or a UTO trend, but there were a lot of tapestries. Each one depicted some kind of picture, like a Neishor plucking fruit from a tree, rather than patterns like the rugs.

This all would create an odd, old time alien feel if not for the fact that there were solid looking projections scattered around showing various things from what looked like the news to sports and television shows, though he heard nothing from them as they were all silent.

The most interesting thing of all, however, were the aliens. They were different from the soldiers he was familiar with. Almost all of them had patterns painted into their fur. Many Neishor had their manes dyed and braided and some of them even had them styled into things like mohawks. In one group of patrons someone with fur as white as his guardian caught his eye, except she was one of the vulpine-looking Falashai. She had blue dyed into numerous parts of her fur, from the tips of her ears to the stripes on her arms and thighs. She was just one of many with these unique markings. The military must require their soldiers to remove these dyes and such, as he saw none of them at the base. It took Dylan a moment to realize just why he could see so much fur. The fur made it seem less unusual, but he realized how little clothing she wore. All she had was a pair of fairly short shorts with big pockets and a vest. It was almost odd how he could see someone on Earth wearing a similar outfit.

The white vixen was, along with her friends and plenty of other patrons, looking in the direction of the newcomers, probably trying see some of the humans. Her gaze fell on the four little men on the

tabletop and she pointed them out to her companions, resulting in her whole table looking at them. The humans had a few different reactions. Russell stared neutrally back, Cody and Andrew waved, and Dylan averted his gaze.

The medic was just about to ask Kira if she dyed her fur, to distract himself, when he noticed a bunch of his platoon mates had grabbed a large table together and were waddling over towards their booth with the thing. With a heavy thump that each human could feel in their bones they placed it down right next to the booth and gathered their seats to sit at the table.

Dylan felt a fair bit of relief at that, which was probably their intention. A part of him wanted to keep looking over this new place but he also didn't want to be gawked at like he was some kind of exotic animal.

The black fur of Specialist Tihiri Walay filled the center of his view as she sat at the middle of the long table while seven more sat down around her as the table and booth formed a top heavy 'T' shape. The black medical vulpine looked across the table at him and flashed an awkward smile. "Er, sorry. Am I blocking your view?"

When she moved to get up, he hastily said, "No no, you're fine. I was just looking at this white Falashai when she saw me."

The larger medic turned in her seat to see the other vulpine. "Oh nice," she said as she looked back to Dylan. "That blue goes great on her."

"What's it for?" he asked the larger medic.

"Fashion, mostly. Most species have cultural ties to painting their fur, but these days its all about looking good."

Dylan nodded in understanding. "Kind of like tattoos."

"Tattoos?" Yirshan asked, then her eyes widened a bit. "Oh, hey! The Tordenchi and Ashar like to tattoo their tails. You guys must be able to get them everywhere."

"Yep." Cody said, rolling up one of his sleeves, revealing a rather typical looking tribal tattoo. The guardians had to bend down and battle for headspace to see the tiny work of art on the small human. "This one goes up to part of my back. It's the only one I have."

Russell grinned at the corporal and pointed out the obvious, "You look like a twit with that thing."

Cody snorted and rolled his sleeve back down. "I was drunk, cut me some slack."

Yirshan fluttered one of her wings as she said, "I'll admit I couldn't see it very well, but I thought it looked nice."

"Aw." Cody smiled happily up at her for the compliment. "Thanks! So those fur dyes, is the permanent, hard to remove stuff preferred? You don't need to maintain tattoos. It has to be annoying to keep dye looking good."

“Depends on the person,” Tihiri answered and looked at Kira as the rest of the table fell into their own conversations. “Hey Kira, you went permanent blue, right?”

The white wolfess flicked an ear. “Of course! I love blue.” She put her elbows on the table and looked down at Cody and Dylan. “I used permanent dye.” Her fingers touched the outer edges of her eyes. “I had stripes going towards the back of my head.” She then touched her inner eyes and slid her fingers forward down her muzzle. “And stripes down my muzzle that ended in these little swirls just before they reached my nose.” She then rubbed the tip of her left ear. “I dyed this ear but not the other. It drove my brother crazy so I kept doing it.” She grinned at that thought. “Then I had these sort of... random patterns on my stomach, chest, tail, legs, back... more than most when it comes to patterning their fur. I just thought it looked nice. I also dyed my toes and fingers.”

Russell snorted in amusement. “Just point to the spots you didn’t dye, eh?”

She grinned at the commando. “I can do better.” She reached into a pocket and pulled out her Yutri. She opened the sharing projection, blocking her face. She fiddled with it a bit, then suddenly an image of the wolfess popped onto the display, dyed just like she described. It showed her with what must have been a couple of friends at some kind of club that fit in more with the whole future stereotype than this pub did. It was slightly jarring for Dylan to see his guardian in a black low cut, belly length, sleeveless vest. It showed off the patterns she described very well, kind of like ‘tribal’ tattoos some people like, but it was quite the switch from her military dress. What made it even more surprising were the rather short pair of shorts that revealed the patterns on her thighs and calves as well. She was squeezed in the middle of a Viliti and an Asishi. The rabbit was nuzzled up under Kira’s muzzle while the hyena had her own muzzle on top of Kira’s head. The wolfess’ eyes were half lidded as she was smooched between them with a massive, happy smile on her face. Visible between a couple of gaps in the group hug was a white and blue blur that was undoubtedly her tail wagging wildly.

After he got over the outfit, Dylan found himself fixed on that expression of elation on her. He had yet to see her so happy. It had only been eleven days since he met her, sure, but he knew why she was so happy in that picture. It came back to the lectures on Lupari behavior and how physical affections like nuzzling were very common behavior. A gentle and affectionate touch could go a long way in brightening their days, and they were always happy to see others feeling better after something as simple as a nuzzle. He wanted to do that for her, and it would probably even be enjoyable, but as he thought before, the idea of being that close to a predator’s mouth made his stomach twist into knots.

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Kira curiously watched her charge as he looked over the picture. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking but it certainly looked like more than just how her dye looked. He looked up at her, but if he was feeling something off he was hiding it well. She smiled softly at him.

“Now wait...” said Cody. “If you used permanent dye and had it all over yourself like that, what happened to it when you enlisted?”

The white wolfess shuddered, and her platoon mates exchanged knowing grins. She set her Yutri back to idle and pocketed the device before saying, “I... well, I had to shave my entire coat.” A few laughs came from the long table and her fellow Lupari, Anacha gave her a pitying look. A shaved Lupari was a very distraught Lupari, especially an arctic one like herself.

Yirshan guffawed loudly. “You should have seen her in training! She looked like a fuzzy puppy.” Kira glared at the dragoness, but she kept going. “And pink! You could see the pink! She was a disaster.”

Private Nishi Sikil, one of the spotted leopards of the feline Ralai, interjected, “Remember the look on the sergeants’ faces when the shaved pink Lupari beat up half of the platoon?”

That earned another round of laughter. Kira tried to put on an agitated front, but lost to herself and broke out into a smile. “And I’ll do it again,” she said. “Just... with fur this time.” The teasing and joking set a good mood for the table, much to her delight. Her eyes settled on Dylan to check to see if he was enjoying the mood as well. She sorely hoped the boisterous laughter wouldn’t make him nervous.

She found him grinning, if a little awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his head. When he noticed her look she used a finger to gently stroke his side with the blunt side of her claw. His hand left his head to rest on the top of her knuckle and pet the fur before he said, “You look great with your fur dyed.”

That comment made Kira so happy her black lips almost curled back to show her teeth, she was smiling so much. She managed to keep them in check, though, as she cooed, “Thank you. It took a lot of drawings before I was happy with what I had. Since there was so much dye needed in the design I wanted, I went with permanent dye so I wouldn’t have to do huge touch ups all the time.”

He nodded in understanding and looked like he was going to continue when they were interrupted by a knicker from a Neishor. The chatter stopped and the soldiers looked up to see a large white equine with very faint, light grey stripes. He was of the striped ‘Kei’ subspecies. The Keishor ushered forward a group of several waiters and waitresses, who got right to taking orders for drinks.

Kira’s stroking stopped and she laid her hand out, ushering for Dylan to get on, if he wanted to see what was going on. He couldn’t see over the surrounding guardians and high seats. He climbed aboard and settled onto her pads, then his guardian lifted her hand up towards her shoulder, where she held it against her and allowed him to mostly see what she saw. The first words out of his mouth were, “Ooooh, I get the name now...”

The wolfess bit back a giggle as the Neishor, specifically a Kaishor for the striped subspecies, started to speak, “I see a few familiar faces here. Welcome back! I also see some very, very new guests.” His eyes wandered between the various humans being held up by their guardians. “Hello, humans! I am Relish Valiatick and welcome to my humble pub. I’ve made preparations for your visit. I wish to make this a wonderful first experience for you. I’m still working on things, regrettably, so if there’s anything you need or think I could do better, just say so and I’ll happily make it right.”

After he finished he joined his servers in taking orders from the soldiers. Kira and the other three guardians kept their charges in their hands when a young Ashar waiter came to their table. The black and white rat chirped out, “Hello there!” as he handed out menus to those that would take them, though most preferred connecting to the business’ node and seeing the menu from there. Kira was one that took a menu, figuring Dylan would be more familiar with the old fashioned way of ordering food.

To the waiter’s credit, he only looked at the humans for a moment before it became rude and smiled widely at everyone at the booth. “My name is Milli and I’ll be your server today. What can I get you all to drink?” Before Kira could even think that he needed to clarify on drinks he started to list off a few and describe them, obviously for the humans’ sake. All four of the little aliens listened closely, though

it was Dylan who seemed to be almost shaking with excitement. That was the alien exploration at work again, she knew.

After some chatter from the humans about what was good, they all placed their orders. Dylan ended up asking for wayliak juice, just like his guardian. The waiter also placed down a small table similar to the ones that were placed on some of the regular tables in the mess hall back at base.

Once the waiter left to get the beverages, Kira opened her menu while it was flat on the table and was ready to hold the human above it, but noticed a little pocket attached on the inside holding a tiny piece of parchment. She squinted at it for a moment, then grinned hugely when she realized what it was. It was human sized menu! She very carefully plucked it out between two fingers and raised it up to look at. It was so tiny! “Aw! He really did prepare. This is for you, I think.” She lowered it down for Dylan to take.

The man took it from between her claws in two hands. “Hah. It’s kind of big,” he said and held it up for her to see.

Seeing him holding up a poster sized menu towards her was an odd combination of funny and adorable. She just about cooed at him, but managed to only snort in laughter. “Indeed! Is it written in Common?”

He flipped it open and immediately nodded. “Yep. I think I’m going to need your help with this.” He sat down in her palm and placed the big menu on his crossed legs.

Kira bent forward to look at her own. “Is it the same as mine?”

“No... it’s a lot more limited.”

That was a shame. Relish seemed to have done his best, but he couldn’t expect his chefs to be able to prepare every meal on a little human scale. She’d be surprised if most of it even remotely reached the quality of a normal sized dish. “Well, you like meats, so I’d suggest looking under the meat section first. Do you know the word?”

“Uh... no. What’s in this meat section?” He rapidly scanned through the menu, looking for something that could suggest meat.

“Meat...” Kira said as if stating the obvious.

He looked up at her from the menu. “Steaks, then?”

“No, meat.” A bemused half smile was on her muzzle now.

“So, it’s just a section dedicated to nothing but meat?” She flicked an ear. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Because most of us are vicious predators?”

“Well I don’t know about vicious... more like innocent, maybe.” He grinned and looked back down at his menu. It crossed his mind that if this was just days earlier, the mention of the giants being ‘vicious predators’ wouldn’t have been very good for him. Now he could joke about it. He felt no small amount of happiness with that.

Kira scoffed. “Innocent are we? Well let me show you the vast amounts of delicious animals we enjoy and you’ll see how ‘innocent’ we are.”

The regular soldiers ordered their food quickly while the guardians had to spend a bit longer working with their charges to help them with reading their menus and to explain what the food was. The whole while Milli, after bringing the human drinks in curious little sealed containers that were oversized just like the menus, patiently waited for his customers to sort things out while happily offering his thoughts.

They placed their orders and continued with a little banter and small talk, a lot about the previous week. Their food was very quick to arrive. The dishes for the guardians were placed down while the humans’ came on one covered tiny plate. The Ashar waiter tried to move their individual plates with his big pink fingers, but the humans were quick to give him a pass on having to do that as they collected their food themselves.

All four guardians and even many of the regular troops watched curiously. It was so surreal. The sheer size difference made something as mundane as serving food a precise and almost comical looking affair. Kira suspected the humans were aware of how ridiculous it looked, as all but Cody looked embarrassed.

Thankfully the waiter worked quickly and got it all over with post haste, leaving all of them alone with their food. Kira, along with the other three guardians all ordered mostly meats while each of the humans ordered more mixed portions.

They idly chatted, but each guardian seemed more interested in how their charges were enjoying the new food. Kira knew how big of a deal this was for Dylan and couldn’t help but be excited for the inevitable excited reaction from him.

Her ears turned towards him when he finished a piece of the pishtay, a beast of burden and farm animal commonly enjoyed for this particular reason. “How’s it taste?” she asked.

He looked up at her and gave her a knowing smirk. “Hmmm... well, it’s pretty good. It tastes like-”

Kira cut him off with a playful growl. “If you say chicken I’ll pour my drink on you.”

“... I was going to say siliash.”

The Lupari huffed and picked up her drink and moved to look like she was going to pour it on him, and probably the other humans too. “Ack! Wait!” he shouted with his arms up, prompting her to pause. “It’s uh, good! Really well seasoned. Reminds me of venison, sort of.”

Satisfied, she placed the drink she never intended to pour back down and returned to her own food, a really big slab of siliash and a few other chopped meats with some fruits. “What’s venison like?” she asked as she cut into her food.

“You’re just a meat connoisseur aren’t you?”

“I prefer enthusiast. Besides, I like fruit, too.” She picked up one of the small orange berries on her plate, tossed it into her maw and happily chewed it.

“Uh huh... well, deer is, er, I can't explain it. How do you explain meat? I guess it tastes kind of like chicken...”

Kira's eyes widened and she again threatened to pour her drink on him. “I know humans obviously have a horrible sense of taste, but is it that bad or do you seriously have only one flavor of meat?!”

Some time after a bit of smooth talking managed to keep the juice at bay, they finished their food. Most of the soldiers at the long table headed off to mingle with the growing crowd of civilians and play card games and video games on the other side of the building. The only non-guardians left were Hatia, Larish, and Tihiri.

“Dessert! We must do dessert!” squawked the gryphoness. “I vote nixa pie.”

Tahsah grinned at the corporal. “As long as you're there to explain yourself why a single Jahkatian made up half of the bill.”

Hatia's wings fluttered and she huffed indignantly. “Don't be so silly. I only made up a quarter.”

Larish snorted. “More like a third.”

“Hmmm, no...” Tihiri said with a folded ear. “I think it was more like three fifths.”

“That's more than half!” cried the gryphoness.

Yirshan laughed, reclined in the booth with Cody in her lap. “You're fat, Hati.”

A round of laughter at Hatia's expense filled the air. While the gryphoness simmered with feigned indignation, Kira noticed the blue dyed white Falashai they were talking about earlier was heading over with her friends left behind at their table, watching curiously. The laughter died down when she stopped just behind Hatia and Larish. The two corporals looked over their shoulders at her while the guardians looked slightly more guarded than they were just a moment before.

“Hello there, pleasant greetings,” the vulpine said with a toothy smile.

The soldiers met her with a few hellos and bowed heads. “Hello,” Anacha greeted. “Can we help you?”

One of her ears folded flat and she canted her head as she looked over the humans, Cody still in Yirshan's lap, Andrew in a similar position with Anacha, and Russell and Dylan still seated at the little table. “I was just wondering...” she muttered and fiddled with her fingers. “Could I please get a picture with one of the humans?”

The guardians exchanged looks with each other, but none of them said no. This was purely up to their charges to decide. None of them could say no for them without a good reason.

The Lupari officer looked over the four humans as she said back, “That's up to them. Go ahead and ask them.”

The Falashai perked up and her eyes widened slightly as she looked between all four, wondering which

one to ask before deciding to simply ask all of them, “Would any of you let me take a picture with you, please?”

Cody almost immediately chirped out with, “I’ll do it!” Yirshan placed him down onto the table and the human marched over to the edge, all the while with all eyes locked onto him. The civilian vixen in particular seemed very excited as she watched. “So how do you wanna do it?”

“Oh, um... can I hold you?” she asked with her head canted again.

The question got all of the guardians and even the regular soldiers to sit up straighter, slightly put on edge. However Cody didn’t seem even slightly perturbed as he nodded. “Yeah, sure. What’s your name, by the way? Mine’s Cody.”

The Falashai’s tailed flicked happily about behind her as she moved around the long table to get between it and the booth. “Invili. Thank you for doing this!” To Invili’s credit, she actually looked at the guardians and asked, “So... I put my palm down for him, right? Grabbing is bad?”

Anacha flicked an ear and smiled at her. “Very good. Yes, simply let him climb into your hand.”

Invili flicked her own ear and gently placed her hand down next to Cody. Her eyes widened completely and her fingers looked like they were shaking when the tiny soldier clambered aboard and sat down in her palm. He grinned up at her and said, “So, a picture... I think you holding me up next to your muzzle would be fun. Just make sure you lift slowly.

The vixen softly whined with excitement as she turned around and waved over to her friends. She moved to go back to the other side of the long table, but paused and looked back at the guardians, likely wondering if it would be okay to go around the table with Cody in hand. She got a few approving ear flicks, then went to where she was before. “Get over here you guys! Someone needs to take the picture!”

Kira heard a laugh coming from them as a couple of them got up and headed over, one a leonine Ralai and the other a Tordenchi, both male. “You actually got them to let you hold one?” asked the large feline as he stopped in front of her, looking down at Cody.

“Got them? All I did is ask him,” she nodded down at Cody, “and he said yes.”

He didn’t get to say anything back to that as Larish leaned back in his seat and motioned towards the table he came from. “I think you should go sit back down.”

“What?” he asked, confused. “Why?”

Larish stood up from his seat, showing he was at least a head taller than the feline and softly nudged him away. “Go on now,” he said back, sounding amusing as he pushed the Ralai along. “Sit down and think about your choice in words.”

They all watched the Neishor manhandle the young male back to his table, protesting all the way. Invili and her Tordenchi friend looked at the soldier’s warily. “Did we do something wrong?” asked the vixen.

Anacha shook her head. “Not you, young one. We’re just always watching for people that may act too aggressively towards our smaller fellows.”

“Oh,” she muttered with her ears slightly folded back. She quickly snapped out of it, though, as she turned to face her other friend. “Onsi, take a picture!” She then slowly raised her carry hand up towards the side of her muzzle while Onsi opened his Yutri’s camera interface and held the device up with one hand.

Invili didn’t seem to expect Cody to scoot over and lean against her cheek, as her ears shot up straight just before the picture was taken, then followed by another. As soon as Onsi lowered the camera she started to move her muzzle, effectively nuzzling the human, who seemed to be delighted by it.

Kira watched enviously. What an affectionate little human! He didn’t even know Invili and he was already accepting nuzzles from her. She glanced at her own charge, who seemed to have been looking at her as he quickly averted his eyes to look down at the table for a moment, then up at Cody and Invili.

Once the vixen got her fill, she returned Cody to the table, thanked them, and left with Onsi.

After that, they did decide to order some pie due to more insistence from Hatia and eventually Tihiri joining her side. While in the middle of enjoying it, the humans with their own tiny pieces, which were really just broken up chunks, the projectors around the building took a break and changed from some Neishor sports game to a news broadcast.

Kira watched it for a moment before realizing it was the announcement of the new flag. Her ears turned towards it in realization and she pulled out her Yutri, connected to the Stripeless’ network, and set her device to share like she did with the picture. She presented the humans with a glorious display as she said, “You should see this. It’s about you!”

All four men paused in their pie consumption to curiously watch and listen as a Jahkatian news anchor in a clean, red suit read the report. She heard a comment from one of them about aliens not being very alien before she listened to the gryphon reporter herself.

“... marks the day of the inception of the new banner of the United Treaty Organization,” he said as he faded out in lieu of a full shot of the UTO’s flag. “This rendition of the flag, which bears the thirteenth star representing our newest member, humanity, was accepted as the official new banner...”

Kira looked over the banner approvingly. It was almost exactly the same as the last one, but the addition of a new star was and would always be considered a significant change for the whole union. She always did like the look of the thing.

It was a vertical flag in shape. The dominant color was black while the shapes on it were gold. Most of it was dominated by the smattering of golden stars, which were now thirteen in number. There wasn’t any pattern to them as they seemed to be just dotted around. At the bottom of the flag was an upward pointing, rounded chevron. Directly under the shape, mostly contained in its arch, was a set of stylized decor wings. One had the appearance of a feathered wing like the ones seen on the Arkatians while the other wing appeared draconic in nature, like the wings of Jahkatians.

“I really like that flag,” commented Russell as all four humans looked at it. “Imagine my surprise when I found out it wasn’t silver and blue.”

His three fellows laughed and Dylan said, "Some of the guys call it corny. What a load of crap, I think it's cool."

"Corny?" Anacha asked curiously. "Why?"

Yirshan chuckled and said before he could answer, "They're just cynical. Do they get upset over the emblem, too?"

As if the news knew she mentioned the emblem, the flag faded away and the UTO's logo came on screen to remind viewers that, like always, the emblem wasn't changing. It was basically a condensed version of the flag. It had the symbol and chevron, but only three stars on top. At the top of the chevron and two on its sides.

Dylan looked at it and shook his head. "Not really. No complaining about the symbol, either. Though I guess that may be because we like to use wings on stuff all the time."

"Flight envy I see," said the red dragoness, which earned a few laughs from the other two Katians.

"Hey now." Cody looked up at Yirshan. "You said you could only glide."

"It's close enough!" she shot back.

Fahne tapped Yirshan with one of her massive wings. "I disagree."

The sergeant looked at her commanding officer's own set of wings, which were extremely large compared to the vast majority of Arkatians. Despite that, they were still folded neatly behind her. Yirshan looked like she wanted to say something, but huffed instead.

Hatia looked at the lieutenant's wings a little longer before idly saying, "I'll never get bored of growing mine in the sims."

"I just had a thought," muttered Russell as Kira shut down the feed and stowed her Yutri. "Thirteen stars are on the flag, but counting us, aren't there only twelve races in the union?"

"Did you count the Kiori?" asked Dylan.

"The squirrels? Yeah, I got them, and I counted the Katians as two." The commando rapidly listed off on his fingers to himself. "Yeah, twelve."

"Asishi?" added Cody.

"I got the hyenas too. One's missing, I'm telling you."

The two went back and forth listing off the races to each other, and each time they got twelve. The guardians nor Andrew offered any input as they went at it until Dylan apparently grew agitated by it and looked up at his guardian to ask. "Are we missing something here?"

Kira flicked an ear. "You are, but you're going to learn about them in one of your classes. It's a

complicated and delicate thing, so orders are for you to learn it there rather than from us.” She didn’t like the orders. While not lying, it did seem like a breach of trust.

The other two humans perked up at that and a look of realization crossed Russell’s face. “Extinct species. Is that it?”

“What?” Hatia laughed and pushed an empty plate of vanquished pie away. “No! They could walk in through the front door at any moment. They’re just not very common.”

“Aw come on,” lamented Cody. “You don’t want us to know about them?”

Yirshan poked the man with the dull end of her claw. “That’s right!”

Anacha snorted and grinned at the dragoness. “No, that’s not right. It’s just better served waiting for the course on the matter. You’ll hear all you need about them in the class tomorrow.”

“I bet I could space Google it,” Cody said, grinning as if he had found a horrible secret. “Except... I’ve had a whole five days of language study. That’s going to be tricky.”

The Lupari grinned down at him. “So your ear’s nicked, but I suppose you could still look it up. However, I urge you to simply wait for the class. It’s a touchy subject, and searching about them with a broken understanding of the language could sorely hurt things. So, please don’t search for the subject on the extranet.”

After the humans agreed to do as the lieutenant asked, the conversation was soon redirected and the topic about the thirteenth species ended in lieu of different discussion. While they chatted and discussed what physical, non-simulated games to show the humans, alcoholic drinks started to be served. This led to a major change in the pub. A lot more customers started to show up and the crowd became much louder, and it quickly became apparent who was getting drunk. The wait staff were trying to keep some space between the soldiers and the civilians by keeping a buffer of empty tables, but the influx of new patrons made it impossible.

Before long, it was almost completely full and the soldiers made up a significantly smaller portion than they did just a short time ago. Kira fell quiet as she simply watched, with a lot of her attention on Dylan, who was the only human left at the little table as he idly sipped on more of that juice he had ordered while the others were back into their guardian’s hands, chatting. Her charge had gone quiet himself, which worried her. His attention was focused on Mitchell’s mech, which had drawn a lot of attention as it was surrounded by a small crowd. Kira figured he’d been trying to draw attention to himself and not the mechless humans with their guardians.

However, it wasn’t bound to hold everyone’s attention. Eyes kept darting towards the various tables with guardian and charge pairs at them, and some even had civilians at them, talking. Many of the humans didn’t seem to mind, but Kira knew Dylan would very quickly get uncomfortable if their booth started to get more attention.

She looked back down at him. Her ears were already trained on him, but they perked up when she noticed he’d gone rather rigid with his eyes wide as he seemed to look at random things around the restaurant.

“Dylan?” she said softly to him, but all she got was a quick glance before he went back to looking around. She immediately became worried. This must be another one!

“Touch him,” Anache suddenly said. She looked back at her and noticed that everyone else had started to notice Dylan’s state. “Quick, gently,” she urged her on.

Kira looked back down to her charge and lowered her hand to him with one finger extended. “Dylan?” she whispered again as she stroked his back with the pad on her tip.

Her touch earned a reaction akin to a static shock as he suddenly jumped and looked up at her with what looked like genuine fear, but so very rapidly turned to relief as he leaned back against her finger and even turned his head to nuzzle against it. She could feel him shaking.

Silence reigned over the table as one of their own came down from what could have been another very bad moment. Kira quietly kept petting him, allowing him to take all the comfort he needed from her presence. She uttered quiet reassurances to him. She told him all was well, that he was safe, that she was here.

It worked. The Lupari felt the little human’s trembling slow until he just about turned to putty against her hand. She smiled warmly at him when he looked up at her anxiously.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“It’s okay. Another bad memory?”

“Yeah...” He looked down at the table he was still seated at, gazing at his drink. “Why do they have to come when I’m having fun?” he asked her pitifully.

She had no good answer for that other than, “I don’t know. Don’t think about it. Just relax. I’m here for you... how do you feel?”

“I feel... good.”

“Oh?” She canted her head. Good? She didn’t expect good.

“Yeah, your hand feels nice.” He smirked up at her.

A collective breath from the other squadmates seemed to escape everyone from his words. Kira scanned his tiny face for deception and sampled his scent. She couldn’t find anything wrong. He seemed... good.

They smiled at each other and Kira propped her charge back up onto his table, where he went straight back to drinking his juice as if nothing had happened.

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Dylan thought it was a great evening. Short of one moment of dredging up a bad memory, he thought it went perfectly. He had great company, food, drinks, conversation, and even games when their guardians brought them over to view them. They had air hockey! Well, something like it, anyway. Four

goals was rather curious, but it was fun watching their guardians face-off.

Now they were back at the barracks. Not because he had some break that forced him and some others back to base. No, actually, it was just time to go back. He was able to stay the entire time and he couldn't be happier about it.

It was winding down now. Most of the base was turning in for sleep. Among the humans, a few were left awake as they lingered outside the barracks on the balcony. Dylan, Cody, Russell and two of the Russians, Sergeant Potap Shvedov and Lieutenant Lubomir Tretyakov, were lined up along the railing while they gazed up at the night sky.

Lubomir pointed upwards at a bright dot arching up into the vastness of space. "Look at that one go."

"Where do you think it's headed?" wondered Dylan aloud.

Potap grunted. "Somewhere amazing. Maybe I'll dream about it. I'm going to bed." The sergeant pushed off of the railing, bid goodnight to his fellows, and headed inside. Lubomir watched the ship for a while longer, until it was gone from sight, before he retired as well.

"Maybe it's going to Earth," commented Russell, his eyes still lingering where the ship vanished off to.

"If it is," said Dylan, grinning, "I hope it comes back with more chicken."

"Chicken? Why?" Cody asked as he opened up his Yutri to look at a new message.

The medic shrugged. "No reason."

"Is this for more chicken jokes?" The corporal started to enter a response to his message while he chatted.

"What? No! It's... yeah, it's chicken jokes."

Russell laughed and clasped Dylan on the shoulder. "Don't overdo it, boy. You saw how she was waving that drink around."

"Yeah," agreed Cody as he closed his Yutri. "Keep it up and she'll eat you." Russell grumbled and smacked Cody on the back of the head. "Ack! Sorry!"

Dylan shrugged, grinning. "I'm not THAT sensitive, come on!" The idea of Kira doing that was ridiculous, but the thought of her jaws at all was still unsettling. He didn't want to share that part.

Russell grinned at him. "Good on you."

Cody leaned over the railing to look past the commando at Dylan. "Yeah, and she's more likely to hold you down and nuzzle you than anything else."

"What?" asked the officer with his eyebrow raised.

"Aw come on. Don't play dumb. She's Lupari and you could see it in her eyes. She wants the C."

“The C?” Dylan smirked, amused.

“Yeah!” A big stupid grin was plastered on the corporal’s face. “The C! She wants cuddles.”

Russell groaned and his palm met his face. “Good God, what kind of military have I gotten myself into?”

Both of the younger men laughed and Dylan added, “Welcome to the Armed Forces of Love and Affection, lead by High General Fluffykins.”

“Hah!” Cody guffawed and ignored the agitated commando. “‘High’ general indeed!”

“That’s it, I’m jumping,” growled Russell as he leaned over the railing.

The medic nudged the officer. “You know, I can’t fix you when you’re down there.”

“Damn,” Russell muttered as he stood straight again. “I guess bed it is then. Goodnight gentlemen.”

The man didn’t get very far from the railing before a massive form turned the corner and headed for the catwalk with a rather unsteady gait. “Coody!” yipped the familiar voice of the corporal’s guardian, Trikil, as he stopped next to the walkway.

Both Dylan and Russell grew very quiet as the smell of alcohol washed over them. However Cody didn’t seem to miss a beat as he said, “Hey there Trikil. How are things?”

“Good, good... just... kind of bored.”

“Oh...” muttered Cody. “Well, I was just about to go to sleep...”

“Oh.” One of the giant’s ears folded to the side. “I was too-”

Russell scowled at him. “Then go to sleep. You’re drunk. If you’re thinking of taking him, forget it. He doesn’t even want to. You’ll screw yourself over.” One hand grabbed Cody by the collar and he beckoned Dylan to follow as he dragged the younger soldier over towards the door.

Before they could reach it, a massive, black furred hand lowered down and completely blocked it. The motion prompted it to slide open. “Hey now,” growled the Falashai. “He’s my human and I want him. I didn’t get to spend time with him today.”

Russell released Cody and glared up at the vulpine. “I don’t goddamn care what you didn’t get to do! You’re drunk, he doesn’t want to go with you, you’re NOT touching him. Leave. Before you ruin yourself.”

An angry look broke across Trikil’s face. “No, sir,” he stressed the sir, mocking the officer. “I’m taking Cody.” He loomed over them. “And if you know any better, you’ll let it happen.” He stared down his muzzle at Russell.

The man gulped and looked like he was working up to say something, but Trikil disregarded him as his

other hand reached of the railing and his fingers wrapped around the anxious corporal, who offered no resistance until his guardian picked him up. The man gasped and his eyes widened as the digits clamped around him too tightly. His hands pushed against the fingers to try to get them to loosen up, but they didn't budge.

Dylan beat Russell in speaking up as he shouted, furious, "What the hell are you doing?! Loosen up, you're squeezing him!"

Trikil looked at his hand, and his glossy amber eyes widened in surprise upon realizing his charge was struggling in pain. His hand opened up immediately and Cody dropped the small distance back down to the walkway. He fell to his knees, clutching his abdomen as he breathed heavily. "Oh Vash, I'm sorry!" the giant cried and his hand stopped blocking the door as he brought it over to cup around his charge.

Dylan slid under one massive hand to get to Cody. He crouched down, now trapped between Trikil's hands with him, and checked his friend over.

The Falashai started to stutter in a panicked voice, "Is he okay? Is he hurt? Help him!"

At a cursory glance, the medic couldn't find anything wrong, but he didn't expect to. If there was any damage, it would be on the inside. Dylan jumped to his feet and shoved at one of his hands, trying fruitlessly to get him away. "Yeah he's hurt, you fuck!" He kicked as hard as he could at one of the fingers, which finally prompted him to move his hands away.

"What? No!" The vulpine growled, frustrated. "He's okay! He's alright! Here just let me take him."

Dylan couldn't believe it. He still wanted to take Cody? He yelled his defiance, "Back off!" and shoved himself into the hand that came down to scoop his friend up, using all his might to desperately try to push it away. He felt another body thump against the hand, and he saw Russell had thrown himself in with him.

They felt it stop. Whether if it was actually their strength or their defiance that brought pause to Trikil, Dylan didn't know. Before he could even look up at the giant's face, the white furred hand of his guardian wrapped around Trikil's wrist and jerked his hand away, causing both men to stagger forward.

Dylan managed to catch himself and see Kira twist Trikil's arm behind his back as she pulled him away from the catwalk. She jabbed him in his kidney with the side of her hand, forcing a cry out of him, and before he could gather his wits she kicked him in the back of his leg. He fell down onto his knees where the Lupari grabbed ahold of his other arm and forced him down flat on his stomach. She placed her knee on his back to hold him in place while she kept his arms pinned behind him. With him fully subdued, she snarled out, "What were you doing to my friends?!"

"Nothing!" Trikil cried. "I was just trying to pick up Cody!"

Kira sat up straighter to see on top of the catwalk. Her eyes focused on Cody, still bent over on his knees. She dug her knee harder into Trikil's back, forcing a yip of pain from the vulpine. "Liar!" barked the Lupari. "You've hurt him!"

"N-no! I- I... it was an accident!"

Dylan forced down the desire to see his guardian doing her thing and went right back to tending Cody. As he crouched down next to him, he noticed a few of the other humans had gathered at the doorway, watching curiously. “The hell are you standing around for?! Get me the aid kit and a stretcher!” He nodded at Russell, still next to him. “Get your Yutri out, I need a light.” As the commando fished out his device, the medic dug his own out of his pocket and flicked the light on before Russell had his in hand. He flashed it in Cody’s face, checking him for any blood from his eyes, ears, nose, or mouth. “Cody, listen to me,” he said softly as he looked about. “How’s your breathing? Does it hurt?” He was already taking deep breaths, but he had to be sure.

“A-a little...” he muttered.

Dylan didn’t find any blood, so he moved around behind him and lightly nudged one of his boots. “Can you feel your legs and feet? Move your foot if you can.”

Much to the medic’s agitation, he did more than that. Cody dragged his legs out from under himself and sat on his rump with his limbs laid out in front of him. At least that was a great sign of movement. He heard some movement behind him as the other men plopped down a large medical bag right next to him and laid the stretcher down. He passed his light to someone else as he moved the stretcher into position and immediately coaxed Cody to slowly lay down onto it. He strapped him down, totally restricting his movements and forcing a groan of pain out of him. Dylan only offered reassurances as he tightened the straps. It didn’t matter if it hurt; he wasn’t going to let Cody move an inch if he could help it. The only liberty he gave was the lack of straps on his midsection, where the corporal had been squeezed.

Dylan then flipped open the bag and pulled out the pouch of medical instruments. He found the scissors and started to cut through Cody’s shirt. He got the tatters removed and tossed them aside, leaving the man barechested for the medic to check for bruising.

By now several Yutris were being shone on the pair, offering him all the light he needed to see that Cody clearly had several stripelike bruises wrapping around his torso. A few of the other men hissed at how painful it looked. With no way to help with this, Dylan strapped Cody in completely now, though not so tightly around his ribs, for fear of worsening anything that could be broken. He then found a neck brace in the medical bag. He highly doubted it was needed, but he refused to take a pointless risk like that. As he was slipping it around Cody’s neck, he finally realized one of the giants was looming over the catwalk. A glance showed that it was the other medic, Tihiri. She was watching closely as she spoke into her Yutri, apparently reporting the situation for Cody’s imminent arrival to the base’s hospital.

The two medics quickly exchanged information before Tihiri lowered her hand for him and their patient. For the briefest moment Dylan’s eyes widened as he realized he had to get into the hand of someone new. That feeling lasted all of a second before he, with help from Russell, lifted the stretcher onto the Falashai’s padded palm and sat himself down right next to the corporal. As he was lifted away, someone threw his Yutri up after him. He deftly caught the device and held onto the stretcher while Tihiri turned away. He got a short look at Kira, still holding Trikil down with the other members of the platoon helping her, watching him go with a worried look visible even in the night.

The next hour or so was a blur of activity. An ambulance picked them up and rushed them off to the hospital, but none of the giants medics, for fear of making things worse, dared touch the human. When they arrived at the hospital, he helped the human doctors with the stretcher while they hammered him

with questions while he stuck around for a short while longer, seeing if he could help. When he no longer could be of use, he was asked to leave and wait for his guardian.

Kira arrived with a couple of military police while he waited on a bench near to the hospital's transfer pad. He had to answer a bunch of questions about the incident, and when he asked what was going to happen to Trikil, he learned the Falashai would be facing attempted kidnapping and battery charges, as well some kind of negligence charge they implemented for guardians. Then on top of that, he disobeyed and threatened an officer.

Once they left, Dylan practically fell into his guardian's hand and she started the walk back to the barracks after declining a ride. Dylan found that a little curious, but certainly didn't mind a bit of alone time with his guardian after that. Once Kira left the hospital she worriedly asked him, "How's Cody? Is it bad?"

He looked up at that anxious look on her face, then shook his head. "No... it looks like nothing's broken. It's just a lot of bruising. He's going to be sore, but he'll be fine."

He heard a loud sigh of relief come from her. "I hope this doesn't damage his openness. Everyone loves that from him." Dylan nodded in agreement and they both fell silent. A few minutes later, he heard her quietly say to him, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? What? Why?" Dylan asked, confused, as he leaned against her stomach.

She looked down at him with her ears splayed. "I suspected Trikil wasn't right, and all I did about it was register a complaint about him."

"I thought you said you guys couldn't report him for anything yet."

"Yes, report him. A complaint is different." She sighed and shook her head. "I should have gone for the report anyway."

"Oh, come on." Dylan patted her stomach. "If we didn't see something like that coming, then how could you?"

"I suppose... but I'm supposed to look out for things just like that. I'm supposed to protect you."

He looked up at her and saw something from her he'd never seen before. In the low light of the lit path, he could see her eyes were glistening with moisture. He looked back down at her pads and carefully debated what he should do. His instincts screamed for him to not even think about it, but his heart said she needed this.

The human smirked. If he just followed his instincts he'd be an awful medic.

Dylan slowly pulled himself to his feet and turned to face Kira, which prompted her to stop walking. "Bring me up, please?" he quietly asked.

She cocked her head curiously, but did as he asked and raised him up to her face. She held him some distance away from her muzzle. She held her thumb out for him to hold onto, which he gladly propped himself against. They looked at each other down her snout. He was certain she could see how anxious

he was; he was even biting his lip!

He took a deep breath and extended his free hand to beckon for her to bring him closer. Even with the watery eyes, he could see her brighten up as she slowly brought her hand closer. Even though she kept her mouth sealed and teeth invisible, he had to force himself to not think about it. Instead he focused on her soft blue eyes and the unceasing friendliness and adoration behind them. They reminded him that it was okay. She wouldn't hurt him.

His hand touched her cold, black nose. All motion stopped when he touched her and her ears were almost folded completely folded forward and down at him as she waited to see what he'd do next.

The medic took another breath and the hand on her thumb left the digit to join the other resting on her nose. He stepped forward, bringing his body close to her nostrils, prompting them to start flaring as she snuffled curiously. The watering look in her eyes rapidly started to fade as they glimmered with palpable affection. Both of his hands stroked the black flesh as he said gently, "Protecting me is exactly what you did. Truthfully, I expected to have to deal with Trikil with no one else but another helpless human, like I always had to do. I didn't expect to be able to do a thing to stop him, but I tried, like always. But this time it was different. You stopped it. For the first time, someone that could help, helped. That means... that means more to me than you could possibly know." He leaned forward and spread his arms around her nose, actually hugging it. He could feel her tail swinging right through her nose. "Thank you, Kira."

A cute little whine escaped her and her other hand lifted up to stroke his back with a finger, but she didn't speak, not with him stuck to her muzzle, until he pulled off of her. She smiled hugely, still hiding her teeth. "I'm so happy to help. I almost mauled him when I saw what was happening." Her finger at his back moved to rub up and down his side. "But... no need to thank me. Helping each other is what friends do."

He grinned at her and nodded his agreement. "They do, yeah..." He looked down at himself, noticing how damp her nose made him. "Though I don't know about nose baths. Ick!" He wiped at his shirt with his hands.

The Lupari giggled, lowered him back down to her stomach, and started walking again when he sat down. "Tongue baths are less messy, honest."

He snorted in amusement. "Somehow I doubt that."