

Everyday

Everyday

(Hardin-Petty, On the flip-side of Bobby Vee's 1960 hit single 'Rubber Ball')

*Everyday, it's a gettin' closer,
Going faster than a roller coaster,
Love like yours will surely come my way, (hey hey hey)*

*Everyday, it's a gettin' faster,
Everyone says go ahead and ask her,
Love like yours will surely come my way, (hey hey hey)*

*Everyday, it's a gettin' faster,
Everyone says go ahead and ask her,
Love like yours will surely come my way, (hey hey hey)*

*Everyday seems a little longer,
Every way, love's a little stronger,
Come what may, do you ever long for
true love from me?*

*Everyday it's a gettin' closer,
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Love like yours will surely come my way, (hey hey hey)*

*Everyday, it's a gettin' faster,
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Love like yours will surely come my way.*

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Slam!

"Had a nice day, Major?" the sergeant behind the desk asks the elderly man who just entered.

"Now I know why Anthony and Rrsh'Dana were in such a hurry to set sail."

Slam!

As the door to the inner office slams shut, the sergeant goes back to the paperback he was reading.

A few minutes later, when he deems that the major has had enough time to cool down, he fills two cups with black coffee and places them on a tray, together with a few brownies, then carries it with him into the inner office. Placing the tray on the desk, he sits down in the chair opposite the major. "What was it this time?" he asks. "Did Sehh'Remma decide to scare the living daylights out of one of the base guards again?"

"Worse!" the major exclaims. "I had to ban Masmah from using the pool."

"Oh? Did her fur clog the filters?"

"If it was that simple, but no..." the major mutters. "She decided to try diving. Can you imagine what more than four hundred pounds of bones and steel-hard muscles cannonballing into the pool does?"

"Ouch!"

"It gets worse," he continues. "She then used the men's shower."

"I wouldn't think that it mattered with her thick fur," the sergeant ventures, hoping for details.

"No, the officers didn't see much, but *she* did. She kept staring, and even stuck her head into one of the stalls to get a better look."

"That sounds even worse than the chocolate binge she had last month," the sergeant states, trying hard not to grin.

"You know," the major says, "they have now banned chocolate on the premises. There's no way she'll get hold of more there."

"But why didn't Sehh'Remma or the professor stop her?"

"They're not here," the major explains. "He's in the states, working on hyperspace

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algorithms, and Sehh'Remma decided to go with him. Didn't want to let her 'cuddle toy' out of her sight, or something. Masmah stayed here because there's no commercial aeroplane with seats large enough for her."

Morning.

Ring!

"Major Hinchley's office, Sergeant Henri Dupree speaking," the man at the desk states into the telephone.

...

"Yes, he's in."

...

"If you'll hold, I can see if he's free." He then presses a button on the phone before switching on the intercom and stating, "Major, I've got Captain Anderson on line two. He said they've got a possible wolf sighting."

"Kurt wouldn't say anything like that without good reason," the major's voice can be heard through the small speaker. "Put him through."

A few minutes later the door to the inner office opens and the major exits. "I'll be at the radio center for a while," he says.

"Trying to reach Anthony?" the sergeant asks.

"Yes," the major replies. "He's the nearest operative right now. That is, if we can contact him, and if he's willing to take the case."

Three days later.

When Henri enters the office he finds the major's trench coat on the coat rack. Peeking into the inner office, he sees the major at his desk, sipping coffee and staring into the air. "Something happened?" Henri hazards.

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"Huh? No, not really," the major replies. "Anthony reported in last night with some very strange news."

"Oh?" Henri asks, suddenly interested.

"He found one of the large sixteen seat life pods, but only one passenger; a wolf female. Now, I can understand that one of those capsules managed to get down undetected, but why only one passenger? And a female? I didn't know that they had any females aboard their ships."

"They didn't," Henri replies after deliberating. "Their attitudes towards females are along the lines of 'barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen'. There's no chance that they'd've had a female working aboard a ship. Bonded officers never bring their females with them, either. How is she anyway?"

"Injured, starved, scared and stinking to high heaven according to Anthony," the major responds. "They've injected antibiotics and painkillers to stabilise her condition, and will be bringing her in the slow way. Unfortunately, she's been unconscious since they found her, so they haven't been able to ask her anything yet."

"There will be plenty of time later," Henri muses. "It's not like we can send her back to her homeworld anytime soon."

Afternoon, six days later.

When the White Lady docks, Henri hurries to drop the mooring lines over bollards, then quickly climbs onto the deck. After exchanging greetings with Anthony, he descends the ladder to the rear cabin. "Hello pussycat," he says, grinning widely, when he sees the white-furred feline-looking alien sitting at the table.

"Grrr." the alien first mock growls at the nickname, grinning widely to display rows of sharp teeth, then smiles, her ears perking up and tail twitching in amusement. "I didn't think anyone would come by until tomorrow morning."

"Well, there wasn't anything good on the TV, so why not?" he asks. "Seriously, I'm curious about your passenger, and couldn't wait to meet her."

"She's pretty nervous," Rrsh'Dhana states, "so be careful. No yelling, touching or anything."

"I know," he responds. "Anthony wanted you to sit in since she already knows and trusts you."

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"I wouldn't use the word 'trust'," she counters, "but she'll probably feel safer if I'm present." She then gets up from the bench and, opening the door, heads for the cabins, Henri in tow. Stopping in front of a door she first knocks, then, speaking in a language of growls and yips, "<Dara, I have a visitor for you.>" Not getting a response, she opens the door a notch and peeks inside. Satisfied with what she sees, she opens the door fully and steps inside.

When Henri follows a few seconds later he finds Rrsh'Dhana sitting on the end of the bed, and a nervous looking black-and-grey female alien with wolflike facial features bunched up in the other end. On a shelf he notices a brush with a broken handle and a few other odds and ends. Then he notices the foul smell of corruption and filthy fur, made more evident by the close confines of the small cabin. "Sheesh! She stinks!" he exclaims.

"I know," Rrsh'Dhana whispers. "Consider yourself lucky that your people don't have much of a sense of smell."

"<I'm Henri, and I'm here to ask you a few questions,>" he states slowly in the same language that Rrsh'Dhana used earlier. Seeing the fear in her large black eyes, he sits down on the floor to make himself look less threatening before continuing, "<I told you my name; why don't you tell me yours?>"

Morning.

"I thought you would be on Anthony's boat, talking to his latest find, not here," the major says when he sees the sergeant sitting behind his desk at the office.

"I'll head down there in a few minutes," Henri replies. "I was at the docks when they arrived yesterday and managed to talk to the wolf then. Here's the report, I just finished typing it up." He then hands over a few machine-typed sheets.

"And off the record?" the major asks. "What's your personal impression?"

"She's scared of something," he replies, "and it's not us. She tried to hide it, but she looked terrified for a moment when I told her that we'd try to return her to her homeworld and family as soon as possible."

"Well, I trust you to sort it out," the major states. "Now, run along, I can handle the office alone today. It's not as if we have anything pressing to do nowadays."

"I'll be off, then." the sergeant says, grinning as he gets up from his chair and heads for the door.

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Slam!

The sound of the door opening and slamming shut almost makes the major drop his coffee cup. "Something wrong?" he asks when he sees the look on Henri's face. "You haven't been away for an hour, and I fully expected you to spend most of the day talking to that wolf."

"Yes, something is wrong," the sergeant growls as he sits down at his desk and reaches for a phone directory, "very wrong in fact. She tried to drown herself last night. That's how terrified she is of returning home."

"Damn!" the major exclaims. "I didn't even know that they had the concept of suicide."

"I didn't know, either," is the curt reply. He then opens the directory, and looking at a page, starts dialling a long number.

The major, knowing that it won't be possible to get any information from Henri until he's worked out the anger seething just beneath the calm surface, walks back to his office and closes the door. An hour later he hears the door slam, then the sound of Henri's van driving off.

Evening.

When Henri parks his van on the docks, he's long past angry and into the calm of suppressed rage that lies beyond. Walking from his vehicle and to the boat, he jumps onto the deck, then descends the ladder to the rear cabin where he finds Anthony and Rrsh'Dhana. "Is Dara up?" he asks, not seeing her in the cabin.

"No," Rrsh'Dhana replies, "but she is awake, if that's what you're wondering about. She hasn't left her cabin since she woke. She just lies there, crying. I don't know what she's gone through, but I want to rip someone to pieces, very small pieces."

"Unfortunately I do have some idea of what she's gone through, and I, too, want to rip someone to pieces," Henri states, his eyes cold and sharp. A moment later he sighs, then quietly asks, "Can I see her?"

"Go ahead," Rrsh'Dhana replies. She then expresses her claws for a moment before continuing, "Just don't do anything that hurts her, or..."

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Henri only nods, then slips quietly into the corridor. Stopping outside the cabin he listens for a second, hearing only sobbing. Knocking on the door, he waits a few seconds for a reaction, but gets none. Opening the door and entering, he finds the wolf female in bed, lying with her face buried in the pillow. Saddened by the pathetic sight, Henri sits down on the edge of the bed and places his right hand on her shoulder before speaking in a low, careful voice, "<You are safe now, no one will hurt you again,>" over and over again, hoping for a response.

When the reaction comes, it's as strong as it's unexpected; she suddenly turns around to face him and throws her arms around his neck, pulling him close, her muzzle rubbing against his right ear, then her whole body starts shaking.

A week later.

When Henri arrives at the docks, he runs into Rrsh'Dhana who's just stepping off the boat. "Good morning," he greets her. "Going somewhere?"

"I'm meeting Masmah," she replies. "She's feeling lonely with Seh'hRemma and the professor away. And you? What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk with Dara. Is she up?"

"Yes, she's up," she replies. "She's in the rear cabin, sipping tea."

"And Anthony? Where's he?"

"He went out to buy groceries a little while ago. He'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'd better keep Dara company until he returns then," Henri says as he climbs onto the boat's deck.

"You do that," she says as she walks towards the street.

Henri quickly descends the ladder to find Dara, dressed in a bathrobe, sitting in the single padded chair in the cabin. She is at first nervous, but quickly calms down when she recognises him. "<How are you today?>" he asks, "<Feeling better?>"

"<Yes,>" she replies timidly. Then, feeling braver, "<Is it true? Can I stay here? I won't have to go back?>"

"<I don't know if you can stay here, yet,>" he replies. Then, he sees her look of

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dejection and he adds, "<I've managed to get you placed last on the list for transportation back. The list is long and we still don't have a suitable transport, so that alone will take several years. I'm also working on getting you permission to stay permanently. But that's not why I came by today.>"

"<Oh?>"

"<No, I came to ask a few questions, and to give you this,>" he replies, handing her a package.

She slowly unwraps it to reveal a box, and lifting the lid gasps as she sees what it contains; several brushes and combs, all with silver handles and mother-of-pearl inlays on the back. Doubting her eyes she lifts one of the brushes out of the box to examine it.

"<The one you have didn't look too good, and I figured that Rrsh'Dhana's brushes wouldn't suit your longer fur,>" he explains to the startled female. Taking the box out of her hands, he reaches in and lifts the bottom, revealing a compartment holding a set of files with handles made to the same expensive quality. "<Do you think these will do?>"

"<But...>" she stammers, clutching the brush in her hands, "<I can't...>"

"<Nonsense,>" he counters. "<It took me several hours to get the military to pay for this set. You don't want all that work to be in vain, do you?>"

"<But...>" she whispers, still not finding the words.

"<You've never owned something as fine as this, is that it?>"

She slowly nods.

"<About time, then,>" he states as he hands the box back to her. "<Now, why don't you put them in your cabin while I pour us some tea. Then we can go through today's questions.>"

Pling.

When the doorbell chimes, the man at the counter looks up from what he's working on. Seeing who just entered his store he grins widely. "Good afternoon. I trust the set of brushes was of an acceptable quality?" he asks as the sergeant approaches.

"Of course they were," Henri replies. "You know that you're the best silversmith for hundreds of miles."

"Ah, flattery. You want to buy something else?"

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"Yes," he admits, removing a sheet from a breast pocket, unfolding and placing it on the counter. "Ever done anything like this?"

"A challenge!" the silversmith exclaims. "It's some sort of necklace? But two inches wide, and leather backing? I've never seen anything quite like it. What is it?"

"I believe the correct term is a 'collar'," Henri replies dryly. "Can you make it?"

"It's unusual, but shouldn't be too difficult" the man states with a shrug. "Anything else you want on it?"

"Yes," Henri replies after a brief pause. "If possible, I'd like a red gemstone, maybe a garnet or ruby, in the center piece."

"Everything is possible," the craftsman states with a grin. "It's just a question of how much you're willing to pay. Is the bill going to the same address as before?"

"No, this one is on me."

"I will start on it within the hour."

"Business is slow?"

"Well, you know," the silversmith replies with a dejected smile, "not many people have cash to spare for jewelry nowadays. There's a trickle of people with items that need repair, but not many new orders, no."

Morning, a few days later.

When Henri parks his van at the docks, he sees two familiar figures up on deck, obviously enjoying the sunshine. He quickly climbs up on deck to greet them.

"What are you doing here today?" Rrsh'Dhana asks.

"I'm here to take Dara to see some police officers," he replies. "Under Earth military law, what happened to her is punishable by death, and the higher ups intend to use it as an example both to establish Earth law in the solar system, and to make certain that if any of the perpetrators survived, they're introduced to a firing squad. There's also talk about possibly granting her asylum on humanitarian causes." He pauses a few seconds before asking, "Would you perhaps have something other than that bathrobe that might fit her?"

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"Maybe one of my casual evening robes would fit," Rrsh'Dhana replies. "It's not as if I ever use them." She disappears down the hatch, only to return ten minutes later with Dara, dressed in an ankle-length blue robe, in tow. Henri smiles warmly and takes the nervous wolf's hand in his, and together they climb onto the dock and walk towards his van.

"<Nervous?>" he asks as he helps her strap in.

"<Yes,>" she admits. "<What if they don't believe me? What if they want to send me back?>"

"<Don't worry,>" he replies. "<I've found several lower officers who were stationed on the ship and they can testify that something was going on. Also, listening stations picked up several strange transmissions that we now believe were about you.>" He then straps himself in, cranks the engine and gets the van moving up the street.

When the van stops a short while later, it's not in front of the police station, but a clothing store. "<What's this?>" Dara asks, suddenly anxious when Henri unstraps his safety belt and exits the van.

"<We have a few hours before you're to testify," he replies as he opens the front passenger door and helps her out. "<I thought we could use the time to get you some clothes of your own.>" He then opens the door to the store and gestures for her to enter first.

"A wolf!" the store's single customer exclaims. "Get that filthy beast out of here!"

"Oh, shut up!" the storekeeper commands. "Why don't you get out instead. You never buy anything anyway, only finger my merchandise until it's dirty!"

"We're not causing you too much trouble, I hope?" Henri asks, concerned as the fuming customer stomps out.

"I've wanted to throw her out for a long time," Sarah, the store owner, replies. "Besides, any friend of Rrsh'Dhana is a friend of mine, and if I'm not mistaken, that's one of her evening robes."

"You're absolutely correct," he states. "Now then, are you ready for a challenge?"

"If it entails selling clothes, always!"

"Good!" he exclaims. "Dara here needs some day-to-day clothes, as well as something pretty to wear for special occasions. Now, the challenge lies in that she doesn't speak a single word of English."

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"And why isn't Rrsh'Dhana here to translate?"

"I have my reasons," he admits, grinning conspiratorially. "But can you do it?"

"Of course I can," she replies. "What should we find first? Everyday clothes?"

"No. Find her a pretty dress. And if you could have it finished by this afternoon, that would be great." He then turns to Dara, "<Sarah here is a friend of Rrsh'Dhana, and she will help you find some new clothes. Pick something pretty, and don't worry if it looks rich.>"

"<Still worried?>" Henri asks as they exit the police station late that afternoon.

"<They were nice,>" Dara admits.

"<We humans often are when we want something,>" he explains, grinning slightly.

"<What?>" she asks, suddenly anxious again.

"<Nothing bad,>" he quickly states. "<There's no law, no rules in space, only on planets and large space stations. On spaceships, they use the rules of the planet it came from. Our leaders want to enforce Earth law for the entire solar system. Using wartime laws here on Earth makes what happened to you punishable by death. We probably won't find any of them alive, but it's the principle that counts. If none of the major races protests our right to prosecute them, it sets a precedence, or tradition if you like.>" He then leads her to his van and opens the door for her to get in.

"<Are we going back to the boat now?>" she asks as the van starts moving.

"<No, we're stopping by the clothing store to see if your dress is ready. Then I thought we could go somewhere nice for something to eat. I won't say anything bad about Anthony's cooking, at least not where he can hear me, but there are those who make better food.>"

It's a much-changed couple that enters the restaurant an hour later; Dara dressed in a multicoloured sari, and Henri in his best uniform. Walking up to the maitre'd, he states, "Dupree, table for two."

The man in black-and-white livery casts a cold glance at Dara then utters, "I'm sorry sir, but we have no reservation by that name for tonight."

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"Ah... we'll take whatever table you happen to have available," Henri states, glancing into the almost empty room.

"There are no free tables tonight," the head waiter counters.

Hearing the poorly camouflaged dismissal, Henri turns and walks back out with Dara hurrying to keep up.

"<What's wrong?>" she asks timidly, her anxiousness flaring up again.

"<They didn't want you in there,>" he replies, angrily. "<Come. I know of a place that won't refuse to serve us.>" He then almost drags her back to the van and they drive off.

"<What's this place?>" Dara asks as they enter a café.

"<This is where honest soldiers come to eat,>" Henri replies. "<It's not as fancy as the other place, but the food is good, and the portions large.>" He then leads her towards a booth in the corner furthest away from the door, but is stopped short when a burly man steps in their path. "Could you please step aside?" Henri asks.

"No!" the man exclaims. "I'm going to stand here until you take that ... that creature out of here!"

"You stand there, then," Henri states calmly, pulling Dara along as he makes as to pass between the man and the counter. The man takes a clumsy swing at Henri, which is easily avoided. Henri then grabs his opponent by the arm and shoulder, and with a gentle-seeming twist and push, sends his opponent sprawling onto the floor.

A friend of the antagonist rushes to confront them, but is stopped when a booted foot poking out from another booth trips him. "Now, now," a rusty voice says. "Didn't anyone teach you to fight fair?" The owner of the voice, a middle-aged man with a pleasant looking face, stands up and walks across the floor to pick up a dagger the second assailant had dropped. He examines the blade for a few seconds, then quickly wheels and throws the dagger high, towards a wall where it sticks, embedded almost to the hilt. "Now, then," he states calmly, "since we're finished with that unpleasantness, you *must* introduce me to your friend."

"Of course," Henri responds. "<Dara, this is Kurt Lansing, one of the men who, just like Anthony, tracked and captured your peoples' soldiers. Kurt, this is Dara, who was kept aboard one of the battleships against her will.>"

"<I've been away for a while,>" Kurt states slowly in Dara's language. Then gesturing towards his booth, "<Why don't you two join me and update me on what's new

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around here?>" As the three of them take their seats, with Dara furthest in the booth, the two antagonists gather themselves and stumble out, muttering curses and threats.

"Do you think those two will cause any more trouble?" Henri asks.

"I doubt it," Kurt replies. "I know both of them, and they're cowards at heart. Now that they know you and your friend are under my protection they'll stay away." Then turning towards Dara, "<Where have you been hiding, then? I'm quite certain that you weren't here last autumn.>"

"<I... >" she stutters, glancing at Henri for support. Then as he nods her on, "<My capsule came down on an island last summer, and I've been hiding there until three eight-days ago when Anthony and Rrsh'Dhana found me.>"

"<So the man of ice is still sailing around, eh?>" he asks. "<But who is Rrsh'Dhana?>"

"<Long story,>" Henri interjects. "<I assume that you've seen the other aliens walking about?>"

"<Yes,>" Kurt replies. "<One of them is staying with him?>"

"<That's one way of describing it,>" Henri answers, grinning. "<Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go and get Dara and me something to eat. Do you want anything, too?>"

"<I've already eaten,>" Kurt replies, "<but thank you for asking.>"

"<Where are we going now?>" Dara asks as they leave the café later that evening.

"<You are going back to the boat,>" Henri replies. "<Otherwise Anthony will be very angry at me tomorrow.>"

"<What Kurt told me about him--->" she says, hesitantly. "<He made Anthony sound so cold and uncaring. It didn't sound like him at all.>"

"<No, but that's how he was until he met Rrsh'Dhana,>" he explains. "<Anthony lost everyone he loved in the beginning of the war. After that he closed himself up and refused to let anyone get close to him.>" Henri unlocks the van and they climb in.

Dara is quiet during the short ride down to the docks, but steals quick glances towards her companion when she thinks he isn't looking. When Henri parks the van, she quietly gathers the robe she had borrowed from Rrsh'Dhana and steps out. Then they walk slowly towards the boat, both reluctant to end a pleasant evening. As she is about to climb onto the boat's deck, Dara suddenly turns towards Henri and throws her arms

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around his neck, hugging him closely, her body pressing against his and her muzzle rubbing along the side of his neck.

Henri, surprised by the female's sudden show of affection, begins to stroke her back, slowly at first, then faster as she starts to lick his neck and what she can reach of his shoulders through the open shirt collar. He's beginning to enjoy the feeling of the rasping tongue against his bare skin when she suddenly sinks her teeth deeply into his left shoulder. Stifling a cry he stumbles backwards, tearing away from her embrace. "<You ... bit me!>" he cries, incredulous. "<Why?>"

"<I... >" she mumbles, voice trembling with anxiety. "<Don't you like me?>"

Henri looks into her large black eyes, seeing the fear that now fills them before speaking, "<We ... we humans don't bite like that. We press lips.>" He then proceeds to demonstrate by planting a gentle kiss on the side of her muzzle. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he urges her gently towards the boat. "<I'll see you again tomorrow.>" He watches until she disappears down the hatch before he turns and, rubbing the rows of small wounds on his neck, walks back to the van.

Morning.

Henri is sitting at his desk, sorting the mail when the major enters. "Good morning major."

"Is the coffee pot full?" the major asks, gruffly. As the sergeant nods, the major adds, "Then it is a good morning." Pouring himself a large cup of the hot, black brew, he then proceeds to make himself comfortable on the visitor's chair and looks at the sergeant. "I hear you were out on the town last night. Care to explain why you brought Dara with you?"

"Nothing gets by you, does it?" Henri replies. "As for your question, I had two reasons: First, I thought she deserved it, and second, I was trying to get people to accept that not all wolves are homicidal maniacs."

"I think you're trying a bit too hard," the major comments, smiling sadly. "But you're right. The best estimates are that it'll take at least ten, probably closer to fifteen years to send them all back. We can't keep them in the prison camps all that time, but with the current hatred for them we can't let them out either."

"I think the hatred is worse now than during the war," Henri comments dejectedly. "Many people believed that once the war was over all the problems would disappear."

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"It's never that easy, son," the major responds, shaking his head. "So, are you going to see the wolf again?"

"I'm heading over as soon as I've finished with the mail."

"Is Dara awake yet?"

When he turns to the source of the voice he finds Henri standing on the docks, fidgeting with his shirt-collar and rubbing his neck. "Yeah, she's up," Anthony replies. "She's in the rear cabin, talking with Rrsh'Dhana about last evening. If you want to stop her from revealing everything, you'll have to hurry."

"I need to get moving, then," Henri yelps, then climbs aboard and disappears down the hatch. "Well, hello kitten!" Henri exclaims when he sees Rrsh'Dhana sitting on the bench.

"Grrr," Rrsh'Dhana replies, waving a hand, gleaming claws fully expressed. "I told you never to call me that!"

"Why not?" he asks, grinning. "Where's Dara?"

"She disappeared towards her cabin as soon as she heard your van," she replies. "She's probably brushing her fur right now. She'll be back in a few minutes."

"I guess that I can wait a little while if it's for a good cause," he states, grinning.

Rrsh'Dhana is about to utter a snide remark when the door opens and Dara enters. "<Hello,>" she ventures, softly.

"<Why so shy?>" Henri asks.

She doesn't reply, just sits down on the end of the bench.

"<Well then,>" Rrsh'Dhana states, "<what do you want today?>"

"<Take a look at this paper,>" he replies, handing her a folded sheet.

Rrsh'Dhana examines it for a moment, then hands it back. "<I'm sorry, but I can only make out every fourth word or so. Could you explain?>"

"<I'm leaving the military to begin working for the space administration next week. I'll be the regional alien relations liaison, helping visitors from other species during their stay here. I've been doing this for some time now, so this paper only makes it official.>"

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"<Congratulations!>" Rrsh'Dhana exclaims. "<But you're not here just to tell us this, are you?>"

"<No, I'm here to ask Dara what she wants.>"

"<What I want?>" Dara asks, surprised.

"<Yes,>" he replies, smiling. "<Now that you've given your statement, the authorities have no reason to detain you, and I understand that Anthony wants to head out on the open sea again.>"

"<You can come with us,>" Rrsh'Dhana explains, "<but you will be expected to help out.>"

"<Or you could come with me,>" Henri offers. "<I have a spare room in my house that you can use. Or I could try to find you a room at the military base if you want that. There are a few otherworlders living there, mostly of Rrsh'Dhana's people.>"

Dara glances at both Rrsh'Dhana and Henri while thinking, then asks, "<Is it a large room?>"

"<As large as Rrsh'Dhana and Anthony's cabin,>" he replies. "<And there's a big window.>"

Reaching a decision, Dara jumps up from the bench to hug Henri, then dashes towards her cabin.

"She's changed a lot in a few weeks," Rrsh'Dhana states, "from a quivering bundle of dirty fur to the enthusiastic young female she is now. Try keeping her that way, OK?"

He's about to reply when Dara reappears, carrying a lumpy bundle.

"<Shall we go?>" Henri asks, nodding towards the ladder.

Dara nods, and they all climb the steps to the deck.

"<Why are we stopping here?>" Dara asks as the van pulls into a parking spot.

"<I thought we could celebrate,>" Henri replies.

"<What if they don't want me here?>" she asks as they enter the ice cream parlour.

"<They're used to seeing other races here,>" he explains.

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"Henri!" a voice booms. "Over here!"

Turning towards the source of the voice, they see a massive form rising from a bench. "Masmah!" Henri exclaims. "<What are you doing here so early?>" Then, turning to Dara, he whispers, "<She's one of Rrsh'Dhana's friends.>" Since the big, bearlike female is waving them over, they take seats on the bench opposite her.

"<You've been staying with Rrsh'Dhana and Anthony, right?>" Masmah asks, then takes a large gulp from a pitcher filled with a pink liquid.

"<Yes,>" Dara replies hesitantly, uncertain about the great, shaggy female.

"<I should have visited,>" Masmah booms, jovially, "<but first of all, the hatch is so small that I barely fit, and second, Rrsh'Dhana told me to stay away until you were feeling more secure. She seems to think that I could scare you. You're not afraid of me, are you?>" Then, turning towards Henri, "Do you think you could go and get us something to drink? And take your time."

Reluctant to leave the impressionable Dara alone with Masmah, he hesitantly makes his way to the counter. "One bear-size and two normal strawberry milkshakes," he states.

"Coming right up," the youth behind the counter responds.

"You're new here?"

"Started last week, sarge," the young man replies. Then, glancing at the two females, "That's a wolf isn't it?"

"Sure is," Henri responds. "You don't have any problem with that, I hope?"

"The boss said that any customer with money is welcome," he explains, "and that if I had any problem with that, there's more than enough others who want the job. Besides, having a bear walk in and demand a milkshake a scant hour after I started working here is, well..."

"I understand," Henri comments. "She can be quite overwhelming at first. The second and third time, too, but she's really quite nice when you get to know her." He then drops a few notes on the counter and picks up the drinks before walking back to the females.

"<You'll love this drink,>" Masmah states to Dara as she picks up the large, 'bear-sized' pitcher.

Dara first takes a small sip, wrinkling her nose at the cold, then a larger sip before grinning broadly.

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"<I've travelled to many planets,>" Masmah grunts between gulps, "<but there are not many drinks rivalling this one. And of those, most are not only very expensive, but also served in too small a portion.>"

"<You know,>" Henri states, "<before you came, the largest mugs were known as king-sized.>"

"<You must have very small kings,>" Masmah counters with a window-rattling laugh.

"<So, what are you doing nowadays?>" Henri asks, hoping to steer her into a quieter topic.

"<Not much,>" she replies. "<I had a talk a few days ago with the engineers who are designing the moon base. Unless someone stops them, they'll design a completely unusable base.>"

"<What are they doing wrong?>"

"<I won't comment on the hopelessly small cargo halls, but they're not planning any alternate atmosphere section. I've tried to tell them that the methane breathers are important, but they want to deal with that later. It might make sense in a short-term economic way, but it'll anger all the races with special needs,>" she explains. "<True, it'll probably be many years before they begin arriving, but not preparing for them now might result in them never coming at all.>"

"<How important are they?>"

"<Very important!>" Masmah exclaims. "<They are the sole suppliers of several rare alloys needed to build compact reactors. They are also major suppliers of crystals used in high-energy systems. Since most of them have very low tolerances for the stress of travel their ships are very slow. Mostly they accept this because they live longer than we do, but if your computers can make their ships faster without an increase in stress, they'll pay almost anything for them.>"

"<I'll bring the message to the right people,>" Henri states.

"<Good!>" she booms. She then gets up from the bench and begins to amble towards the counter. "<All that talking made me thirsty again. Anyone else need a refill?>"

"<Not me,>" Henri replies.

Dara only shakes her head. Then, as she watches Masmah walk away, "<How does she know so much?>"

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"<She was the cargo master on a freighter before she came here,>" he explains. "<Incidentally, that's where she met Rrsh'Dhana. She worked as a cook on the same ship.>"

"<Rrsh'Dhana worked?>" she asks. "<For pay?>"

"<Yes,>" he replies. "<She is also a licensed shuttle pilot. Many species consider both male and female as equals. And that means equal pay for equal work. There are some species where the physical differences are too great, one of the sexes non-thinking, for example, or in a very few cases, they are too specialised.>"

"<She knows how to fly a shuttle?>"

"<She sure does,>" Henri replies, smiling. "<She can fly fighters, too.>"

"<She never told me any of that.>"

"<The opportunity probably never arose.>"

"<What are you two whispering about?>" Masmah asks as she places a new pitcher on the table and lowers her bulk onto the bench.

"<Nothing much,>" Henri replies. "<When are Sehh'Remma and Roger returning?>"

"<They'll be back late next week,>" Masmah replies, "<And you two are both invited to the party next seventh day.>"

Seeing Dara's confusion, Henri quickly fills her in on the unusual trio. "<You mean she---?>" Dara asks, glancing towards Masmah. "<But she's so large!>"

"<No, we don't,>" Masmah replies easily. "<I like Roger. He's cute, but far too frail for me. If I tried to do more than give him a weak hug I would end up crushing him. Sehh'Remma, though, isn't that strong.>" Seeing Dara's shocked expression, she quickly continues, "<While permanent bondings between different species aren't too common, they do happen. Shorter relationships, however, are more common. Two adults of physically compatible species can have a lot of fun without any worry about, umm, consequences. You didn't hear about this back on your world because very few females want to mate with your males; they're condescending -- and frankly, not very good at it -- and your females never leave the star system.>"

"<But why do you stay with them if you don't mate?>" Dara asks.

"<I like them both,>" she replies, "<but my people usually only mate once every year, when the plants back home start to bloom and release special chemicals. I like to cuddle, though. Your people don't have the instinctual need for that, but my people do.>"

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You should try it yourself one day.>"

Dara doesn't respond, only stares down into her now empty glass.

"<She was very... >" Dara says, the sentence tapering off when she can't find the right words.

"<Blunt?>" Henri offers. "<Yes, she can sometimes be a bit more direct than you'd prefer, but she never means any harm with it.>" Looking back, he waves to the massive, brown alien before he turns and opens the door for Dara.

She walks through, almost dancing, he following at a more sedate pace. Reaching the van she turns in a slow pirouette to see what takes him so long. "HENRI!" she screams.

Alarmed by the panicked scream, he starts to turn to the left, towards a movement, when pain suddenly shoots through his head. Then, darkness...

"<He's coming around now.>"

As the pain slowly eases and the fog clears, Henri begins to notice his surroundings; lying on the ground, his head on something soft, slender, fur-covered arms gently stroking his forehead, Masmah having a heated conversation with a police officer, sirens in the distance, the smell of blood. Slowly the realisation dawns that his head is resting in Dara's lap, and that the stench of blood is coming from her hands. "<What happened?>" he whispers. "<Are you hurt?>"

"<She's all right,>" Masmah's voice booms out nearby. "<Can't say the same for the two who attacked you, though.>"

Just then two ambulances arrive, sirens howling. As soon as they've stopped, the doors burst open and paramedics jump out. They quickly place two limp and bloody bodies on stretchers which they push into one of the ambulances. As the first ambulance streaks off, the paramedics turn their attention to Henri. Dara is at first unwilling to let go of him, but with Masmah reassuring her they get him onto a stretcher and loaded into the other ambulance.

"Now, what am I going to do with you?"

Turning his head towards the door, Henri sees the doctor standing there, looking

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thoughtful. "Something to stop my head from exploding?" he hazards.

"That should be simple enough," the doctor, a young woman, replies. She then hands him a few white pills and a cup of water. Then, nodding towards Dara who's sitting on a chair next to the bed, "Is that the wolf I examined a few weeks ago? She looks much better now."

"Yes, she does," he agrees. He then pops the pills into his mouth and, grimacing at the taste, quickly washes them down with gulps of water.

The doctor in the meantime walks over to the wolf and, kneeling on one knee, points at her hip where the wound was. Dara pulls aside the fabric, giving the doctor access to the now almost healed wound. "Well, her wound looks good. There is some scarring, but that should be all but invisible when the fur grows back," she states, rising to her feet.

"Nice to hear," Henri comments. "But that's not what's worrying you, is it?"

"No," she replies. "I've gone over the X-rays, and as far as we can determine, you only have a concussion and a few lesions. Nothing dangerous, but we would usually insist on keeping you here overnight for observation."

"But?" he asks.

"There's your friend," she replies, nodding towards Dara. "Some of our long-term patients were wounded and severely traumatised during battles with the wolves. The mauling she gave to the two drunkards isn't exactly helping calm the waters, either."

"I see," he states. "You want her out of here, but she refuses to leave me?"

"No, *I* don't want her to leave," she stresses. "But we must consider the other patients' welfare, too."

Henri is about to say something when there's a knock on the door and a policeman peeks in. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he states, "but I need to ask a few questions."

"Nothing that can't wait," the doctor replies. "But you know the rules; no agitating my patients."

"Of course, Sheila," he states easily, then gives her a quick kiss as he enters the room.

"What do you want to know?" Henri asks, slowly easing himself into a sitting position.

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"You tell me," the policeman counters. "On one hand I've got two men with very serious claw wounds. One of them is awake and claims that your friend here attacked them without cause or warning. On the other hand, it doesn't fit with either my perception of her from the interview yesterday, or the statements of Masmah and the youth at the ice-cream parlour. So, if you could tell me whether or not you've seen the men before, and what you remember of this incident, that would be very helpful."

"They attacked me from behind, so I never got to see them," Henri explains.

"I got Masmah to translate for me," the constable states. "And Dara here claims that they tried to attack you in the café yesterday."

"Those two?" Henri asks, then continues to relate the events of that evening.

"I'll try to find Lansing," the cop states. Then, as he moves to leave, "Since I understand that she's in your custody and will be moving into your place, I guess we'll meet again. It is your turn to hold the Thursday night poker party next week, isn't it?"

"I think so," Henri replies, "but now it's going to be a 'no-smoking' party."

"Not much of a loss with the quality of tobacco nowadays," the policeman counters, grinning. Then he disappears out the door.

"<What did he want?>" Dara asks. "<He was talking about me, wasn't he?>"

"<He wanted to hear my version of what happened today,>" he replies. "<Don't worry. He believes what you told him.>"

Just then the doctor returns. "Have you given any thought to what I told you?" she asks.

"Well," he replies, "maybe you could send me home?"

"Possibly, but only if you can promise me two things," she answers. "First, that you take it easy and don't try lifting anything heavy for the next few days, and second, that there is someone to keep an eye on you there."

"I don't think you need to worry about someone looking after me," he states.

"No, you're probably right," she comments, glancing towards the wolf. "All right, I'll get the paperwork going and get you some pills, in case you have problems sleeping tonight. Then I'll get an ambulance to take you home."

"<Well, this is where I live,>" Henri states, gesturing towards a small, two story

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house.

"<What's that smell?>" Dara asks, wrinkling her nose.

"<I have a few birds in a large cage around the corner,>" he replies. "<They're for eggs and meat.>" He then digs out a key and, fumbling a bit, unlocks the door. "<Shall we go inside?>" Leading her around he shows her the kitchen, living room, bath and toilet on the ground floor before bringing her upstairs. Opening a door and switching on the lights, he states, "<This is your room.>"

Dropping her bundle on a desk beneath the window, she first peeks into the closets before slumping down on the bed. Feeling the softness of the mattress, she lets herself fall backwards, arms out.

"<Do you like it?>" he asks, quite unnecessarily.

"<It's great!>" she exclaims. "<But where do you sleep?>"

"<My room is right across the hall,>" he replies, pointing at a door. "<I was thinking of making dinner. Do you want some?>"

"<Yes, but weren't you supposed to take it easy and not do any work?>"

"<It's no problem,>" he states. "<Coming?>" Then he turns and heads downstairs, leaving Dara sprawled out on her bed.

Henri has just placed the food on the table and is about to call for Dara when she enters, sniffing the air.

"<What IS that?>" she asks, eyeing the white mass on the platter suspiciously.

"<Fish,>" he replies. "<Well, mostly fish,>" he continues as he sees the look in her eyes. "<There's also milk, cheese, spices and a few other things.>"

"<What other things?>" she asks, still suspicious.

"<How would I know?>" he counters, grinning. "<I didn't make it, I bought it frozen and ready to heat.>" Sitting down, he then serves a big helping on both their plates. Picking up a fork, he starts eating.

Dara looks at the food with some skepticism, but eventually picks up her fork and takes a small bite. Then she takes another, slightly larger bite, and soon her plate is empty.

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After dinner, Dara rinses off the dirty dishes and places them in the sink. Then they go to the living room where Henri slumps down in the sofa and she takes the seat next to him. For a few minutes nothing happens, then Dara gathers her courage and points to the TV set. "<What's that?>"

"<It's for news and entertainment,>" he replies, picking up the remote and switching it on. Jumping between channels, he continues, "<Unfortunately, there's not that much to see since your people managed to destroy most of the transmitters. Not much of a loss if you ask some.>" Switching it off again, he then picks up a CD and slots it into the stereo, and soon the room fills with soft classical music. Picking up and opening a box, he holds it out to her. "<This is something we call 'chocolate'. Try one, they're good.>"

Curious but apprehensive, she picks a brown square from the proffered box and first sniffs at it, then licks it. Deciding that it tastes good, she bites down on it. Looking at Henri for permission, she grabs another piece.

"<Don't eat too many,>" he cautions. "<They tend to have a special effect on your people.>" Seeing her suddenly apprehensive, he continues, "<It's nothing dangerous. It just makes you feel more relaxed. Quite pleasant I understand.>" Looking at her again he notices her large grin. "<And quite fast acting...>"

A few minutes later Henri yawns. "<I'm sorry,>" he says, "<but the medicine seems to make me sleepy. The music will stop by itself, but if you could turn off the lights when you go to bed...>" Then, yawning again, he makes his way upstairs.

After having climbed into bed, Henri finds that no matter how tired he is, he can't seem to fall asleep, and he ends up listening to the sounds in the house. When the music stops, he hears Dara climb the stairs to enter her room, then return downstairs again. The house soon fills with the clanking and gurgling of the ancient piping, telling him that she's using the bath. An hour later he's still awake and considering taking the pills the doctor gave him when he hears Dara's clicking footsteps in the hallway. Lying still he listens to her walking around, switching on and off the light in her room several times, opening and closing the window and finally he hears the sound of her mattress' springs. Feeling disappointed somehow, he rolls over on his side to stare out the window.

Almost an hour passes and he's finally about to fall asleep when the door to his room glides open. He pretends sleep, breathing slowly, as he listens for what she's doing.

At first she only stands in the doorway, hesitating, then she pads quietly to the side of his bed. Hesitating again, or maybe waiting for a reaction, she stands there for a full five minutes before reaching a decision. Grabbing a corner of his blanket she lifts it and slides under, slinking down on the mattress behind his back.

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Henri still does nothing, feigning sleep as he waits for her next move, if any, afraid that he'll scare her away.

A few minutes later Dara again moves, this time snuggling closer, her muzzle rubbing against his neck. Then her arm slips around to place itself on his chest.

He still does nothing, only listens as her hot, sweet breath caresses his ear. Not until her breathing slows and she's asleep does he move, and then only to grasp her hand in his.

Morning.

When Henri wakes it's not because of the alarm clock, but because he's cold. Rolling over on the other side, he sees Dara curled up in his blanket. Not wanting to wake her he slips carefully out of bed and, picking up a robe, walks as quietly as possible out the door. Not being able to get to the clean clothes in the dresser he instead goes down and plunders the drier in the basement. After a quick bath he grabs for the deodorant only to come up empty-handed. Looking closer on the shelf he finds that not only is the deodorant missing, but so is the aftershave. Searching the room he finds no trace of the missing items, only an empty cardboard box that must have slipped between the bathtub and the wall. Picking it up, he finds that it once contained a flea-bath. Deciding upon discretion he puts it back where he found it, then heads for the kitchen. After assembling breakfast on a tray he stops in the hallway to collect a flat package from a high shelf. Back in the bedroom he places the tray on the nightstand before sitting down in a chair to watch Dara. A minute or so later she begins to stir, her nose twitching as she begins to notice the smell of freshly brewed coffee.

"<Huh. What?>" she asks, groggily.

"<Breakfast,>" he replies. Getting up from the chair he walks over and gives her a quick kiss on the muzzle before stripping off his robe and climbing into bed beside her. He then lifts the tray and places it between them.

She's about to grab a fruit when she notices the package. "<What's that?>" she asks.

"<Why don't you open it and see?>" is the cryptic reply.

She quickly removes the paper wrapping, revealing a box of similar make as the one her brushes came in. Opening it, she gasps as she sees the contents. "<But...>" she stutters, "<this means...>"

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"<I know,>" he replies to the unspoken question. "<The question now is; does it fit?>"

Instead of an answer, two furry arms wraps themselves around his neck and a rough tongue starts removing the top layer of skin on his face and throat. When she calms down and releases him a few minutes later the bed is a mess of spilled milk, coffee, egg yolks, bits of bacon, breadcrumbs and crushed fruit.

"<I take it that you like it, then,>" he states, grinning. He then leans over and picks the silver and leather collar from her hands and gently puts it around her neck. "<I think silver goes well with your fur, don't you agree?>"

Dara again lets her actions speak for her. But this time when her teeth sink into his shoulder, he doesn't pull away.

The end.