

# SANDWALKER'S CHOICE

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## Chapter One

*BZZZZZ! BZZZZZ! BZZZZZ! BZZ —*

After some groping around, my hand made contact with the alarm's deactivation switch and interrupted the incessant buzzing of the alarm. "Just five more minutes..." I mumbled to myself, wrinkling my muzzle up in a vague snarl as I tried to immerse myself in sleep again.

No such luck. "Good morning, sister dear!" Into the room padded my older sister Greytail, an attractive chakat with dark cream fur, save for hir tail, which was a soft silvery grey. "Time to rise and greet the day!" Shi went to the large window and pulled the red-and-blue floral curtains open. Warm sunlight flooded in to play on my face, making me squint as I opened my eyes. "Oh...damn it, Grey! You *never* let me sleep in!"

"Oh, I do so, and you know it," shi said, flicking the tip of hir tail across my nose. Shi prodded my side with hir foreleg, urging me to get up. "Come on, Sandwalker. Breakfast is on the table, and getting colder by the minute."

I remained lying down, my legs tucked under me cosily. "So? I've eaten cold breakfasts before." The sunlight bathing me in its rays was seducing me, beckoning me back to the blissful oblivion that was sleep.

"Even pancakes with butter and 100% Canadian maple syrup?"

Greytail laughed as I quickly got to my feet. "Well, why didn't you say you'd cooked pancakes? Honestly...." I brushed my hands down my torso and lower body, smoothing out the mussed fur. My luxuriously thick tabby coat settled easily into its usual disarray. Having done that, I stretched all my limbs out to their maximum extent, and yawned. "There. I'm up. Happy now?"

My sister grinned, and clasped me in an enthusiastic hug, lick-kissing my muzzle, which I happily returned. "Yes, I'm happy. Now come and eat your breakfast. You'll need it for this morning."

"What for?" I asked with puzzlement as I followed Grey out into the kitchen/dining area. On the table was a plate with a large stack of perfectly round pancakes. Next to it was a bottle of maple syrup and the butter dish. I parked myself at my place, added a generous dab of butter to the top, poured the syrup lavishly over the pancakes, then began to eat, relishing the sweet taste of the syrup.

Grey stepped out from the pantry with a bowl and a bag of cornflakes, opening the fridge and grabbing a carton of milk with hir lithe tail. "You have that planting expedition at the beach, remember?" shi said, taking hir own place at the table and preparing hir morning nourishment. "Part of your botany studies, I believe."

"Oh, gods! I'd completely forgotten!" I stopped eating for a moment in my recollection. A quick glance at the kitchen clock reassured me that I had plenty of time to get ready. "I was planning to go to the library to do some research, but I guess I'll have to save that until tomorrow." I resumed ploughing through the pancake stack.

"Well, if you give me an idea of what to look for, I could bring the information home for you," my sister offered, digging into hir cornflakes.

I nodded my acceptance of the offer, as my mouth was still full. Swallowing, I said, "Thanks, sis. Um...let me think. See if you can find anything on exotic houseplants and how to grow them. I've decided that this place needs some colour."

Grey raised an eyebrow, swivelling both ears in my direction. "Oh? What makes you say that?" shi asked, taking another spoonful of cornflakes.

"The fact that every wall is white might be a good start. We've been a year in this place, and still we have little in the way of decoration." I waved my arm around to emphasise my point. "Sure, we have the odd painting or two, but we really need some vibrant colour to spice the place up."

A low grumble of agreement came from Grey's throat. "I suppose you're right," shi said thoughtfully. "It was just so much easier to leave things the way they are, without having to go to the effort to make the place look good. I mean," and here shi ate some more before continuing, "we don't exactly get many people calling on us, do we? Who else is going to know that we don't have ornamentals cluttering the house up?"

"Our parents when they visit next week," I said, wrinkling my muzzle into a smug grin at hir shocked expression. "You know how they like to comment on everything. I wonder what Mother will say when shi sees the continuing austerity of our abode."

Greytail frowned hard at me, then said in a perfect imitation of Mother's voice, "'Oh, really, dears. Can't you be a little more...creative? Honestly, you can still see the builder's notation through the paint.... And those windows are dirty. Cold tea will make them sparkle. And speaking of things sparkling, where's that faux diamond necklace I bought for your twentieth birthday?'" Shi moved hir hand in a gesture of excessive babbling, opening and closing it rapidly in time with hir words.

I started laughing, almost choking on my current mouthful. "You had better not do that while shi's here," I warned, shovelling the last of the pancakes into my mouth. "We'll never hear the end of it, otherwise."

"All right, I won't." A few seconds later Grey finished hir cornflakes and went into the kitchen, picking up my empty, but syrup-smearing plate as well. I heard the dishwasher open, then a muttered exclamation.

"What? Something wrong with that thing again?" I moved into the kitchen and peered over my sister's shoulder. "Looks fine to me."

Shi pointed to an indicator in the door, which showed how much of the cleaning solution was left in the machine. "It's empty again." Shi fixed a stern gaze on me, the corners of hir mouth twitching slightly in annoyance. "Have you been poaching fish in the dishwasher again? You have! Your ears are turning pink!"

I looked down at the floor, shuffling my forepaws. "Um...yeah, but it's so much easier than doing it the normal way! And the dishes get cleaned at the same time!" I protested weakly.

"We haven't been using *that* many dishes! Honestly!" Both of us were starting to get a little hysterical, which didn't help matters much. Before the dispute could get any worse, I grabbed Greytail and hugged hir forcefully, planting a kiss on hir muzzle. "I'm sorry, Grey, but you really should try dishwasher-poached fish. Especially snapper. That is just divine!" I glanced guiltily at the indicator. "Um...."

"Oh, never mind," shi sighed, hir body losing its tenseness. "I'm just so...conservative. Mother always told me to minimise wherever I could." Shi put the plates and cutlery in the machine and closed it.

I snorted in mock derision of Mother's preachings. "Shi told me *exactly* the same thing, and look at me! Using up expensive cleaning solution just to poach fish!" I started giggling despite myself, followed soon after by Grey's musical laughter.

"Sandwalker, you always manage to make me laugh, no matter what the crisis." Grey smiled at me, and gave me a quick lick-kiss. "Now go have a shower -- your bus leaves in just under forty-five minutes."

"Not to worry. I've never been late yet." I turned to head to the bathroom, then paused for thought. "Well, there was that one time I was late to my first day of university.... I'll never forget that fiasco." I chuckled wryly as I went into the bathroom.

When I came out, smelling lightly of apricots, I looked at the clock again. Twenty-one minutes left. "Just enough time to make some lunch," I said to myself.

Out of the pantry and fridge I grabbed bread, ham and various condiments, plus what was left of the fish I'd poached yesterday. In minutes I had a small hamper filled with sandwiches, the fish parcelled neatly beside them. "Hmm...something to drink." I went back to the fridge and took a small bottle of cola out, putting it in on top of the fish.

I closed the hamper and glanced at the clock again. “Jeez, five minutes!” I grabbed the hamper and bolted for the door. “Bye, Grey!” I called as I slammed the door. As my long legs carried me swiftly down the front path I heard his voice from the back garden. “Have fun, Sandy!”

The bus stop was normally about fifteen minutes down the road if one walked at a leisurely pace, but today I was sprinting. Even running as fast as I could, it still took me seven minutes to skid to a halt by the ‘BUS STOP’ sign.

And not a moment too soon. Barely thirty seconds later, the bus specially chartered for the expedition pulled up beside me. I was still panting hard when I boarded and collapsed into a padded spot next to my foytaur friend Kerisa.

Kerisa stared at me, a smile playing about her muzzle. “You weren’t actually running late, were you?” she asked, laughing at my disgusted expression.

“As much as I hate to admit it, yes, I was.” I wiped my forehead with one hand, then scratched at a sweat-induced itch on my right breast. My *naked* right breast. “Oh...bugger,” I muttered in irritation. “In all the excitement this morning I forgot to put on a top.” I swivelled my head around, looking for any other ’taurs going topless. The bus was nearly full, and to my chagrin I saw only one other going bare-chested; an unusually red-furred chakat with grey and black striping. Shi appeared rather uncomfortable, looking as if shi was trying to avoid touching the ’taur next to him. I found myself looking him up and down, then thinking, “Nice figure, intriguing colour scheme, full breasts....” I’d never seen him before and yet I was already cataloguing him as a potential mate?

I turned away to ask, “Who’s that?” of Kerisa, forgetting about my current problem and pointing in the other chakat’s direction. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him before. Have you?”

Kerisa looked for herself then shook her head. “I’ve seen him a few times, but shi’s incredibly shy. Or at least I think shi is – shi tends to avoid people if shi can possibly do so. Shi’s been at school for nearly a fortnight now.”

I pondered for a moment on this new personality. “Doesn’t it strike you as being odd that shi doesn’t interact? I mean, you know what we chakats are like – fun-loving, social, interactive.... Look at him compared to normal chakats. Shi’s acting like the proverbial ugly duckling.”

“You know, I had noticed that, but I didn’t immediately recognise the difference.” Kerisa nibbled idly at a claw while she thought, gazing at the unsociable chakat. “Perhaps we could help draw him out. Maybe shi hasn’t had a chance to make friends yet.”

“Possibly, but even that’s unusual, especially at that age. I think that, if we put our heads together, we could give him a more favourable outlook on life. What do you think?”

“It’s worth a try, I guess,” my foytaur companion murmured, glancing over again. “Not now, though. Perhaps when we get to the beach we can get close enough to him to start talking....” She shrugged. “We’ll see what happens.”

I nodded, and fell silent for the rest of the journey to the beach. Kerisa, too, refrained from talking when she saw, after a couple of attempts at talking, that I was preoccupied.

“Okay, people. You have your instructions, now get to it!”

We were all dismissed by our foytaur supervisor, who was also the professor of botany at the Uni, to begin the laborious task of planting special grasses designed to prevent erosion of the beaches. Arrayed in several large groups of boxes along the beach were a total of nearly ten thousand narrow-leaved grass clumps, ready to be transplanted.

“Oy...this is going to be a lot of hard, hot work,” I muttered to Kerisa in a resigned tone of voice, picking up a box. I looked around for the unsociable chakat, and spotted him walking by himself toward one of the many dunes in which we were planting. “There shi is. Let’s see if we can get him to talk to us.”

We took up a position a few metres away, close enough to view him, but not enough to actively converse. Some observation seemed called for to start with, to see how shi dealt with others working near him.

I pulled one of the clumps from the box, dug a little hole, then quickly shoved the roots into the hole before the sand could fill it in again. “One down, about a thousand to go,” I remarked under my breath.

Through our watching we noticed that the chakat was doing hir bit competently and quickly, but shi worked alone, keeping away from anyone else. “Time to initiate contact,” I said quietly to Kerisa, gesturing with my tail. She nodded, and together we edged over to hir, planting as we went.

“Hello, there,” I said, putting on as friendly a smile as I could manage. “Mind if we join you?”

“Huh? What? Oh! Um...hi....” As red as shi was, the chakat managed to turn an even darker shade in...embarrassment? Shock? Surprise? Shi hurriedly turned away from us to jam another grass clump into the sand.

I frowned, shooting a quick glance at Kerisa, who nodded as if she’d read my thoughts. “This is going to be a tough nut to crack.” Taking a breath, I introduced myself. “I’m Chakat Sandwalker, daughter of Skywatcher and Trailblazer. This is Kerisa.” She waved a delicate hand in her own little greeting.

The chakat nodded, daring one brief look at our faces before glancing away. “Chakat Deepriver, daughter of Longmuzzle and Earthtender.” Shi moved away a few steps, reaching into hir box to pluck up another clump.

Kerisa sighed, murmuring to me, “Something must be seriously wrong if shi’s that intolerant of company.”

I nodded in agreement. “You’re right about that. At least we got a name out of hir.” I took a couple of steps nearer, planting another clump. “I like your name,” I said, trying to provoke more of a response from hir.

“Um...thank you...” Deepriver said softly, again trying to keep away from me. “I was named for the river that flowed past my family’s house when I was younger.”

At this point I decided to try the blunt approach. “Why do you avoid everybody? I’m not going to hurt you, and neither is anybody else. What is there to be afraid of?”

Deepriver blinked furiously, stunned by my little outburst. Hir voice was even quieter when shi said, “When I was a cub, I was teased a lot, because I was the only chakat in the school. Then my parents went to visit some friends on Chakona, but they never returned, because the ship they were travelling on disappeared without a trace, which made it even worse. My father’s mother came to take care of me, then. I took to avoiding everyone, spending most of my time in a quiet corner in the library, or hiding somewhere. I know it’s silly, and irrational, but....” Shi trailed off, unhappiness showing plainly on hir face. “Being surrounded by lots of people makes me really nervous.”

I stood silently, not quite knowing what to say. Kerisa solved my problem by stepping forward and clasping Deepriver in an enthusiastic hug. Shi flinched terribly, trying to pull away from the foxtaur, but shi relented when Kerisa tightened her grip a bit more.

“Oh, you silly chakat,” she said, releasing her strong arms from around Deepriver’s torso. “That was years ago! It’s time to put the past behind you, and move forward in your life. I bet you haven’t had many friends either, have you?”

Deepriver shook hir head, a tiny tear escaping from hir left eye. “People tried to get to know me, but I was so afraid of coming into contact with them that I always ran away.”

“Well, now you have two friends – myself and Kerisa.” I moved forward and gently hugged the other chakat, restraining myself from lick-kissing hir. This time shi didn’t flinch so much, which was an improvement, but I felt we still had a way to go before shi would be completely recovered from hir fear.

“Excuse me, people! I don’t see you working!” Our professor’s voice rang out from behind us, and we all turned guiltily. “Sorry, Professor,” we muttered apologetically. We quickly went back to our tedious planting duty, feeling the prof’s gaze on our backs until he padded away to inspect another team further down the beach.

After that, Kerisa and I managed to coax Deepriver into more conversation, telling hir about ourselves, and in return getting more info about himself. By the end of the afternoon, we were actually reasonably close friends, though Deepriver was still somewhat hesitant. We assured hir that we would not drop hir for any reason, and set a date to have lunch together between classes the next day.

“Grey! I’m home!” I closed the front door behind me and listened for signs of my sister moving around. Padding into the kitchen to grab a cold drink out of the fridge, I saw a note on the bench. “Gone into town, back around 6pm. Grey.”

Looking at the clock, I saw it was only twenty minutes to six, so I didn’t have long to wait. I put on a disc of Beethoven sonatas, and lay down on a comfy rug in the living room with a good book.

I became so engrossed in my reading that I didn’t hear my sister come home. The first I knew was when the front door slammed. “How was your day, Sandy?” shi called, padding into the room to give me a hug and lick-kiss. Shi laid down on the rug beside me, an arm around my torso in a warm cuddle.

“Funny that you should ask that.” I chuckled and proceeded to give Grey a run-down on the day’s events. I wound up with, “Me and Kerisa are meeting hir tomorrow for lunch.” I sighed, reluctantly breaking my sister’s embrace to get to my feet. “I’m not sure, but I find hir oddly...attractive. I barely know hir, and yet...” I scratched my head in a show of confusion. “I’m not sure what to think. Maybe it’s the male side of me talking. I *am* getting rather close to the peak of my male cycle.”

Greytail followed me out into the kitchen to help me prepare dinner. “I know of a few relationships that have started out in such a fashion, and from what you just told me, this may be such another, although I think it’s much too early to tell.” Shi took a bag of steaks out of the freezer, and put them in the microwave to defrost, before turning to pull some vegetables out of the fridge’s crisper. “See how it goes in a week. That’s all I can say at the present moment. Now,” shi said in a business-like tone of voice. “Grab a bowl, and whip up some salad dressing while I grill the steak.”

Dinner was a slightly subdued affair. My thoughts kept turning to Deepriver. The warm silkiness of hir fur, the smile on hir face when I waved after I’d gotten off the bus....

“Sandy. Sandy? Sandwalker!”

“Huh? What?” I came out of my little daydream to see Grey waving hir hand in my face, trying to get my attention. “Oh, sorry. Daydreaming again.” I realised I’d been holding a forkful of food halfway to my mouth, and I hurriedly disposed of it, rather embarrassed.

Grey stared at me, hir right eyebrow rising as shi said, “You almost *never* daydream. I’m pretty sure I don’t need to guess what you were thinking about, right?”

My ears flushed pink as I admitted, “Um...yeah. *Hir* again.” I concentrated on the meal in front of me, giving the occasional compliment on the cooking. I’d also noticed that my thoughts had manifested themselves in a more physical fashion, and I was kind of glad shi couldn’t see beyond the table. Being in male mode sometimes had unexpected (for me) effects.

After we had finished dinner and cleaned up, we retired to the living room, lying on a rug together while we watched some TV. Despite all the channels we could receive, there was very little on that had any interest for either of us. I flicked the TV off with a negligent press of a remote control button and sighed.

Grey slowly clasped me in a loving hug, hir silvery tail curling around mine. Hir body pressed against my own, and I could feel the vibrations as shi purred. “Let’s go to bed,” shi suggested, the barest hint of suggestion in hir voice.

“It’s only ten past seven!” I protested. “I’ll be awake for another four hours yet! Oh....” The import of what shi was saying became clear, and I smiled, turning to embrace Grey in a loving hug, giving hir muzzle a lingering lick-kiss.

“I figured that you would be feeling a little...strained after what you’ve been through today, and might need some relief. You’re just about at the peak of your male cycle, right?” Grey knew perfectly well where I was in my cycle, and I gave hir a playful bap on the nose in answer. “You know darned well that I am!” I said, laughingly. “And I appreciate the offer. Sisters should renew their bonds every now and then, though I think that ours is still as strong as ever.”

My sister licked my muzzle, moving up to kiss my forehead. “I’m glad you think so,” shi said quietly, gazing into my eyes with hir own. “It really has been too long.” Hir hand moved down to brush lightly against my breasts, giving me a tiny thrill. Shi smiled at my reaction and did it again, putting a little more effort into it. I couldn’t help but emit a quiet mewling as shi did so.

Shi lowered hir head to tickle my breasts with hir soft brown nosepad, then flicked hir tongue out to lave my left nipple. I shivered with mounting pleasure, reaching with my hands to run them through Grey's golden brown hair, tinted with mahogany highlights. I mewed again as shi began to lightly fondle the other breast while shi concentrated on licking the first.

"Never mind the bed, Grey," I whispered. "This rug is just fine. Nobody is going to know if we do it here or in the bedroom." I was going to say more, but I was interrupted by a warm rush of bliss as shi began to nurse from my breast. My nurturing milkwater flowed into my sister's mouth, almost overwhelming me with the pleasure it brought me. The breasts are a very sensitive area on a chakat's body, and if stimulated in just the right way, one can be quickly brought to orgasm.

Grey suddenly stopped, licked the last few drops from my left nipple, then swapped to the other, lavishing hir attentions on the other breast with long, sensuous licks before beginning to drink of my milk again.

Oh, this was nearly too much for me to cope with. I was struggling to hold back from my climax with the shreds of my willpower, and I might have succeeded had Grey not started caressing my belly with a handpaw, running the slightly crude fingers through the lush fur, another very sensitive zone.

I cried out in a joyous feline howl as orgasm came and swept me away on the waves of pleasure. Muscles all over my body tensed and relaxed in wild contractions. My breathing was ragged as I tried to draw breath through the intense spasms. My sister continued to suckle at my breast and stroke my belly, heightening the ecstasy I was feeling beyond what I thought was chakatly possible.

It seemed like hours before I wound down, though I knew it was only about a minute. The after-glow of climax was almost as good as the climax itself. Grey detached himself almost reluctantly from my breast, and looked up into my eyes with hir golden ones. "That was just a prelude to what is to follow, dear one," shi murmured, kissing me full on the lips. "I'll concentrate more on pleasuring your male side, though. I think you need it."

I merely nodded, a grateful smile on my face. "Thanks, Grey. Somehow all my troubles seem to disappear when I'm with you. Maybe it's partly because you're the closest thing I have to a mate," I pondered.

"Oh, you'll find a mate soon enough," my sister said, stroking my cheek with a gentle hand. "Perhaps it might even turn out to be Deepriver. I do hope you'll bring hir round to meet me sometime. Invite hir for dinner tomorrow, perhaps."

"And Kerisa as well," I added. As my thoughts once again began to revolve around Deepriver for what seemed the umpteenth time, I felt the first stirrings of arousal in my sheath. Grey noticed as well, moving so shi could view the proceedings. "You must like hir a lot if even thinking about hir turns you on." Shi reached out to touch my sheath, drawing a claw lightly up its length, sending wonderful shivers through my body.

Instead of a proper answer, I just started purring, rolling slowly onto my back so Grey could have more access. Hir eyes sparkled as shi stroked my sheath with hir hand, coaxing my member out of its hiding place. In seconds I was fully extended, the tip oozing a drop of pre-cum.

Shi leaned forward to kiss me fully on the lips, then shi began to work hir way down my body, licking me with small movements of hir rough tongue. From my throat shi went down to my breasts, lingering for a short period while shi teased my nipples to rock hardness before continuing down my torso.

I was tempted to just shove Grey's head down into my crotch, I was so impatient, but I restrained myself, knowing that shi would get there in hir own time. I gasped when I felt hir tongue lightly graze the tip of my turgid cock. Shi licked with agonising slowness down my whole length, almost driving me to distraction with the incredible pleasure I was getting from the treatment.

Grey suddenly lifted hir head, turned hir big golden eyes to me then, wordlessly, shi went down on me. My cock slipped into hir hungry mouth, to be coated with warm saliva and lovingly caressed by hir tongue.

I began to purr even louder, the vibrations actually shaking the floor imperceptibly. The grip on my cock changed slightly, and I knew that Grey must be grinning. Shi could feel the vibrations too.

My sister kept up the oral stimulation for a little while, until I was digging my claws into the carpet in an attempt to curb my incipient orgasm. Shi gave my cock one more lick, and raised hir head. Shi moved around so that hir rump was facing me, then crouched slightly at the front, looking back over hir shoulder to smile at me. "Take me," shi whispered.

I wasted no time in doing as shi asked, being aroused to near fever pitch. I mounted Greytail, draping my forelegs around hir sides as I shuffled forward. My cock found its mark, and gently slipped into the warm depths of my sister's body. Both of us mewed in feline bliss as our bodies became as one.

I stayed still for a few moments, letting us enjoy the initial sensation of entry, before beginning the slow thrusts that would take me, and hopefully hir, to a wonderful climax. Pulling out almost the whole way, I pushed back in again, revelling in the silkiness of hir hot passage. I leaned forward, reaching around hir to fondle hir breasts, giving hir back some of the pleasure that shi had given me.

Grey groaned quietly as hir breasts were rubbed tenderly, adding to the bliss of the stimulation by using hir own hands to reach below hir to softly stroke hir belly. We shared a love-filled kiss as we made love, the tensions of the day easing away.

Eventually my body began to take over its movements as my animal instincts started over-riding my conscious direction. My thrusts increased in their tempo, my breathing got a little out of kilter, and I was trying to hold back for as long as possible. Both Grey and I were very much on the brink of climax, but we didn't stay there long.

With enraptured yowls of ecstasy we came, Grey following just a scant moment after me. I continued to drive my male member into hir clutching vagina, thick jets of my seed spurting deep into hir body. Greytail herself nearly collapsed under me, hir throes of passion overwhelming hir like a monster wave crashing over a hapless surfer.

As much as I wanted the moment to last forever, it couldn't, and our orgasms dispersed to leave us basking in the lovely afterglow. We cuddled together on the rug, lying on our sides, my cock still ensheathed, for the time until it retracted back into my body, in Grey's femsex. "Oh, Grey," I murmured quietly, hugging my sister close. "That was a wonderful experience, one that I hope we may share with a mate, whether it be Deepriver, or some other 'taur."

"I agree, Sandy," shi said, hir tone tired, as was mine. "Bring hir round for dinner tomorrow. And Kerisa for moral support, perhaps. I think shi'd like to have someone else shi knows with hir." Shi yawned and leaned back into my embrace. "I don't know about you, but I'm going to get some shut-eye. Sleep well, Sandwalker." Shi laid hir upper torso on my body, and was soon in a happy slumber, judging from the smile on hir face.

"Sleep well, Greytail," I whispered, and followed hir example, snagging a nearby pillow to rest my head. Within a minute or two I was ensconced in the welcome bosom of sleep.

## Chapter Two

I was rather surprised to find myself sleeping in the lounge when I woke up the next morning, Grey-tail still curled up with me, until I recalled the events only a few hours ago. I smiled to myself as I remembered every moment of our love-making. Then I looked at the clock perched above the mantelpiece.

“Shit!” I exclaimed as I hastily got to my feet, unceremoniously awakening my sister from her slumber. “Hey!” she protested groggily. “What’s the big idea!”

I pointed at the clock, which showed 8:41am in a big LED display. “Class starts in less than twenty minutes! We slept in! Well, *I* slept in, but still...!” I rushed out of the lounge into my room, where my textbooks and homework were sitting on the desk in tidy disarray. Picking them up, I shoved them into my black leather satchel, then padded out again. “No time for breakfast. I’ll see you when I get home.” I gave Grey a quick lick-kiss, then skedaddled.

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The halls of the Mathematics block were eerily silent when I padded in fifteen minutes late. Reaching the door to my classroom, I peered in through the glass, grinning slightly with relief when I saw the professor wasn’t at the board. Looking toward the far side of the room, I saw Kerisa sitting at her usual place, the desk in front, where I sat, empty.

I sneaked in quietly, closing the door behind me with a light ‘ker-snick’, and made my way over to my place, sighing with relief when I sat on my haunches behind the desk.

“How nice to see you this morning, Shir Sandwalker,” came a resonant tenor voice from the back of the room. “I trust you have a good excuse for being tardy?”

“Damn,” I muttered under my breath. “I *knew* it was too good to believe.” I swivelled my head to regard Professor Mallein, a rather grizzled wolftaur of slate grey colouring, who was now walking down the aisle toward me. “Um...that sort of depends on what you define as an acceptable excuse. I had one of those nights....” I pricked one of my ears up in a version of the ‘raised eyebrow’, injecting a subtle suggestive tone into my voice.

Most of the class was human, so they didn’t really pick up on the meaning of my statement, but the remainder were ‘taurs of various types, including a couple of chakats, who grinned in understanding. Kerisa’s eyes sparkled a bit, and she hid her smile behind a hastily placed hand.

The professor, I was glad to see, picked up on my reference, and merely grunted in reply, the edges of his mouth pulling upward in a tiny smile. “I see. Well...just don’t make a habit of it too often, eh?” He padded down to the front of the room, and faced the class. “Alright, class! I assume you have all, with the exception of Sandy, done the problems I set you? Good.” With that, he turned around and erased the board with a few quick swipes of his arm. He then wrote up some more equations, pausing to look from a textbook on his desk.

The rest of the class began to copy down and work on the equations. I turned around to Kerisa and asked, “What were you doing before I came in?”

“Exercises 45 to 47.” She grinned at me then, and leaned over to whisper in a low voice, “Have fun last night, did you? I sometimes envy you chakats. You have a *great* sex life.”

“Yeah, well, we have it both ways, so we get double the fun out of it. I was a little sexually distracted yesterday. Me and Grey decided Deepriver was the source of my problem, and she indulged me.” I grinned and turned around again before the professor could call me to task, and began to work on the board’s equations.

The first three classes of the day went by rather uneventfully. When the bell for lunch rang at noon, I made my way to the cafeteria, pleased to find that I was near the front of the line for once. As I waited I looked over the menu for today. “Hmm...chicken and mushroom casserole, pumpkin soup or the Mystery Meal....” I thought to myself that it seemed to be a tradition in all schools to serve a

dish named along the lines of 'Mystery Meat'. "I wonder what the Mystery Meal will be today," I mused quietly to myself.

"I don't know, but I remember last week it was roast beef, so it's not all bad." The wolf morph in front of me turned to smile at me. "Following the current trend, I'd take a guess at something unpalatable today. Like baked roadkill."

I wrinkled my muzzle up at *that* suggestion. "Gee, what a pleasant thought, and right before lunch too..." I started laughing, joined a few seconds later by the wolf. "I don't think I'm seen you before...are you new? Or have we just missed each other?" He was a little taller than I was, probably just under six feet. His fur was a pale brown, streaked through with black and silver. A tail of pure black fur moved around behind him like a furry snake. Eyes of mild green gazed at me curiously, roving over me as if he hadn't seen a chakat before. If he hadn't, he hid the fact extremely well.

"It's a pretty large uni, so that's entirely possible." The wolf extended a well-manicured paw. "Name's Leon Kavanaugh Runswift the Fourteenth. Most people call me Leon, oddly enough. Or 'Kavvy'."

I blinked rapidly, staring at Leon. "The Fourteenth? And with that British accent..." I held out my hand, a bit stunned. Was I in the presence of royalty?

Leon seemed to read my thoughts, and grinned as he shook my hand. "No, I'm not royalty, thought it seems that way. I'm merely the fourteenth male in our family named Leon. The Runswift line goes back about two hundred years...give or take a decade or two. Just treat me as you would any other person." The line moved forward a few places, allowing him and myself to serve ourselves. "I highly recommend the casserole," he said, spooning himself a large helping, grabbing a heap of bread, then moving on again to select a small apple pie for dessert.

"I'm not particularly fussed about mushrooms," I said, regarding Leon's plate warily. It *did* look inviting though.... "But I guess I'll give it a try." I scooped up about half of what Leon had taken, then grabbed a bowl of soup. "Pumpkins, on the other paw, I'll eat quite happily."

For my dessert, I thought I'd indulge myself with the 'Death by Chocolate' cake. Leon stared at me, a wry grin on his face when he saw what I'd selected. "Got a sweet tooth, have you?"

"Not particularly. I just felt like having something different." After picking up a couple of Cokes from the vending machine, and paying for the food, we made our way to an empty table. Leon sat down, gesturing for me to do the same before he realised how pointless it was. We 'taurforms don't need to sit, really, but I took the gesture with a smile. I picked up my fork, looking down at the chicken and mushroom casserole with trepidation. "Here goes," I muttered to myself.

Just as I was about to take the first bite, I saw Kerisa enter the room, followed a few seconds later by Deepriver. "Oh, hell!" I swore, a look of sudden recollection on my face.

"What?" Leon stopped in mid-chew, peering at me with concern. "Is something the matter?"

I waved a hand in the general direction of the queue of people waiting to serve themselves. "I said I'd eat lunch with my friends. Care to join us? I'm sure they wouldn't mind...one of them needs to make new friends, anyway."

Leon shrugged. "Sure. Any friend of yours is a friend of mine, or so the saying goes." He stopped eating for the moment, while I tried to get my friends' attention. After a few waves of my arms, Kerisa noticed and grinned at me, nodding her head in understanding.

"So who's this?" Kerisa inquired when she padded up to the table, taking the position to my left, Deepriver taking the right. "Introduce us, why don't you?"

"Kerisa, Deepriver, this is Leon...Runswift," I said, deciding to drop the rest for his benefit. "Leon, my best friend Kerisa, and a friend we met only yesterday, Deepriver." Kerisa wasted no time in giving Leon a big, chakat-style hug, much to his bewilderment. Deepriver merely nodded, a vague smile on his face. "Nice to meet you, Leon."

"Nice to meet two such lovely lad...er..." Leon trailed off, not quite sure how to group the two additions to our table collectively.

"Ladies will do fine," I said, giving Leon some help. "She's female —" I pointed to Kerisa, "— and we chakats always look outwardly female, so it's just easier to refer to us as ladies. We don't mind, really."

Kerisa tapped her fork on her plate impatiently. “Can we eat already? I’m starving! I haven’t had anything since breakfast.”

I snorted at that. “I didn’t even have time for that this morning, so count yourself lucky.” I dug up a forkful of the cooling casserole, and put it in my mouth, wondering how it would taste. To my surprise, it barely tasted of mushrooms at all. The flavourful spices in the dish masked the bitterness, yet added to the chicken’s tastiness. “Oh, Leon, you were right about this casserole. It’s lovely!”

Leon smirked a little at me. “Trust me when it comes to food. My father was a great chef, and he taught me a lot about cooking, including spices.” He grinned as I took another large bite and savoured the taste.

Kerisa looked down at her plate, upon which rested a brown amorphous mass that I assumed was the Mystery Meal, then at my plate. “I think I’m not hungry any more. I have utterly no idea what this meal is.”

“Um...” Deepriver looked at his Meal, cut off a portion and ate it. “Ugh. Tastes like...like...” Shi groped for a suitable description, giving up after a few seconds. “It’s inedible, anyway.” Both shi and Kerisa looked at Leon and me. “Do either of you want ours?”

“No, thanks,” we said together, shaking our heads. While we continued to eat our wonderfully tasting lunch, the other two just shifted their food around with their forks. When I moved onto my cake, Deepriver’s eyes lit up. “Are you going to eat all that?” shi asked hesitantly. “Chocolate’s a rare treat for me, and I didn’t have enough change on me to buy it.”

I broke the cake, which was actually quite a big slab, into two pieces, giving the larger portion to the other chakat. I bit into my piece, and was almost overwhelmed by the incredibly rich sweetness. “My gods!” I exclaimed, my face screwing up into a comic expression. “This is *sweet*! No wonder they call it ‘Death by Chocolate’.”

I watched Deepriver as shi ate his. His eyes were closed, his face serene as shi chewed. Every now and then shi’d emit a purr of bliss as shi consumed the rich confection. I glanced at Kerisa, then at Leon. Both were looking with interest at Deepriver. “I’ve never seen anyone with such a passion for chocolate,” Leon murmured.

“Hmm? Oh!” Deepriver blushed when she noticed shi was being stared at. “I feel like such an idiot, acting the way I am...” Shi quickly finished off the cake without further comment.

“Yes, well, everyone is entitled to their personal quirks,” I said, grinning. “Makes a nice change.” I consumed the rest of my piece then leaned back, feeling there was something I’d forgotten. “Oh! Deepriver! Would you like to come round for dinner? My sister extends the invitation. I told her about you yesterday and shi said shi’d like to meet you.”

Deepriver regained his look of uncertainty at the offer. “Um...I can’t tonight. I have a test tomorrow that I should study for.” Shi peered down at her congealed plate, not saying another word.

“Right...okay. Leon? Perhaps you might like to come for dinner? I don’t normally make such offers to people I barely know, but you seem like such a nice guy...” And a very good-looking guy at that, I added mentally.

Kerisa quickly narrowed her eyes at me, as if she was saying “He’s *mine*, you hear me?” I caught the look she shot at me and nodded imperceptibly. You want him, you entertain him.

“I’m sorry, but I have a previous engagement with my folks. They’re trying to palm me off onto another prospective mate. Honestly.... We’re in the 2300s, and parents *still* try and act the Victorian matchmakers. It’s ridiculous.” Leon made a rude noise to show his disgust at such old-fashioned tactics.

“That’s okay,” I said, slightly relieved for some odd reason. “I’m glad my parents aren’t like that – though my mother is a little on the fussy side.”

We spent the next few minutes until the bell rang for the end of lunch talking, getting to know each other a little better. At the end of it all, I was pleased that I’d made two new friends in as many days. One can never have too many friends, I thought as I padded off to a botany lecture.

The rest of the day proceeded normally. When I got home that afternoon, Greytail was at the kitchen table, a small pile of books sitting next to her. I went into my room to dump my books and stuff, then came out to the dining area. “What are you reading?” I asked as I rummaged through the fridge for

something cold and refreshing to drink. I came up with a large bottle of L&P, shut the fridge with my tail and went to the table.

"I got those books you asked for," shi said, not looking up from hir reading. "Everything you've always wanted to know about growing exotic plants but were afraid to ask." Shi now put down the book and moved to give me a warm hug. "Tell me how your day was, before we go any further into the exciting field of plants."

I leaned into Grey's arms, encircling hir with my own while I thought. "It was...interesting. I was obviously late when I got to my first class, but Professor Mallein took my excuse well enough. I said I'd had 'one of those nights' again."

Grey laughed, the vibrations running into my body, giving me a small thrill of pleasure. "I used to use the same excuse when I was your age. Anyway, carry on. Did you have lunch with...what's hir name?" Shi prompted me to fill in the blanks.

"Deepriver? I did, yes. And I met a great wolf morph by the name of Leon Kavanaugh Runswift the Fourteenth. We all had lunch together. Well, he and I did. Deepriver and Kerisa mistakenly chose the Mystery Meal, so they didn't really eat lunch as such." I shrugged at such trivialities.

"Eh? The Fourteenth? What is he...some kind of nobleman? Surely there can't be too many with royal blood nowadays..." Grey backed up a step, staring at me with hir golden eyes wide.

I wasn't entirely sure myself, either, so I just shrugged again. "I don't think so. He said he was the fourteenth in his family to have the name Leon, so.... Maybe he is, maybe he isn't. I asked both around for dinner, but they declined, at least for the time being."

"Well, I guess I'm not surprised," my sister said, moving back to hir previous spot at the table. "After all, they've only known you for a day. You'd be rather apprehensive if you were asked to dinner by someone you barely knew, don't you think?"

I picked up one of the books, idly flicking through the glossy pages. "Hmm...good point. Anyway, speaking of dinner...what is it?"

"Well, seeing as we're not going to have guests tonight, I thought we could just send out for pizza. I hear Pete's Pizzas are having a special on large Hawaiian pizzas. Two for \$9.99 plus a 2 litre Coke for an extra ninety cents. It's been a few weeks since the last time, don't you agree?"

"That sounds great! But what are you going to have?" I grinned at Grey's disapproving frown, which suddenly dissolved into an open smile. "Very funny, Sandwalker. You're going to have to come with me. Only one special per customer, so you'll have to buy your own."

I shrugged. "Suits me fine." I looked up at the kitchen clock, which showed a few minutes to five o'clock. "Best we go now, before the rush hour starts."

We collected our little body pouches in which we liked to carry our money in and left the house. It took us only a few minutes to get down to Pete's, but when we got there, it seemed as if most of North Auckland had had the same idea we had. "Oh, man!" I grumbled as we took a place at the back of a line stretching some twenty metres from the door to the counter. "Is it really worth the long wait? What's wrong with Giuseppe's Pizzeria?"

"The pizzas are terrible. I should know – I've had one of them before. It had way too much garlic on it." Grey looked around, then up toward the counter. "Um...Sandy. What did you say Deepriver looked like?"

"Sort of a dark red, with black and grey tiger stripes. Why? Is she here?" I craned my neck all over the place, looking like a silly tourist.

Shi pointed at the front, where said chakat was serving a customer. If I concentrated I could just make out hir words. "Two Chicken Pizzas with extra cheese. That'll be nineteen seventy-five, thanks." I watched with incredulity as the line moved forward a bit more, allowing us to see a little clearer. "That's hir all right, but shi said shi had a test to study for...unless that was just a cover up for the fact that shi works here. But what's wrong with working in a pizza parlour?"

Grey looked at me with an understanding expression on hir face. "Well, if you wanted a good job, but could only get one as low as serving fast food, wouldn't you be a little tempted to hide that fact from everybody?"

“Um...I guess you do have a point, though I’ve always thought working in a pizzeria was a great thing.” I pondered it a moment longer before the line moved again toward its inevitable conclusion. “I wonder what hir reaction will be when shi recognises me.”

“We don’t have very long to wait before that question will be answered,” Grey said to me in a low tone of voice. Only five more customers stood in front of us.

A few minutes later it was our turn to be served. “Good evening. What is your —” Deepriver broke off suddenly when shi realised who shi was speaking to. “Oh, gods. YOU!” The outburst prompted a few curious looks from customers in other lines, much to hir embarrassment. “What is your order?” shi repeated in a more normal tone of voice, though the insides of hir ears were redder than I’d ever seen them.

“We’d like to order two of your Hawaiian specials to go. We’re paying separately – one for hir, and one for me.” I looked Deepriver in the eyes until shi turned away to deliver the order to the kitchen. “They’ll be about five minutes, if you’d care to wait?” When we nodded shi leaned over and hissed in a low voice, “What are you doing here! I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life!”

I nearly said, “I’m sure you have,” but I wisely refrained from saying so. “We’re just buying our dinner. We might ask you the same question, don’t you think?” Before shi could say anything I butted in. “Look, there is nothing wrong with working in a pizza parlour. In fact, I’d love to work here, with all the smells, the customer interaction, the gossip...” I stopped when Grey gave me one of hir Looks when I said the word ‘gossip’. “Anyway, the point is that there is nothing to be ashamed about. Look at it as a chance to learn people skills. You have, haven’t you? After all, you’re working with other people. You’re not afraid to touch them, are you?”

Deepriver stared at me for such a long time that I was starting to get rather uncomfortable when shi said, “You’re right.” Shi smiled then, and quickly gave me a small hug over the counter. “That’s the main reason why I took this job a week or two ago; to get used to being around people all the time. Truth is...I sort of like working here. The people are usually friendly, though I get the odd misfit in here who likes to stir up trouble, but otherwise...” Shi shrugged then, and turned to collect our pizzas from the slot behind hir. “Here you go. That’s nine ninety-nine, plus a buck eighty for the drinks if you wish to buy them.”

“We certainly do,” Grey said, grinning at Deepriver. “When does your shift finish?” shi asked as shi took the pizzas and drinks, and paid for them before I could get my own money out. “Pay me later,” shi whispered quietly.

“Uh...” Deepriver glanced at the large clock that stationed above the kitchen door behind hir. “At 6:30, actually. Why?”

“We’d like you to join us for dinner, if that’s all right with you? We’ll shout you, of course.” Grey cocked hir head sideways in inquiry.

The chakat behind the counter looked rather surprised, but shi nodded, a small smile on hir face. “We’ll be in the park across the street,” Grey said as we left. Out of the corner of my eye I saw hir slip Deepriver a twenty dollar note with a sly wink. I grinned to myself. “Well, it looks as if things are about to take a turn for the better, and maybe we can get some excitement out of it as well,” Grey murmured to me as we went out the door with our purchase.

“I hope so, because I really like that chakat.” I pointed discreetly between my legs, causing Grey to grin. “Oh?” shi said without bothering to look. Shi knew what I meant. “We’ll have to do something about that, won’t we?”

## Chapter Three

The park was rather nice at night. The trees were subtly lit by coloured lights set in their branches, which gave them a sort of party feel.

Grey and I sat at a picnic table underneath a pair of flowering pohutukawa trees, their bright red brush-like blossoms appearing black-purple in the subdued blue light in the trees. “Beautiful, aren’t they?” I murmured to Grey over the table, this one specially designed for ’taur-forms. “It’s a pity they didn’t use red lights. Would have made them seem a little more...natural.”

“Um...well, it doesn’t really matter what colours they use at night; the flowers are still best viewed in full daylight. Oh, here shi comes!”

We both turned to watch Deepriver hurrying up to us, the streetlights making hir fur a garish shade of orange-red. “There’s no rush!” I called to hir as shi moved up the crushed gravel path to where the table stood.

“I know, I know, but I’ve been too well trained to not to be late for anything.” Shi halted beside the table, hauling out the goods shi’d bought. Three pizzas, one with chicken, one with olives and anchovies and the other with heaps of cheese; two 2 litre bottles of lemonade and coke, plus an order of chips. “Wow, you must eat a lot,” I said as shi put the chips on the table.

“Not necessarily. I figured that if you wanted more, there would be.” Shi took a place next to Grey, and began to tuck in. Shrugging, we followed hir lead.

After a few seconds shi stopped, and looked at Grey. “Oh! We haven’t introduced ourselves, have we?” Shi blushed with embarrassment again. “Oh, dear. I’m Chakat Deepriver, daughter of Longmuzzle and Earthtender.” Shi held out a hand awkwardly, as both were a little full.

Grey took the proffered hand, grinning widely. “Chakat Greystail, daughter of Trailblazer and Skywatcher. I’m Sandy’s older sister.” I nodded in happy acknowledgement of that fact. “We were both sired by the other’s mother, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh! Really?! I wouldn’t have guessed....” Deepriver trailed off, looking down at hir pizza. “But then, who would? After all, it’s very rare for siblings to look alike.”

“True, true. Don’t worry about it. It’s a definite pleasure to meet you. I have to admit, I think Sandy was right about you.” Grey smiled at Deepriver’s expression, which was now somewhere between flattered and chagrined. “Oh? What did shi say?”

I stepped in then, replying with, “I said that you were very good-looking, and that...um....” I looked at Grey, silently asking hir if I should say what I was going to. At hir answering nod, I carried on. “And that I think I like you. A lot.” This time it was my turn to blush.

Deepriver stared at me for such a long time, I almost thought hir eyeballs would dry out. Then shi blinked. “I’m...flattered, I think. And...pleased that you think so much of me. I’ve never heard anyone say they liked me in that way.” Shi smiled then, a smile full of warmth. With a quick movement shi came around the table and gave me a strong hug.

“Urk!” I uttered in surprise. I was very taken aback. Shrugging inwardly, I returned the hug. When we pulled apart, I was shocked to see tears in Deepriver’s eyes. ‘Oy,’ I thought to myself. ‘This is one seriously emotional chakat.’ Returning to the situation at hand, I asked, “What’s the matter?”

Deepriver sniffed and wiped hir eyes with the back of hir hand. “Oh, dear. I’m sorry. I don’t usually get that emotional, really, but....” Shi sniffed again awkwardly, then delivered another blow to my heart. “I like you too. You’re so...so sweet, gentle, loving....” Shi broke down into tears again and clung to me, soaking my tabby fur.

I glanced at Grey, who just stood there with a rather stunned expression on hir face, slice of pizza held halfway to hir mouth. I was sure that shi was thinking the same thing I was: this girl needs some serious loving.

I hugged Deepriver to my body, letting hir shed the tears that had been bottled up for who knew how long, stroking the soft red fur on hir head, moving down the back of hir upper body to where it joined the lower body. Grey put down hir pizza and joined us, clasping both of us in hir embrace.

After about two minutes of being in that position, my chest was getting rather saturated, and I figured we'd better get Deepriver home. "Come on, 'River," I murmured lightly. "Stop your crying now, love. Let's get you home."

Deepriver nodded in agreement, and pulled away from Grey and me, blotting his tears with his hand again. I put the food back in their bags and boxes, and handed them to Grey, who took them wordlessly with a nod of understanding. "Where do you live?" I asked gently.

"Alexandra Drive," she replied, pointing in the appropriate direction. "Just a couple of blocks away. Um...if it wouldn't be too much trouble..." She trailed off, swallowed hard, then continued. "Would you mind if I spent the night with you two? I live in a flat by myself, and I get so lonely. All I have to talk to is a stuffed toy, but he's not one for particularly interesting conversation. All he does is just sit on the chair with an agreeable look on his face."

"Of course you can stay with us!" I said emphatically. "We'd love to have you round." I caught 'River up in another hug, winking over his shoulder at Grey, who nodded back, a knowing smile on his face.

Together we walked the few blocks back to our house. We didn't say anything as we walked. We didn't have to. All that really needed to be said had already been said. Me and 'River padded leisurely down the footpath, our arms around each other's shoulders. Grey followed a couple of metres behind us, carrying the food. To the average person, we might have looked just slightly odd as a group, but we didn't care.

"Welcome to our humble abode," I said as I opened the front door and stepped in. I grinned as 'River's jaw dropped in astonishment. "This is...so very different from where I live. This is your own house, you said? How did you afford it? I'm sorry; I shouldn't ask such questions. Oh..."

Grey shut the door behind him and placed the now rather cold food on the table on top of the books that still cluttered the surface. "Don't worry yourself over it. We inherited it from Trailblazer's parents, who died a little while ago. Now, we *really* should eat this food. After I've reheated it, of course." She retrieved the partially consumed pizzas and went into the kitchen to zap them for a while in the microwave oven.

"Let's eat in the living room," I said, heading in that direction myself. "Oh! Before I do, let me show you the rest of the house." I then proceeded to give 'River a guided tour of our reasonably spacious home, showing him each of the three bedrooms, the bathroom and toilet, and the little porch that extended into the back garden. I turned on the lights so she could see the plants closest to the porch.

"Oh, they're gorgeous!" 'River cried, seeing the massive hydrangea bushes, one on each side, in all of their spectacular blue and red glory. 'Greytail is the green thumb person. I'm not too friendly to plant life, though I have the odd success." I chuckled at my weak joke. "She puts just the right amount of additives to make the bushes as blue – and red – as possible."

'River was almost hugging the blue bush, burying his face in the massive square-petalled blooms. "I love these flowers! They're my favourites! And the colour...I've never managed to get mine to this size and shade," she said, just a tad wistfully.

I came down off the porch to give 'River another hug. "Grey would be thrilled to pass on some of his botanical knowledge to you." Pointing off into the darker areas of the relatively expansive garden – at least it *seemed* quite large, though I knew it was probably little larger than a hundred square metres – I told him of some of the other wonders that resided here, such as the snapdragons, irises, rhododendrons, and even a bird of paradise in a far corner.

"Dinner's ready! Again!" called Grey from the porch door. I followed Deepriver inside, closing the door behind me to prevent the annoying mosquitoes from gaining entrance.

Going into the lounge, I saw that Grey had spread out a large, thick tartan blanket on the floor, presumably to catch crumbs. We sat ourselves down and began to help ourselves to the now piping hot, and still crispy, pizzas, drinking the Coke from cups designed for 'taur-forms. We didn't converse much, concentrating most of our attentions on feeding our stomachs.

When we had finished and cleaned up, we all lay together, 'River sandwiched between Grey and me, and watched some comedies on TV. It was really nice to hear him laugh; it was slightly deep, but

highly melodic. I sighed, and leaned against 'River's upper body contentedly. It was then that I realized that in my mind I'd been shortening his name to a kind of pet-name.

'River seemed to sense that too. Shi turned his head and looked me right in the eyes, his own of brilliant amber boring into me, perhaps even my soul. I felt myself getting lost in those eyes, until I blinked and returned to reality. Shi then glanced at Grey, then back to me, as if trying to decide between us. Shi took a deep breath...then dropped the bombshell.

"I have been thinking this through for a couple of days now – well, ever since you introduced yourself to me, really – and...I feel that I'm doing the right thing. You've aroused in me a sense of...longing. Longing to be with someone who I like, possibly even love, very much. Chakat Sandwalker..." I held my breath at this point, realising what Shi was going to say. "Will you be my Companion?"

Grey gasped, totally bowled over by this very important request of me. My mind raced, trying to assimilate this startling revelation. Since I had first set eyes on him, I had liked 'River very much, but I wasn't entirely sure now if I were ready for such a commitment, even one as minor as a Companionship. After all, it had been only yesterday, really, that I had met him. I personally had never heard of any Companionships being so hurried, and I was frantically racking my brain trying to think of a way to hold off until I was absolutely sure of myself.

"Er...let me talk it over with Grey first, if you don't mind? There's something that I want to clear up with him."

'River seemed somewhat disappointed in this answer, and I was very quick to give him a reassuring hug. "Don't worry. It's just a little issue that I'm not quite sure about. I've never been in a Companionship before, so I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. All right?" Shi nodded, a slightly happier smile on his face. "Grey. My room. Now."

I made sure to shut the door behind Grey when Shi came in. "Tell me this, Grey. Do you know of any Companionships that were established within a day or two of the two sides meeting each other for the first time?" I glared at him with a worried expression on my face.

"Well...I don't really know, to be perfectly honest," Shi said, scratching absently at one ear. "The shortest period I've heard of is a week, but there may be others that were formed in less time."

"Oh, dear," I muttered, chewing on a claw. "As much as I like 'River – heck, I've even taken to shortening his name, like I do when I really like someone – I'm...scared."

Grey quickly came to give me a reassuring cuddle. "Don't be. There's a first time for everything, remember. Just go with what your heart tells you, not what your panicked brain says."

I nodded, feeling a bit better. "You're right. Listen to my heart, not my brain." I took a few calming breaths, which often helped me to think when under stress. "All right..." I took one more breath, let it out slowly, then opened the door.

'River was standing in the middle of the lounge when I came back in, and Shi was looking rather apprehensive. Was I about to reject his request to have a loving partner? "We have talked about it, and I am ready to give my answer."

A few seconds of silence passed by before 'River asked his question again, with more than a hint of longing in it. "Chakat Sandwalker...will you be my Companion?"

With a small smile on my face I stepped forward and lick-kissed his muzzle. "Chakat Deepriver, I accept. Yes, I will be your Companion." We caught each other in a *very* strong, almost rib-breaking hug, not letting go until we needed to draw breath.

Grey chuckled, a wide grin plastered across his face. "Congratulations, you two. You're definitely made for each other. This calls for some celebration, don't you think?"

I looked at Grey, and noticed his raised eyebrow. "Oh!" I exclaimed, realising what Shi meant. "Yes, you're right there." I turned to face 'River and said quietly, "'River, would you accompany me to my room? If you wish, Grey will attend as well. After all, you've sort of become part of the family now."

'River looked a little mystified by my tacit request to consummate our deep liking, maybe even love, for each other. In a flash of insight I realised that if Shi'd been keeping contact with other chakats, and possibly other 'taurs, to the barest minimum, then Shi might not have had the opportunity to indulge in lovemaking.

“Ah...” I tried to figure out a good way of explaining what was to happen next. Thankfully 'River let me off the hook by saying, “I must tell you...I've never...done it before. Heck knows I've been ready for years, but...” Shi trailed off, blushing furiously.

“Oh! I see.... Well, this will be a *very* special celebration then, won't it Grey? A celebration of hir becoming a man? And woman?”

Grey nodded, and gestured for us to go to my room. We did so, 'River leading the way. As I passed Grey shi stopped me and whispered something in my ear. “Oh, gods! You...” I giggled as I followed 'River. What Grey had told me was why 'River had suddenly grasped the meaning of what shi had said. I hadn't seen hir, but 'River had, and Grey had signed to her, touching hir sheath with one hand, then patting himself under hir tail. 'River had gotten the meaning almost immediately.

I closed my door behind me, leaving just me and 'River alone together. We embraced each other for a few seconds, then I began to giggle nervously. “What are you giggling for?” 'River asked.

“I'm nervous,” I replied. “I've made love before, plenty of times, but that's always been with my sister, never anyone else. And you're a virgin, so it would be worse for you...”

'River pulled back to look deep into my eyes. “I may be inexperienced, but I know what to do. And how else should two chakats prove their love for each other?”

“You have a point,” I said, slightly sheepish. I went over to the comfy mattress, and slowly sank down onto it, gesturing with my arm for 'River to join me.

“Oh, this mattress is so nice,” shi murmured when shi was lying down next to me. “Much softer than mine.” Shi leaned against me, and we stayed like that for a couple of minutes, partly because we enjoyed each other's company, but also because we were somewhat uncertain on how to proceed.

Finally I just did what Grey would normally do. I gently moved around so that I was facing 'River, then I pulled hir into a slow, lingering kiss. Shi melted into my arms as our tongues battled with each other gently, until we ran out of breath.

We pulled apart slightly, grinning idiotically at each other, then I bent my head forward, gently taking the nipple of hir right breast into my mouth. Shi shivered with pleasure as I massaged the sensitive tissue with my lips, coaxing forth a slow trickle of milkwater, which I lapped up, savouring the sweet taste of hir.

I tired of that breast and moved onto the other, continuing to massage the other with my hand. Deep purrs began to rumble from 'River's chest, encouraging me to move slightly further afield. My other hand crept around to gently work fingers into the area where hir upper body met the lower body.

The feelings shi was experiencing were wonderfully thrilling, and it wasn't very long before shi came to the first real climax shi'd probably ever had. Shi was panting with the unaccustomed effort, but shi had a radiant smile on hir face. I grinned, thinking to myself, ‘If shi thinks that was good, shi's going to love what will come next.’

'River surprised me though when shi began to reciprocate, repeating the same actions as I'd done on hir. Shi massaged both of my tender breasts, licking first one, then the other, alternating between them. I mewed in pleasure at the attention I was getting, increasing in volume when shi began to suckle at my nipples, drawing from me the nutritious milkwater that all chakats produce.

Hir hands moved to my back, drifting slowly through my fur, running hir fingers along my spine, which caused numerous shivers to race up and down my back, eventually bringing about a massive orgasm that tore my right nipple from hir mouth's gentle grasp. Shi smiled at me as I wound down, drawing me into hir arms.

Hir deft fingers began to roam further, down my belly until they got to my sheath, whereupon they gently stroked it, coaxing my maleness out of its hiding place. Smiling, shi pulled away from our embrace, and smoothly turned herself around and crouched forward slightly, presenting herself to me, hir tail moving to the side to afford better entrance, looking over hir shoulder at me.

I smiled back fondly at 'River then moved to mount hir. My cock quickly found its mark, and with one slow movement I pushed into hir virgin depths. Shi was slightly tight, but not unduely so, and I revelled for a few moments in the silky feel, before beginning the slow strokes that would bring us both to climax.

Shi was purring very loudly as I made tender love to hir, turning hir upper torso so shi could engage me in another passionate kiss. My hands reached around to gently fondle hir breasts again, while my handpaws gently kneaded hir belly.

The moments passed by like hours. Even so, all good things must come to an end, and this was no exception. With a loud yowl of ecstasy I came to my peak, my life-giving seed spurting into hir depths. Barely two seconds later 'River reached hir climax, hir wonderful vagina clenching around me in powerful contractions, coaxing more semen out of me.

We slowly collapsed down onto the mattress, lying on our sides as we felt our energy slip away. I remained inside hir, enjoying the pleasant feelings that were still wandering through my system. Hir upper body rested upon mine, the vibrations from hir slow purring going through my body in a soothing massage.

After being together like that for several minutes shi said softly, "That was wonderful, Sandy. Now it's my turn to make you happy." With that shi pulled away, and moved to roll me over onto my back. My legs all splayed outward, affording hir a very good view of my femsex.

Shi smiled slowly, then bent hir head down between my legs. I shuddered hard when I felt hir agile tongue caress my vaginal lips, moving deeper to lick my clit. My juices starting flowing almost immediately, much to 'River's delight. Shi lapped them up almost as fast as they were produced.

Eventually shi tired of that very enjoyable activity and lifted hir head to look at me, a few drops dribbling down hir chin. "Now the fun starts..." Shi moved to straddle my body, crouching down to give my breasts another slow licking, before shuffling back slightly to make hir entry.

I mewd in extreme happiness as I felt the length of 'River's maleness slide its way into my wet depths until it was completely inside me. Shi didn't move for a few moments, savouring the sensation of being inside another for the first time, then shi slowly pulled out and thrust back in again.

I encouraged 'River as shi gradually got the hang of things, pulling hir down into a love-filled kiss as shi thrust into me. I found I could still taste some of my juices on hir mouth, and I grinned, gasping as a momentary shiver suddenly ran through my body.

A few seconds later I rose to my climax again, howling in feline bliss as it crashed through my system. 'River followed, very ecstatically, a few seconds later, hir thick cum splashing into me in forceful jets.

Shi collapsed on top of me, a few trickles of semen still pumping out as shi panted hard. "I'm really...not used to...this much...exertion," shi muttered, giving my face a lick. "Thank you, Sandy."

I smiled tiredly up at 'River, returning the lick. "You're most definitely welcome, 'River, dear."

When Grey opened the door later to see how we were, shi found us still together, 'River on top, me on the bottom, fast asleep. Grinning to himself, shi closed the door, letting us be.

## Chapter Four

Deepriver moved into our house a couple of days after our first night together, and since then it was as if shi had always been a part of our family. Every night we shared a bed together, 'River snuggled up between my sister and I.

Today, a week after I had first set eyes on hir, shi was going to meet my – and Grey's – parents.

"Pass the butter, please?" I noticed when 'River passed me the large dish that held the butter to me that shi seemed somewhat shaky. The end of hir tail, which I could just see behind hir, was switching madly to and fro, like an agitated metronome, a lot like mine does when I'm anxious. "Is everything alright?" I asked, buttering my toast then peering at hir with a concerned frown.

'River smiled wanly at me, shrugging. "I'm just nervous about meeting your parents, I guess. I'm worried about what they might think of me." Shi took another bite of hir bacon and eggs and chewed slowly.

"Ah. I see. I don't think you'll have too much to worry about. Trailblazer is pretty easy-going, and heck knows shi's been wanting me to find myself a partner for some time. Skywatcher, on the other hand..." I looked over to Greytail who rolled hir eyes dramatically. "Shi can be a little tetchy, sometimes."

"When did you say they were arriving, Grey?" 'River asked, before taking another bite. "About twelve-ish, wasn't it?"

Grey nodded, digging a large spoonful of cornflakes out of hir bowl. "Give or take a few minutes, but if I know Father, shi'll be precisely on time." Shi looked up to the clock, which said 9:28am. "I should say we'll have enough time to do some stocking up of the pantry before then."

"I'll do it, if you write up a list," volunteered 'River, smiling at us. Since shi'd moved in, shi'd tried to make himself as useful as possible. As the crowds in the supermarket tended to be rather extreme towards lunchtime, I said I'd accompany hir. I had some letters to post anyway, so it wasn't really going out of my way.

"Thanks, Sandy," shi said. Shi polished off the rest of hir breakfast, then got up to put hir plates and cutlery in the dishwasher. I finished mine, then went to have a quick shower before going out.

When we got back from the supermarket both 'River and I were exhausted. "I had no idea it was so busy, even on a Sunday," I complained as I dumped several bags of groceries on the kitchen floor for Grey to sort through. "It was like New York on a good day."

Grey had just come in from being in the garden, and now shi took off hir gardening gloves and began taking items out of the bags, opening up various cupboards and placing the items inside. "Hmm, I know what you mean."

"What are we having for lunch?" asked 'River, going into the kitchen to help Grey put the groceries away. "It's nearly twelve now."

"I was actually thinking of a barbecue," Grey said, moving to open the fridge. Out of it shi took a couple of large plastic bags filled with what must have been marinated meat. "There's enough steak for all of us. Of course we'll have a salad. 'River, if you would like to make a start on that? I'll just finish up here then start the barbecue. And Sandy, if you could do the garlic bread?"

We all went about our business quickly. Every now and then I shot a quick glance at the clock, which continued its merciless progression toward midday.

I had just put the freshly made garlic bread into the oven to heat when I heard a vehicle pull up outside. Grey was in the back garden, so shi might not have heard it. Casting a look out of the kitchen window I saw a distinctively patterned chakat get out of the far side of the PTV, then a rather drab brown one from the near side. "Gods...right on time, too!" Turning to 'River I muttered, "Go tell Grey that they've arrived." I then made a beeline for the door.

"Mum! Dad! It's so great to see you!" I ran out the front door to greet my parents with a big hug. After I had hugged each of them I stood back and regarded them. They were getting older, I felt. Mum's midnight black fur, over which were scattered hundreds of tiny white star-like spots,

was now showing slight traces of grey. Dad's was normally a deep cocoa brown, but it was now sporting a few grey hairs.

"It's very nice to see you too, dear," Skywatcher said, smiling faintly. "Now where's that sister of yours? Shi's not out gardening again, is shi?"

From behind me I heard a voice yell, "I'm here! Don't worry, I'm here." Grey hurried down the path to embrace our guests. As shi passed me I caught a light whiff of burned fur. "Come in, come in," shi was saying, gently herding our parents into the house. "Have a look around while I finish preparing lunch."

Before I went in after them, Grey stopped me and whispered into my ear, "I told 'River to mind the barbecue. I figure we should get some of Skywatcher's comments out of the way now, rather than have them all lumped up." I nodded, then went in through the door as Grey scooted around the back.

I could hear Mother's voice in the lounge as I came in. "Hmm...not bad, I suppose. I think the television would look better in that corner, though." Shi turned when I walked into the room. "For propriety's sake, Mother, just lay off the critical comments, will you? We don't go bad-mouthing your tastes when we visit you, so why should you do so here?"

I paused to view hir reaction, then I added, "As well as that, I have something that I want to show you when we go out into the garden to have lunch. Anyway, if I may show you the rest of our humble abode?"

The tour of the house didn't take very long, though I'm sure it was to Mum. I could see hir trying not to make a criticism of every room shi looked at. "Well, Mum," I thought silently as I watched hir jaw jut out. "You're going to be in for quite a shock in a few minutes."

We went out into the garden afterward, to see a table rigged up in the middle of the lawn, with plates and cutlery set out, even a tablecloth. The barbecue was sizzling away, with Grey keeping a careful watch on it. 'River was nowhere to be seen.

"If you would all seat yourselves, I'll serve up the meat," Grey announced, putting the last few pieces of steak onto a heating pad and bringing it to the table. Shi passed out a steak to each person, noticing Skywatcher eyeing the extra place set.

After we had all taken some salad and bread, we sat expectantly. Well...Mum sat with hir tail twitching in extreme curiosity, rather than expectation. Taking a nervous breath I said, "Mum, Dad," I said, looking at them both, "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

As if on cue, 'River stepped out from around a hydrangea bush, strolling slowly toward the table. Shi stopped when shi got to hir place, then said in a surprisingly level voice, "Greetings to you, Skywatcher, and you, Trailblazer. I am Deepriver, daughter of Longmuzzle and Earthtender."

Skywatcher's jaw worked soundlessly, while Trailblazer merely raised an eyebrow. "A pleasure to meet you," shi said, getting up to go give 'River a hug. "I assume that you and Sandy have formed a Companionship, correct?" shi asked, looking into 'River's eyes.

"We have, yes," 'River replied, meeting 'Blazer's gaze. "I made the offer last week, and shi accepted." Shi gestured for 'Blazer to go back to hir place at the table, sitting down at hir own, tail curling about hir feet.

Looking at Mum I could see that shi was still trying to formulate some sort of reply. "Mother, if you're going to say something, spit it out, instead of sitting there looking like a dumbstruck chicken." I gave hir one of my most withering looks to reinforce my statement. "If you don't approve, fine, but just keep your mouth shut if you can't say anything nice. Shi's my Companion, and that's that." At that point I started attacking my lunch with fervour, the knife and fork scraping loudly on the plate. Everyone else took that as their cue to begin eating.

Lunch was a reasonably quiet affair, probably because Skywatcher didn't deign to say anything. Dad was polite as always, asking 'River about hir background, hobbies, likes and dislikes, and so on. I was pleased to see 'River so open, though shi was a little guarded when talking about hir family. 'Blazer seemed to sense it was an uncomfortable subject, so shi didn't push the issue.

When we had finished we had dessert, which was a massive pavlova, fruit and ice cream, then Grey and 'River started clearing up while I took Mum and Dad into the lounge for a talk.

“Right,” I said once my parents had reclined themselves comfortably on the couches. “Opinion time. Get any good or bad things out in the open.” I stared at Mum while I said that.

“Shi’s a nice girl,” remarked Dad, as if shi were commenting on the weather. “Perhaps a little on the distrustful side, but that’s to be expected after meeting people for the first time.” Shi paused for a few moments, then added, “I believe that shi would be a good mate for you and, as far as I’m concerned, shi’s very welcome in this family.”

I nodded, a smile creeping across my face, then I looked at Mum, my smile disappearing to be replaced by a frown. “And you? I just know you’re bursting with opinions.”

Mum blinked at the implied accusation. “Well...shi’s a bit on the shy side, and I think you could have hooked up with someone of a better colour – you know I’m not too fond of red. Then there’s the fact that you’ve known hir for barely a week, and already you’ve declared yourselves Companions.” Shi drew breath as if to say more but I interrupted hir, putting a hand up to forestall any protests.

“At least you’re honest,” I said shortly. I moved myself into a more comfortable position then took a deep breath. “I’d might as well tell you how we got together.... Um, it was just over a week ago, when our botany class went to the beach to plant erosion-preventative grasses, that I first saw hir. I’d forgotten to put a top on that day, and shi was the only other ’taur not wearing anything. Kerisa told me shi was relatively new to the school, and that shi was terribly shy. We eventually managed to corner hir, and shi told us everything. We became tentative friends, and then the next night Grey and I went to get some pizza, and found hir working in the shop. We invited hir to have dinner with us, shi asked to stay the night, and...shi made the offer.”

I sat quietly, studying my parents’ reactions. Dad seemed rather calm about it all, a quality I had always found endearing. Mum just looked at me, totally silent. “I see,” shi said after a minute or so.

Quiet footfalls alerted me to someone’s presence, and I looked up to see ’River standing at the doorway, looking a little uncertain about interrupting. I waved hir in, smiling fondly when shi lay down beside me, leaning against my shoulder.

The room filled with silence again, until it was broken by a heavy sigh from Mum. Shi got to hir feet, and wandered over to us. To my surprise shi then put out hir arms and said, “Welcome to the family, dear.”

’River smiled then got up to be embraced by Mum. “Thank you, Skywatcher. I can’t tell you how much hearing you say that means to me.” Shi pulled away, slightly embarrassed.

“You’ve really got to overcome that shyness of yours,” Mum said critically, hir eyes getting the hooded appearance they got when shi frowned.

“I know, I know. I’ve never been very social; that’s why I took the job at the pizza parlour, to try and get used to people, maybe even get to know some of them. I think Sandy has helped me a lot with that, but some attitudes are so ingrained that it’s hard to override them.” Shi lay back down, and resumed hir previous position, purring softly.

“I’m sure you’ll overcome your inhibitions eventually, dear.” Mum went and sat back down leaning on hir mate’s shoulder. I smiled, feeling much better about the whole thing.

A couple of minutes later Grey came in, raising an eyebrow at the scene before hir. “I was going to suggest a stroll around the park to work off our lunch, but it seems you’re otherwise occupied.”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. “That’s fine. We can all go out as a family. Don’t you agree?” The last statement was directed at our parents, who had started licking and kissing each other.

“Hmm? Oh, right.” Trailblazer chuckled, gave Mum one more lick, then got to hir feet, helping ’Watcher up as well, then both followed Grey out of the room after nuzzling hir.

I rolled my eyes, glancing at ’River with a wry grin. “Welcome to the family.” We went out a few seconds after the others, who were already several feet ahead of us, closing the front door behind us.

We all strolled down the street, waving to people, ’taurs and bipeds alike, out walking or working in their gardens, or lying on porches in the shade. A couple of times we stopped to have a chat with a friend from school, and once to study an information board, but eventually we got to the park.

The park was a massive twenty hectare expanse of native and exotic bush, with wide trails meandering through the dense foliage. Today there were quite a lot of visitors, but we managed to avoid the majority of them.

After about twenty minutes of quiet, contemplative walking we came across the lake that lay at the centre of the park's beauty. Across the narrowest section of the lake was a wooden bridge, painted red. We padded onto the bridge, which was currently empty of people, and rested against the railings, peering down at the water, upon which several small boats were being rowed about.

"It's been so long since we've been here," Skywatcher murmured, purring softly as shi leaned against hir mate. "I'd forgotten how peaceful it was here. Actually...." Shi looked thoughtful for a moment as shi delved into hir memories. "Would you like to see where 'Blazer and I first declared ourselves lifemates? I think I remember where it was."

Grey raised an eyebrow and shot a glance at me. I grinned and nodded before replying, "Sure! I didn't know that particular snippet of history."

Mother looked a trifle smug. "There are some things that you will never know...until we decide to tell you. But anyway, if you'll all follow me.... The park's changed a little in layout but I think I can find my way." Shi led the way off the other end of the bridge, moving onto another path that wound up into the hillier section of the park, where the waterfalls had their beginnings. 'River linked arms with me as we walked, purring very softly, so only I could hear.

After a few minutes we stopped at a small clearing overshadowed by massive totara trees, a few metres off the main path. "Well, here we are," announced Skywatcher, gesturing around with an arm. "This is where we formally declared our lifemateship, one night under the stars. Well, it was under the stars *then*...the trees have grown somewhat," shi added with a slight blush, looking up to where the branches merged together to form a 'roof'. Trailblazer came up beside hir, and nuzzled hir cheek, putting an arm around hir.

"Interesting," I murmured. Looking around, I could see why they had chosen this place. My attention was drawn back to 'River when shi asked, "What's this mean?"

We all looked to where 'River was standing next to a trunk, pointing at an engraving. It was a rather badly-carved circle, with two arrowheads pointing anticlockwise. Inside the circle were the initials TB and SW.

"Oh...I'd forgotten about that," Trailblazer said, staring intently at it. "My carving skills weren't the best then.... I don't think they've improved in the past...oh, thirty odd years." Shi put out a hand to feel the rough bark, and the grooves that formed the initials. "Of course it's gotten a bit bigger, since the tree itself has grown."

I noticed Grey looking at me with a grin on hir face, and I stepped over to ask about it. "I was just thinking that the living room wall would look good with a set of carved initials like this one...don't you think?"

"Yeah, right!" I gave hir a sisterly punch on the arm, frowning at hir for a few seconds before breaking into a smile. "The novelty of it would wear off very quickly I think. Just think...we'd have to buy a painting to cover it up! That would go against all our undecorative morals."

We both started sniggering, drawing the others' attention. "Nothing," Grey said when questioned. "We were just...discussing some alterations to the house."

Before we could get wholly involved in talk about renovations, 'River asked, "Did you two make love here?" We all stared at hir, then starting chuckling. That was the last thing we thought we'd ever hear from hir. "What?" shi insisted.

"We did, yes," Mum answered, still chuckling. "I didn't think you'd have the guts to ask *that* question." Shi went over to give 'River a hug. "The fact that you did seems to strongly suggest that you're ready to frequent the disco scene."

"Heaven forbid!" I said, putting a hand to my forehead in an overly dramatic fashion. "I have this terrible image of hir in flairs, boogieing the night away."

'River blushed furiously, the inside of hir ears going a bright pink. "So, I'm not the most tactful person...but it was a serious question. Sandy and I didn't wait...though we did move to hir bedroom."

"I hope there weren't any passers-by while you were occupied," I said, raising an eyebrow at 'Blazer this time. "Making love in a park is a great way to earn a free visit of a jail cell."

"Well...there was one person," murmured Dad quietly, looking up into the overhanging branches, as if to avoid my gaze. "It was one of those nights when they have the light displays all around the park; you know, those fluorescent lights perched up in the branches, underwater, behind the waterfalls, et cetera. Anyway, there happened to be a white light about..." Shi paused while Shi glanced around, then pointed at a fork in the main branches of one of the trees. "There. Obviously the place is much higher." Shi shrugged, then continued.

"We had been occupied, as Sandwalker said, for a few minutes, and wå were so engrossed in our lovemaking that we failed to notice someone coming up the path." Dad stopped then, looking a little ill at ease, so Mum stepped in.

"There we were, quite obviously going hard at it, and this person came past, then just stopped. Luckily I'd turned my head in that direction, and I quickly alerted 'Blazer to the threat of being discovered. We just stayed perfectly still, not moving a muscle. I think we managed to pass ourselves off as a lifelike erotic statue. The guy even turned to look at us. He probably thought that the park authorities had decided to invest in erotic statuary."

Dad took over again, grinning wryly. "We had to stay like that for about two full minutes before the man moved on. It was all we could do not to break out in giggles at his expression. I don't know what we would have done if he had come up to examine us in further detail."

"Asked him to join in?" I suggested with an innocent look on my face, before Grey nudged me hard in the upper ribs. "Ow!" I nudged his back then quickly dodged away.

We spent only a few more minutes in that spot before moving on again to continue our tour of the park. We stopped by a coffee house that stood on the northern edge of the lake, purchased a few confections for afternoon tea, then sat at a table to watch flocks of ducks swimming around on the smooth surface of the lake. Some came out of the water to waddle up to us, quacking idly at us as if they expected us to feed them. I smiled to myself and fed them some of the Boston Bun I had bought.

One of the ducks seemed not to be interested in our food, instead intent on trying to nip pieces out of us. After Trailblazer and me had been bitten twice, we decided we had better vacate the area. That didn't deter the persistent duck at all, who continued to chase after us, much to the amusement of some of the park visitors we passed.

Eventually we managed to evade the duck, and we continued on our tour, heading out of the bush area into the zoological section, which consisted of nearly two hundred avian species, some of which – namely the cockatoos and parrots – could talk. We walked slowly around the bird cages, peering in and trying to identify the birds listed on the info plaques.

"Hello, cutie! Come back for more?" At that statement from a wide-eyed sulphur-crested cockatoo we broke into giggles and chuckles. The bird just looked at us, cocking his head sideways in curiosity. "You're mad," it said then. That did it; we cracked up, tears of laughter dampening our facial fur as we leaned weakly against the cage. Somebody must have had a wicked sense of humour to teach the bird those phrases.

We quickly moved on before the cockatoo could say anything else, and went to see the rest of the birds, before winding our way back into the bush via another trail.

For the rest of the afternoon we sort of dawdled our way through the remainder of the park, stopping at the playground to watch children of various species play, and the botanical dell where hundreds, probably thousands, of plants warred with our visual and olfactory senses. Some of the flowers were garishly coloured in oranges, purples and reds, while others were more subdued whites and pinks. Some had no discernible smell, other had more perfume than the entire Chanel range.

"My gods! What is that *awful* stench?" Skywatcher was in what appeared to be a miniature jungle, trying to block his nose. I wandered closer, noticing the same terrible smell. The others came over to investigate, and soon we presented quite an odd group, our hands covering our noses in an attempt to tone down the disgusting aroma.

“Ah! I see!” After a few seconds searching I’d stepped around a tree and found a large red flower, about a metre in diameter, sitting at its base. On its massive petals were white polka-dots. Flying around like planes at Auckland Airport were swarms of flies.

“What is it?” inquired Trailblazer, peering with curiosity at the plant. Shi inadvertently took his hand away from his nose to touch the flower, and shi flinched back from the smell again.

I thought for a moment, delving into my botanical knowledge. We’d discussed this briefly in a class not long ago.... “The ‘Stinking Corpse Lily’, I think. *Rafflesia arnoldii* is its botanical name. Usually only found in Indonesia.” I looked around for an info plaque, and found it nearby. “Yep. That’s it all right.”

“Ugh. Pretty, but...insidious-looking,” muttered ’River, walking away into cleaner air. We followed his example, leaving the plant to its business of attracting pollinatory flies, and investigated the rest of the dell.

When we finally exited the dell it was late afternoon. “My goodness,” exclaimed ’River. “I had no idea it had gotten so late.”

Neither had we. Looking up at the sky we could just see the beginnings of the sun’s colourful leaving, the white clouds floating by reflecting pale pinks and oranges. “Perhaps we’d better start back,” Grey said, looking at me. “By the time we get home, clean up, get tea ready....”

“True...” I murmured thoughtfully. “Besides, they shut the park at six on Saturdays, don’t they?”

Grey nodded. “That they do, and if my watch is correct —” Shi peered at the watch shi wore on his right wrist. “— then we’d better get out in the next five minutes, or we’ll be staying the night.”

That idea didn’t really appeal to us, so we made all haste to the main gate, which was just about to be closed for the night. The two humans pushing the massive iron gates shut stopped and stared at us as we tore up to them. “Sorry! We lost track of the time!” I called breathlessly as I ran past. They grinned, watching us run down the street, and resumed pushing the gates, which locked together with a resounding ‘clang’.

It was nigh on sundown when we returned to our house. All that walking had worked up an immense appetite, but none of us could be bothered with the effort of cooking, so we ordered take-aways. Grey went out to pick up our order while the rest of us just chatted idly.

“Tea’s up!” called Grey when shi came in about half an hour later. It was almost a mad rush to the kitchen table, upon which Grey was setting out several parcels wrapped in newspaper. Opening them we found massive amounts of chips, crisply battered fish, potato (even a few paua) fritters, sausages, all covered with liberal amounts of salt. From another bag that shi was carrying Grey produced five 2L bottles of Coke. “One for each of us,” shi said with a wry smile.

I went to the pantry to fetch the tomato sauce, and came back to find everyone already hoeing into the food. “Hey!” I protested. “Let me have some too!” I nudged Dad aside so I could grab a handful of steaming chips.

In a surprisingly short time the food had disappeared and we were all feeling quite stuffed, even for chakats. Leaning back on my haunches I sighed contentedly, glancing at the clock. 7:57pm, it read. “Time for *Coronation Street*, people!” I said eagerly. There was another mad rush to the lounge, leaving ’River behind to clean up the mess we had left. The program wasn’t one shi liked much, but shi was quite happy to make use of the time to neaten up.

Being a Saturday, *Coro St* was on for two hours, and when it was over we were all yawning widely. “Time for bed, I think,” I murmured tiredly. Mum and Dad, and Grey, agreed. “Guest room for you two, and Grey, ’River and I will take my room.”

“All right, dears. Good night.” Each of our parents gave Grey and I a hug, then went out of the room to give ’River one too, as shi had spent the remainder of the time at the kitchen table.

When the guest room door had closed, I turned off all the lights and led my sister and Companion to my room, closing the door behind us. I had a nice large mattress, and we lay down upon it, ’River sandwiched between me and Grey. ’River purred contentedly as our bodies pressed together warmly. “Goodnight, love,” I said to his. “Goodnight, Grey.”

“Goodnight, Sandy. Goodnight, Grey.”

## Chapter Five

It was just after dawn when I awoke, 6:14am by my clock's reckoning. I just lay there and enjoyed the peacefulness that seems to come only in those couple of hours between night and day. Taking note of my surroundings, I saw that Deepriver was still cuddled up in the curve of my body. Smiling to myself, I began to stroke hir head with one hand, eliciting a soft purr from hir throat. Shi stirred momentarily, eventually rousing to at least half wakefulness.

"Good morning, love," I murmured softly to hir, scritching hir behind one ear. "Sleep well?"

"Mmm...yes, I did. It's lovely being cuddled up to on both sides, isn't it?" Shi yawned, displaying hir formidable-looking teeth for a few seconds before closing hir mouth again. "What about you?"

"Well enough, I suppose. I think there was a cricket outside the window that started making an awful racket about 2-ish. How you can possibly sleep through it..." I shook my head in disbelief.

'River smiled at me, hir eyes gleaming in the half-light. "Quite easily, actually. Usually when I'm asleep nothing wakes me. I've slept through my old neighbour's car backfiring numerous times. It's on the same level as a radio turned up to about three-quarters volume, or so I've been told."

I laughed softly at that minor revelation. "Now and again we get the Number 46 bus driving past on its route, and that's probably even worse than a jet flying past. It hasn't had a decent overhaul in years, I suspect." I yawned then, and raised an arm to scratch my upper back. "Should we get up, or should we just lie here and try to get back to sleep? I'm personally all for the latter idea, but..."

"Oh, I don't know.... Say, where's Greytail?" 'River finally noticed the absence of my older sister. "I didn't think shi got up this early."

"Every now and then shi likes to go for a morning jog...though I think the word 'bound' might be more suitable in our case, don't you think?"

Shi giggled in the musical way that I loved, and nodded. "I think so, yes. Well, now that you and I are fully awake we'd might as well get up. Are your parents heavy sleepers?"

"Usually. On the odd occasion they've been known to be roused by 'Rattle ya dags!' yelled at the top of one's lungs, but otherwise...only a bomb would wake them up."

Both of us shared a laugh at that comment, before we finally convinced ourselves to get up. "I claim first use of the bathroom," 'River said, dashing out of the room before I could stop hir. "Hey! It's big enough for the two of us! Come back here!" I yelled after hir, forgetting that my parents were in the next room. The odds were pretty good that they wouldn't have heard a thing, but still....

'River grinned at me innocently when shi saw my frown as I walked into the bathroom a few seconds behind hir. "Oh, come on. Surely you can't be that upset." Shi reached into the spacious shower cubicle and turned on the water.

"Oh, not really," I said, a slightly malicious grin coming over my face. Shi had turned hir back to me so shi could keep tabs on the water temperature by holding hir hand under the spray. This was the perfect opportunity to get my own back. The water had been running for only a few seconds, so I knew it would be still quite cold. With a quick push to hir rump, I sent 'River splashing into the shower.

The shriek of surprise was very satisfying as shi was almost instantly drenched in icy water. 'River leaped out of the cubicle a few moments later muttering sulphurous oaths a pirate would be proud of. Well, actually 'shouting' would be a better term.

Eventually shi ran out of words, and just stood dripping on the squared lino. "You...you..." shi spluttered, then shi gave up with a "Gah!"

I smiled innocently back at my mate, trying to keep my amusement under control, without much success. I finally cracked up, and embraced 'River in a strong hug. "Ooh..." I pulled away and looked down at hir breasts. The shock of the cold water appeared to have caused the nipples to harden, a fact which was not lost on me. I reached down to gently describe a circle around one with a finger, sending a small thrill of pleasure through hir. Shi raised hir eyes to look at me, and quirked an eyebrow. "How about we kiss and make up in the shower where it's warm, hmm?" shi said after turning hir gaze momentarily on the now steaming shower.

“Oh, certainly...” I agreed. I followed 'River into the cubicle, which was plenty large enough for two full grown chakats. The water, which sprayed from six jets set in three of the walls, was hot, but not unduly so, and I soon adjusted to the temperature.

'River took a large bottle of apricot-scented shampoo from its shelf in one corner, and proceeded to lather me thickly, working up a soft foam all over me, paying particular attention to my breasts and underbelly. Hir soft strokes and massaging soon caused my maleness to show itself, much to hir delight.

I took the shampoo from my mate and returned the favour, gently massaging the viscous liquid into hir dark red fur. Moving around hir breasts, I used my thumbs to give each one a gentle stimulation. From hir nipples came tiny trickles of milkwater, which pleased me immensely.

We helped each other to rinse off thoroughly before we went any further. I reached up to the water control and lowered the pressure on the water jets. “That’s better,” I murmured before I bent down to lap at 'River’s breasts, gently flicking the tip of my tongue around the hard nipples, eliciting a shudder of pleasure from hir. Shi began to purr, quietly at first, then grew louder as I began to suckle on hir right breast, drawing the sweet milkwater into my mouth. I moved one of my handpaws down to hir underbelly and began to rub the fingers through the wet fur.

'River started to mewl in helpless ecstasy, hir orgasm painfully close. I switched breasts, and began to massage the one I had just vacated, still rubbing hir belly.

With a yowl of incredibly volume, probably amplified a lot by the surrounding walls, shi came, hir knees buckling to dump hir on the floor of the cubicle. Shi shuddered and writhed for a few seconds before shi began to wind down, panting heavily.

I looked down at my mate, hir fur plastered to hir body, with a big smile on my face. “That was interesting,” I observed, adding a chuckle when I saw hir answering grin.

“Yes, it was,” 'River panted, idly rubbing at hir breasts. “While I’m down here you’d might as well finish me off. I see your maleness needs some attention.” Shi glanced at the throbbing thickness that bobbed around underneath me, and reached out to stroke it with one claw.

I shivered slightly and smiled down at hir. “I do believe you’re right,” I said, moving to mount hir as shi lifted hir tail out of the way.

We both purred loudly with pleasure as I slowly slipped my cock into 'River’s hot depths. I almost came immediately just from the sensations that hir vagina was evoking in me. For a few moments I stayed still, just revelling in the softness and warmth of hir body, before beginning the slow, even strokes that would push us both over the edge.

As I made love to hir I reached around to hir chest and began to massage hir breasts again, while my handpaws worked at hir sheath, drawing the meaty maleness out of its hiding place, closing around it and stroking up and down its length. Hir purring turned into small mews of happiness, which in turned gravitated into feline yowls which echoed slightly.

I increased my tempo, thrusting into hir with more vigour, stroking faster, until with my own triumphant yowl I came, followed a couple of seconds later by 'River’s double orgasm. Hir pussy crushed my cock with its strong contractions, coaxing more thick cream out of it, spurting in tandem with hir own member. I caught hir emission in my handpaws, lifting them to my muzzle to savour hir slightly bitter, yet sweet taste.

We wound down slowly, just letting the water run over us for a few minutes. It might have lasted longer if it hadn’t been for a loud knocking at the bathroom door. With a start I realised that I had forgotten to lock the door. Before I could say anything the door opened, revealing Mum’s very wry expression. “Um...hi. Sleep well?” I said lightly, as if nothing untoward had happened.

“Yes, I did...until I was woken by an odd yowling noise. I wonder what it could have been?” Hir eyebrows nearly raised off hir head when shi said that. “If you’re finished, I’d like to have a shower myself?”

“Well, if you’ll give us a few minutes to get dry...” I trailed off, raising my own eyebrow in suggestion, which Mum took as hir cue to leave us. “Right,” I said to 'River, leaning down to give hir a kiss. “Time to get out, I think.” I reached up to turn off the water, then slowly pulled my softened cock out of hir. Hir muscles clenched to try and keep me inside, and I gently swatted 'River on the rump. “Now, now...you’ve had your fun! No more until later,” I said with a laugh.

We stepped out of the cubicle, dripping onto the tiled floor. I touched the controls on the wall for the air jets, and we were blasted from all sides by warm air for a few minutes. Drying one's fur is quite time consuming. We turned ourselves a few times to make sure all our fur was dried, then I turned the jets off. "There," I murmured, checking myself over. "I think we're done."

I opened the door and went into the hallway, almost bumping into Mum coming from the kitchen. "There's some breakfast on the table if you're hungry...and I'm sure you must be after that refreshing shower, hmm?"

"Oh, yes, we're quite ravenous," 'River said, looking the picture of innocence. We both sniggered quietly as we entered the kitchen to find two large plates of spaghetti on toast and apple/orange juice waiting on the table.

"Ooh, I haven't had this for ages!" I exclaimed, parking myself at my place and digging into the culinary delight in front of me. 'River followed suit a few seconds later, and all that could be heard for the next few minutes – apart from the shower running in the background – were the sounds of two energy-depleted chakats eating.

At about five minutes before seven Greytail padded in, closing the door quietly behind hir. Shi didn't even notice us until 'River said, "Good morning, Grey. Enjoy your run?"

Grey gasped in shock, pressing a hand to hir chest. "Gods, you two. Give an exhausted chakat a heart attack, why don't you?" Shi came over to give us each a hug, then stood back peering at us. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Oh, nothing, really. We woke up around quarter past six, then we had...a shower together." I glanced at 'River, giving hir a little wink, and shi giggled in response.

"Hmm...if I didn't know better I'd say you did a lot more than take a shower, right?" Shi tilted hir head to regard us thoughtfully. "I'm right, am I not?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, we had some fun in the shower. We even woke Skywatcher up; shi surprised us a bit when shi opened the door on us."

"Really? That would have been quite the eye-opener; I wish I'd been here to see it." Grey winked at us then went into the kitchen to make some coffee. Well...she would have if I'd actually remembered to buy some coffee yesterday.

"Sandy!" shi whined when shi found the coffee jar empty. "I thought you bought some coffee yesterday! Who's drunk it all?" Shi paused for a moment, then shook hir head. "Never mind; I'm the only one who drinks it. It must be too early in the morning for me to think straight. I guess I'll just have to get some when the shops open." Grey opened the fridge and pulled out the orange juice instead.

"Well, if you had *told* me we needed more coffee I *would* have got some," I muttered, rolling my eyes. I picked up our plates and carried them into the kitchen to put into the dishwasher, making sure there was plenty of cleaning solution in the reservoir. It had been a little while since I had poached fish in the machine, and I was starting to think that it might be time that I did so again. Just for a change of dinner, of course.

Grey drained hir glass and set it down on the bench. "So, what's on today's agenda?" shi inquired, leaning forward to rest hir elbows on the Formica benchtop.

I thought for a moment after I closed the dishwasher. "Well, I've yet to get those exotic plants I was going to get a week ago; I'll do that as soon as the garden centre opens up." I then slapped my head in forgetfulness. "Gods! I've still got a botany assignment to do that's due in on Tuesday! Ohhh..." I moaned in resignation.

"If you don't mind, I'll come plant shopping with you," 'River said, smiling at me. "I have a few plants in mind that should brighten the place up a bit."

I nodded at hir. "All right, then. What about Mum and Dad? Did they ever say when they were going home? As much as I like them, they're like fish – they both begin to smell after three days."

"Um...after breakfast, I think. Or was it lunch? Damn..." Grey shook hir head at hir lapse in memory. "I so badly need a coffee; my brain is addled without that first jolt of caffeine in the morning."

Just then Trailblazer entered, immaculately groomed as shi usually was. "Good morning, you three. Sleep well? And I heard that comment about the fish," shi added sternly, but with a glint in

hir eyes. “You’ll be on your own again after breakfast, so enjoy our company while it lasts. We have other people to see too, and we can’t spend the whole two weeks annoying our dear daughters.”

“Smooth, Mother, very smooth,” Grey muttered, wandering over to embrace ‘Blazer in a fierce hug. “What would you like for breakfast? Oh, and I hope you don’t want coffee because we’ve run out again,” shi said, glancing at me briefly and pointedly.

“Oh, that’s okay; I’ll settle for a cup of tea instead. You know the drill. Perhaps some toast and cereal?” Shi sat down at another place at the table while shi waited for Grey to brew hir some classic ‘PG Tips’ tea and prepare hir breakfast. “You never answered my question. Sleep well?” shi asked again, looking at ‘River.

My mate shrugged nonchalantly before shi replied. “Oh, we woke up a little earlier than usual, had a shower —” At this point I giggled inanely, drawing an odd look from my father. “— then had breakfast. How’s that for an answer?”

“That was quite sufficient,” Dad said, nodding appreciatively. “I take it that you had more than a shower, judging from Sandy’s reaction to the word.” Shi looked directly at me, raising an eyebrow.

“You could say that,” I murmured. “It was the usual shower scene, complete with unwanted intrusion.” I added, “Speaking of intrusions, here shi comes,” when I saw Mum enter the kitchen area, fur smelling like apricots from the shampoo again. I made a mental note to get another type of shampoo. Apricots were nice enough, but after a long period of use one started to get sick of the fragrance.

“Good morning...again,” greeted Mum, grinning wryly at me as shi padded over to give us all hugs. Gods, was *everyone* going to bring up our love-making in the shower? Chakats are rather sensuous beings, and the act quite often was part of showering, depending on where one was in one’s cycle. Maybe it was the voyeur factor. People always seem to get kicks out of seeing other people ‘at work’.

Before I could muse any further on the subject Grey came over with two cups of tea, setting a milkless one in front of Mum and a very white one in front of Dad. “Thank you,” shi said, picking the cup up and taking a sip.

“The toast will be done shortly,” Grey said from behind the bench, waiting for the eight-slice toaster to finish the toasting process. “The cereal...just a mo. I’d forgotten.” Shi went to the pantry and took out a box of muesli, pouring a large proportion of the contents out into a bowl. Grabbing a spoon from the cutlery drawer shi padded over and set the bowl on the table. The toaster chose that moment to throw the customary two slices of toast over its edge onto the bench. One of these days we’ll get it fixed....

Pulling the butter from out of the fridge’s conditioner Grey brought the toast over, and set both down before hir fingers were burnt. “Ouch,” shi muttered, sucking idly at hir left hand’s fingers.

“Thank you, dear,” murmured Dad, before shi began to tuck in. “Oh, and could you bring me the raspberry jam?” When Grey had done so, as well as a knife, shi slathered a coronary-causing amount of butter onto a slice, then some jam. “Honestly, Mother,” admonished Grey, “One of these days you’ll eat so much butter that the country will declare a national shortage!” shi said with a laugh.

“That may be so, so I’d might as well enjoy it while I can, then, don’t you think?” ‘Blazer chuckled quietly before stuffing hir mouth full of toast.

Mum leaned over and grabbed two slices, and began munching on them as shi sipped at hir tea. “Did you notice that I never once said anything bad about the place, or yourselves?” shi said, raising high one eyebrow.

“Well...there were a couple of comments that weren’t too complimentary, but on the whole I would have to say you were very...um...circumspect, for lack of a better word.” I gazed at Mum with a hard stare. “I’m sure you were hard pressed to not mention the dirty windows, the bare walls, the cobwebs in the corners...”

Mum laughed with a rueful grin. “It was hard, yes, but I was determined not to upset you two again...not after the last time.” Shi then proceeded to give a verbal demonstration of the previous visit, accompanied by hand gestures. “‘Where’s the glass cleaner? When was the last time you could see into the neighbours’ bedroom?’ ‘Do you mind if I vacuum the upholstery?’ ‘Oh dear, the stove is a little black. No worries, I’ll just get the steel wool...’”

We all stared at hir, then burst into wild laughter at hir imitation. “Yes, well, that was a rather stressful time, wasn’t it?” I said after I’d calmed down enough to speak coherently.

“I’ll second that,” muttered Grey, just within my hearing. Looking up I saw a faint smile on hir face before shi turned and went into the kitchen again.

After the rather haphazard breakfast we helped our parents clean up the room they had slept in, then after they’d had a quick wash we saw them out to their PTV. One final round of hugs, then they got in. “Bye, kids,” Mum said, waving out of hir window.

“Bye, Mum and Dad!” we called. ’River just waved, a small grin playing across hir face, as they pulled away from the curb and drove off down the street.

“Thank goodness they’re gone,” I said, passing my hand dramatically across my forehead. I lead the way back into the house, holding the door open until the other two had stepped in before closing it.

“Why is that?” asked ’River as shi went into our room to fetch hir carry-bag, in which shi kept hir cash and cards. “They didn’t seem all that bad to me, after the initial meeting.”

I fetched my own bag from a drawer in the dresser, then turned back to hir. “It’s hard to explain, really. You sort of live with your parents for twenty-odd years before moving out, and the next time you see them again you can’t help but think that they’re invading your personal space....” I trailed off when I realised that that might have been an insensitive thing to say. “Um...I guess you wouldn’t know, would you?” I added gently.

“No...you’re right about that. I suppose if I think about it, not having any parents is a good thing. You don’t have to be subjected to ‘You’ve grown since the last time I saw you’ or support them in their old age.” ’River went silent for a minute or so, an uncomfortable silence which shi eventually broke. “Oh, well. Dwelling on it won’t get me anywhere. Anyway, let’s get going. I like to be first in the queue.” Shi grinned at me, tugging on my arm.

“All right, all right,” I said, grinning back at hir. I followed hir out of the room, bag looped over my shoulder. Parents and sisters are great to be with, but they don’t really compare to the companionship of one’s mate, I thought, closing the door behind me. I put the idle thought away, and asked, “Now what kind of exotic plants were you thinking of?”