

# Reeldad.

*A short story set in the Zig Zag universe*



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Acknowledgements! This story portraits various characters which were created by other people. Please note that ownership of these characters lies with them.

### *Zig Zag*

This character was created by the artist Max BlackRabbit. She's further developed and chronicled by the artist Eric W Schwartz in his (web) comic 'Sabrina Online', and finally described and chronicled by James Bruner in his 'ZZ Studios' story. Of these respective people I have permission from Max BlackRabbit and James Bruner.

### *James Sheppard, Max(well)*

Created by James Bruner. He has allowed me to use his characters. Do visit his website ([www.zzstudios.com](http://www.zzstudios.com)) if you feel this story is nice.

### *Darke Katt*

Created by Eric W Schwartz, I have no more than assumed permission to portray her. I believe her appearance is within the lines set out by the artists.

Some characters are mentioned. Just for reference:

'Tabitha' and 'Sabrina' refer to characters by Eric W Schwartz.

'Beth', 'Ginny' and 'Brandy' refer to characters by James Bruner.

Main cast for your reference:

Appearing with permission, by James Bruner:

- Zig Zag Sheppard (by Max BlackRabbit and Eric W Schwartz). skunk - tiger mix.  
A mix of a (Siberian) tiger and skunk, she got the striped tiger-look marking her heritage. Despite this out of band start in life, she got on top. She was the driving force behind a successful adult movie studio business, and still is active behind the scenes. Her marriage to James marked her crossing into a more stable life.
- Max, skunk.  
Brother of Zig Zag. He is the (biological) father of Stephan. As such, passes genes that cause Stephan to have a tail reminiscent of Zig's. Stephan's mother happens to be a (full) coyote and thus Stephan also carries a resemblance to James.
- James Sheppard. coyote - German shepherd mix  
Husband of Zig Zag, A relaxed person. Ever since Zig Zag married him James considers his place 'the top of the world'. Children never were part of their relationship and it didn't seem to happen anyway in marriage. Being foster parent to Stephan has, unexpectedly so, completed his life in a way he had not deemed possible. Stephan's mixed parentage touches his own coyote-Alsatian background.

Appearing, unable to secure permission, by Eric W Schwartz:

- Darke Katt, cat  
She is a short, stocky, tough, obsidian cat, on the scruffy side, with a character defined by the law of the street. Darke has no great love for anyone but Zig and enjoys her respect. In fact, the word 'love' has no meaning for her. She will speak of 'like'. Since her twenties, through to her current forties, she has worked as janitor in the adult movie studio of Zig Zag. Some may frown upon that job, maybe call it demeaning. It is not. Certainly not in that place! Zig Zag always made sure Darke knows her job to be respectable and of importance.

## Introducing:

- Stephan Sheppard. coyote / skunk / tiger mix

This little guy, the child of Max, was staying with Zig and James for a fortnight when Max was reported missing in action. Zig Zag and James accepted the responsibility, though in their early fifties, to raise the baby. Stephan is the sort of explosive kid that craves attention. A small, yet strong, kid. Smart in word, but not too well guided in action. At the age of one, he shot his foot off in an accident, playing with a gun. He has a prosthetic foot.

Reel Dad

<i>Prologue</i> .....	6
<i>1. Breakfast</i> .....	8
<i>2. Teacher</i> .....	16
<i>3. Dinner</i> .....	20
<i>4. Visitors</i> .....	28
<i>5. That blasted movie</i> .....	39
<i>6. Maxing it</i> .....	48
<i>7. One down</i> .....	52
<i>8. Retry</i> .....	71
<i>9. Distance</i> .....	75
<i>10. Break</i> .....	82
<i>11. Headache</i> .....	96
<i>12. Max, take two</i> .....	106
<i>13. Ophelia</i> .....	121

Context:

We find James and Zig Zag in their mid fifties, raising the son of Zig Zag's little brother Max. James' business met with disaster ten years ago, the economy is in the gutter and Zig's hard work at her studio keeps them just about afloat. Even in her business, times are hard.

## Prologue

*Northern Pakistan, twenty five years from now.*

It was hot and the enemy was active. Sammy was driving, he was attentive. As were the Sergeant and the fresh, new, greens in the back seats. Sammy knew the road well. It led all along Northern Pakistan, right at the Chinese border. Two weeks separated him from the end of his service. Get skittish and don't get home. He was keen, he'd survive these two weeks of border patrol.

"Look!" Dan called. He pointed, "9 o'clock! Body!"

Sammy slowed. He scanned the mountains on either side. Nothing moved anywhere. He cursed, why did it have to be him to find something so obviously wrong?

"Cool it, Corporal, we'll investigate. Get the greens out."

"Boys?" Sammy called to the back, where two pairs of slightly frowning raccoon eyes would no doubt be studying his head.

"Yes sir?" one said, in earnest.

"You know the drill, boys, don't you 'sir' me."

The two raccoons swallowed. Sammy put his irritation into shape, "What are you gulping for?"

"They've not been out of the vehicle yet, Sammy," Dan said off paw, saving time.

"No no no no no..." Sammy hissed softly, his jaws shut.

"That won't help, Sammy," the Sarge added.

“Dan, you’ve got to be kidding me! Tell me it’s just a prank? Crack me up, will ya?”

“I say we check this corpse out.”

“No we don’t! Shoot first and ask questions later. That’s kept me alive!”

“Doesn’t feel right, Sammy,” Dan nearly sung to him.

“I don’t care what you feel! I’m not going to be blown to bits by one of them things!”

A short ‘ah’ from behind made him look back. One of the raccoons was praying. Great. They had neared the hapless shape near the road. It was a trap, he was sure it was a bomb! He was not ever going to see his waving golden fields back home anymore.

“Stop, Sammy.”

“But...”

“That’s an order, Corporal.”

“Yes Sir!”

Sammy acutely braked to a standstill, earning a glare from the Sarge. He gripped the wheel, with all his might. The sergeant got out. When the big fox was on the road he looked back into the vehicle.

“Boys?” he sung invitingly.

Two raccoons followed. Sammy was sweating, and not because of the dry heat. He closed his eyes, he could not bear to see the next seconds.

“Will you look at...” he heard, and then silence.

He knew it, doomed, he was doomed. One of those innocent farmers near the road? He’d be a gonner, for sure.

“Look at that! That’s no Pakistani!”

He opened his eyes. Dan was hunched to the ground near the bluish wrapped form, inspecting.

“It’s one of ours, Sammy!”

And so, Sammy thought, ends my life. He got out, his paw gripping his weapon. The raccoons had secured the area, sort of.

Chance of stepping on a mine: fifty-fifty. Go with a bang? Sure. His foot touched the hot road. Nothing. Hesitant he neared the hunched fox.

“Look!” Dan cried. He was searching, leaning on his knee, “what species is this?”

“Looks like skunk,” Sammy said, who recognized something in the shape.

“Yeah? And where’s the tail? No white either. Weird skunk if you ask me. Come, help me, I think he’s still alive.”

“You gotta be kidding me man... alive, that?”

“Come on guys! Help me, right now!”

Sammy was glad they were returning to camp. That was safe. Their passenger was comatose, and probably for the better, given the state he was in. This guy had been through hell. His dog-tag was tarnished and near-unreadable, patches of blistered skin at his throat where no fur grew. He’d been mistreated in the worst kind of way. He would not possibly live.

“Oh my God!” one of the raccoons said. “Look at his back! Burns all over!”

“Max... can’t read the rest,” the other raccoon said.

Half an hour later, Dan was still reporting, the raccoons stood at attention.

“Ready to go?”

“Never,” Sammy wanted to say, but kept the thought to himself.

Reluctantly he got back to the armored transport and climbed behind the wheel.

“You know, Sammy, they said he’ll live.”

“Sure, you go on believing that painful thought.”

## 1. Breakfast

One month later, near Columbus Ohio, a large wooden house in a quiet, rural hamlet, off the main road.

James stretched his limbs, in his bed. He looked to his left: the other side of the bed was empty. His wife had gotten up early, very early. She would drive off at a quarter to six, having prepared in advance. Quite an achievement and that was taking into account that Zig was able to put a minimum amount of work in her presentation if so required. Anyway, James was sure it still took her half an hour to prepare. At the same time she managed to be so quiet that he wasn't woken by it. Not a great feat she said, if he asked, but he wasn't so sure. James got up to confront the noise next door.

While Zig woke to the noise of her clock, he woke up because in the room next door a small bed was systematically and methodically being wrecked. Any ordinary bed would be wrecked by now, but not this one! He had built it himself. James was really proud of having made a Stephan-proof bed. He left his warm sheets and walked down the hallway to the continual bumping and shuffling.

"Good morning, Stephan," he announced as he opened the door.

A wide smile greeted him, followed by, "Daddy!"

James was warmed by that, at once. The chill he had felt, for getting up alone in the cold morning, without his wife, was easily dispelled by his foster child and nephew. Stephan was four now, and needed to be taken to kindergarten, on time, this morning like other mornings. James, a not-by-choice retired older coyote, went to pick the little coyote-like skunk-tiger-coyote mix from his crib. Stephan responded by taking a leap, landing on the floor next to the crib. It was a really controlled move, but James knew from experience the success rate was maybe fifty percent, tops.

"Stephan! What did I tell you about jumping from the bed?"

Stephan smiled, adding, "Stephan jumped here!" and James was unable to keep his stern face. He should be stern; Zig chided him for his weak hearted approach to Stephan. But how could he be cross with this super adorable puppy? James eyed the crib. Once he'd gotten back from taking him to kindergarten, he would put some more effort into the normal sized bed he was making for Stephan. Four years, still sleeping in a crib... preposterous, if Stephan weren't so small for his age he would not even fit.

“Come on, Stephan, out of your pajamas, hurry. We’re late already!”

Stephan began jumping through the room with a ‘yay!’ at each jump, still able to surprise him. Where did that kid get the energy from? James felt tired, and was still not quite awake. Stephan was more like a nuclear power plant, ready to melt down. Because of it, and sadly as usual, he ended up tearing the pajamas from the little guy until a diaper wrapped puppy with a wide striped tail jumped around still. That was another of his more or less insurmountable tasks: get Stephan potty trained. This toddler seemed to be totally bent on peeing all over the house, at four years of age! It was one of the things where he wondered if he was doing the right thing, being parent of this little energetic ball of fur.

“OK, we do it my way then, Stephan!”

He cleaned his nephew, praising him for his dry diaper, and dressed him. All in all, maybe ten minutes. Good show, James concluded happily. He started descending the stairs, and halfway down called back up, “come on, food!”

The light in the hallway was on.

Off.

On, again.

“Stephan!”

Off.

“Stop playing with the switch!”

Stephan rushed to the stairs and down them in one breath, passing him with a car-noise-like ‘yeeeeeah’.

“Stephan’s first!” he announced, jumping at the base of the stairs.

“Yes, you are, Stephan, yes you are.”

James, still only in his shorts, walked to the kitchen and took bread from the pantry. He swiveled his head around to see the light in the great room go on.

And off.

“Stephan!” James called once more, getting just a little bit irritated. The light went on and the toddler appeared. Stephan moved his high chair to its place at the table and clambered on.

“I want cereal, Daddy.”

“We’re out of milk, Stephan, it’ll be bread.”

“I don’t want bread.”

“Of course not, but it is all we have.”

“I want cereal.”

James sighed, and reiterated, “No, Stephan, we only have bread.”

Stephan’s muzzle adjusted and he started crying, loudly, wailing, “Stephan always gets cereal!”

“Stephan! Shut up or I will put you back in your bed!”

His nephew stopped at once and put an angry face in place.

“I’m fierce!” he said and showed a row of teeth.

“Good, now here is your plate and your knife,” James said, providing the little blunt knife, “Put some butter on, and I’m watching!”

He sat down, waiting for the coffee to get ready. Stephan eyed him cautiously and started buttering his bread. Slowly, and meticulously. James wondered once more how clever this little person was.

“I’m going to dress now, Stephan, I will be very mad with you if I find bread on the floor, you hear me?”

Stephan looked him in the eye, and at times like this James would very much like to know what the little guy was thinking. He noted the twitch in the tail. That spelled disaster, if he was any judge. In truth, he knew another person with such a quirky tail twitch: Zig Zag. Genes seemed to count for something, where behavior was concerned.

“I’m warning you,” he directed this with all the force he was capable of to his charge.

Stephan smiled widely and James left him, reappearing four minutes later. His shirt was unbuttoned still and his trousers open when he marched into the kitchen. Stephan was fingering his tail.

“No! Stephan, you can’t touch your tail when eating! Out! Out of your chair! Hut! Wash your paws again.”

“Don’t want to, Daddy.”

“Well then, don’t touch your tail. Look: there are bread crumbs all over it. We’ll have to brush it again.”

“No! No brushing!”

“Yes, brushing, that is what happens if you touch it during eating. You know that.”

“I want Ziggy.”

“Your aunt will only agree, and you know it. Stop the theater, Stephan.”

The bothered little guy played around with his slice of bread, postponing the inevitable. James considered his predicament: this wasn’t going to work. He made a mental note not to trust Zig, who in her current overworked state wasn’t able to remember to get groceries on the way home. Preparing mentally, James drank his coffee and ate a few slices of dry bread. At the same time he was adjusting his clothes and tried achieving the minimum requirement in terms of presentation using a brush and the microwave door for a mirror, chewing. Then he poured chocolate milk for Stephan which went in quickly and without spilling a drop. Zig would be quite mad if she saw this, but *she* never had to push Stephan through breakfast at top speed.

“Come on, Stephan, brush time.”

Relieved to abort the task of eating, Stephan rushed upstairs to the bathroom. Once James got there, Stephan had gotten almost every patch of fur tangled already, playing with several brushes. This included Zig’s favorite ones. He better not forget to get any brown hairs out!

“Good, Stephan, now Daddy will help for a bit.”

He brushed the brown and grey head, and the black ears. Then, switching brushes, he continued on the grey fur on the small arms. He thought he saw a dark stripe surface here and there. No one could be sure what Stephan was going to look like in a few years. Finally, with the special fluffy-tail-brush he started brushing the tail.

“Ow!” Stephan kept saying at every touch.

“Yes, Zig Zag taught you nicely to say ‘ow’, didn’t she?”

“Yes,” Stephan agreed dutifully.

He’d seen her brush Stephan. While the result was invariably stunning, it was executed a little less soft than what he was doing now. All in all, James thanked God for the quiet moment he received from Stephan here. Breakfast had created a crumbles-loaded toddler and he really needed to get them out.

Once downstairs, he announced, “Let’s go, Stephan,” and he collected the lunchbox he’d prepared yesterday and stepped outside.

“Daddy! That is the Ziggy’s car!”

True to his age, Stephan was the sort to notice such tiny details: instead of the 4x4 truck, he was now facing the low sports-car Zig Zag liked so much. Her current shooting-location required the high clearance of the truck and so, in the end, he was left with the fast wheels.

“That is only for a few days, Stephan, come on: just like yesterday OK?”

“No! Not like yesterday!”

That was probably right too: he’d bumped Stephan’s head getting him in the seat. What idiot would build such low profile cars?

“Daddy will be more careful this time, in you go,” he opened the door. Stephan clambered in and James set about securing him.

“Ow!” Stephan called halfway through the motions.

He’d done it again, this time Stephan had been prepared, in a way.

“Ow here Daddy,” Stephan pointed to his left ear.

He kissed it, “there, that is better, isn’t it?”

“Ow here too, Daddy,” Stephan pointed to his right ear.

“This is not a game, Stephan. I’m going to give just one more kiss, right?”

“One more, right,” Stephan spoke after him.

Within the hour, he stood at the fence with the other parents. Stephan was running around on the fenced off playground with the other kids. His little backpack bumped up and down with the jump-like strides he took. James narrowed his eyes, staring. Stephan sure seemed happy when he was here.

“Hello there? How are you?”

Distracted, he looked aside to see an old squirrel granny. She smiled at him. He’d not seen her here before.

“I’m fine, thank you, How are you?”

“I’m Ryan’s grandmother,” she said, as she pointed to a little squirrel, and continued conversationally, “you are also bringing your grand son, I take it?”

James switched a few gears in his head. This was not the first time he was taken for a grand parent.

“Actually, he’s my foster child,” he saw the lady’s small fright at that, “but no offence taken, I assure you.”

“Oh, I’m so dreadfully sorry, I mean you *do* look young ... sir?”

“James, James Sheppard.”

“I’m Dinny Squirius,” she extended a small paw to his bigger one. James shook it, all the while afraid he might break it.

“I couldn’t help but notice you brought little Stephan along, Mr. Sheppard. He’s quite the popular boy you know?”

“He is?” James didn’t understand why she would know, and expressed as much in his demeanor.

“Oh, I *am* sorry. You see, my son works at the kindergarten,” she made a sweep with her frail arm to the building, “and he’s happy to see, how shall I put this, the arrival of more uptown folks finally.”

Here, she eyed Zig’s sports car. Ah, indeed. James and Zig had deliberated long and thoroughly where to bring Stephan. They had settled for this place because it did not contain all the upper class, rich kids. Those kids would certainly pick on Stephan’s mixed parentage, not to mention Zig’s line of work. To secure the best possible start in life, this had been their solution: the kindergarten in the less favorable part of town. Plus, it was close to the ZZ-Studios building, it was the

closest to Zig's work, in fact, of any option. So far, Zig's line of work had become apparent already at the school and this was considered no issue at all. This place held kids without mothers, those working 'on the street', missing fathers, or fathers in jail, and then any combination of these. However, to take Zig's car as a sign of social station... James could not begin to explain to this dear lady how much she was misinterpreting. But maybe he didn't need to.

"So, you say Stephan is popular?"

"Yes, I was wondering, Mr. Sheppard, would you mind having Ryan over to play with Stephan at some time? Ryan keeps going on about that swing Stephan has."

James beamed at that, "well, he does like his swing, a lot. I'll have a word with my wife, would I be seeing you here tomorrow, madam?"

"Certainly, sir, certainly."

"Bye then," James said. He left for Zig's car, leaving a happy older squirrel lady behind.

Sitting down, he looked in the rear view mirror. "Gramps," he muttered to the mirror image. That old lady reminded him once more of his age. No, he could not blame her, to think him a grandparent. Fifty five full years he'd walked this Earth already, and nigh on four years in charge of a child. What kind of parents would Stephan have once he reached adolescence?

James wondered often what kind of old grey parents he and Zig would be. Then again, a child without a father was even worse. Wasn't it?

Stephan's biological father was missing.

Max, Zig's brother, was 'missing in action'. Which was a friendly term, explaining one could not find the body of the dead skunk. Zig's brother had had a short, apparently fruitful relation with –of all species– a coyote.

So in the end, the set of genes that made Zig a tiger striped skunk, had made Stephan with a tail much like Zig's. And a coyote's head, much like his own albeit a coyote head with black ears, and some sort of black 'mask' over his face at his eyes.

Yes, it was obvious Stephan was something special. The term the world had devised for mixes of mixes was a 'no species'. It would be a difficult life for Stephan, and he and Zig were familiar with that life. Both of them had grown up, a gene-blend, frowned upon by society.

The life of a social outcast, he knew it to be.

James set his jaw. Stephan would be able to count on him, whatever happened, he thought grimly.

Switching on the turn indicator, he joined the traffic flow.

After he bought the groceries Zig had skipped yesterday, including his best guess for the next day, he returned home. That bed for Stephan needed a lot of work yet. The sanding of the wood would take days. He wanted to get it smooth and straight. There was about a full hour of wood working possible before his 'real' work called his attention.

One hour after noon, a chime from his watch reminded him of it: check the scripting on the web-portal of the ZZ Studios. Clearing his tools took mere minutes and so, wood dust flying, he sat down with a tablet in the great room. It was a chore, keeping manual track of the endless updates for viruses and malignant inserts, but this way the system on the studio servers was one of a kind and that fact alone provided enormous protection. Zig could not afford to have valuable video streams hijacked or even downloaded without payment. Next to taking care of Stephan, being the all round computer nerd for the studio was making him feel useful to her. If not for this, he might have decided to leave her because he could not bear the idea of her paying his bottomless debts without anything to repay all her hard work. Nobody else accepted his services and he would not allow it to waste away so he put everything he could into helping his wife on this point. Maybe he'd not been the perfect manager in the past, but he would make very sure those servers were an impregnable fortress.

## 2. Teacher

James was at the kindergarten at four PM sharp. Too early, but he really hadn't any other plan. The old squirrel lady was there too.

"Hello again, I had thought you might be early," she began.

James accepted the small talk invitation and thus, the time was easily bridged until most parents, or their legal representative, were collected, waiting for their kids. By the time Stephan appeared, he had gotten a thorough description of Ryan's mother from the granny. With Stephan present, he excused himself, seeing the toddler was holding the paw of an insignificant, adult rabbit. It was Miss Othmar, Stephan's teacher.

"Mister Sheppard?" she called out, waving, while she held Stephan close to her.

James quickly went over, unsure of the portent of this singular request.

"Could you spare a minute, or five, please?"

"Why, sure, Miss Othmar."

James followed the brown rabbit in and Stephan happily jumped along. She set him to draw a picture, and in the empty classroom she sat down, indicating he should do the same. James sat down on the offered little chair, apprehensive.

"How is Stephan doing at home, Mr. Sheppard?"

"Please call me James, Miss Othmar."

"I prefer not to, if you don't mind," she said, keeping her distance.

Hmm, aggression, or professional conduct, could be either. The rabbit adjusted her glasses, pushing them back up her muzzle. Actually, he wasn't too fond of rabbits. He always felt they mostly looked past one, and this lady was clearly not amused on top of that. A thin rabbit, uninteresting in so many ways, he couldn't begin to list them mentally. Still a 'miss' at easily forty years of age, now why wasn't he surprised?

"What's the matter with Stephan, then?"

"I prefer you describe him for me, else I would be influencing your reply."

"And you won't now?"

"The least, so please, Mr. Sheppard?"

What a cross-examination!

James launched into a description of Stephan's daily activities. He described how, as parent, he would apply gentle pressure at meals. Using mild threats concerning items Stephan might or might not receive, if the toddler wasn't interested in his food. To his comfort, the rabbit nodded from time to time, showing consent to his story.

"Do you know why he sometimes speaks of himself as 'fierce'?"

James was taken aback. "Um," he managed.

"You instilled that in him, Mr. Sheppard?"

She wouldn't understand, he thought. What could he say?

"Miss Othmar, my wife and I believe Stephan will feel the abrasive side of society. And I for one know, Miss Othmar, from experience," he stressed, "that it will be a hard road."

"Mr. Sheppard, do you know if Stephan is popular?"

"Well, that old squirrel lady seems to think so. She even asked if Ryan might come along once."

James didn't quite follow what was the problem and said so.

"Stephan, Mr. Sheppard, is the pivot of a gang of four toddlers who will kick a few other children at times. I assure you that a slightly higher profile school would already have acted accordingly and would have banned your child."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying, Stephan is super endearing, is able to bend all adults to his whim and his fellow toddlers as well. He is the pinnacle of popularity. Through your 'fierce' campaign we have now an infestation of 'fierce' toddlers. And one of them decided kicking is fierce, we don't pin that on Stephan, note. I urge you to reconsider your actions pertaining to the desired development of that little guy there."

"Would I be so kind as to tell Stephan to be a bit less fierce?"

James rephrased for her.

"Yes. On account of him not needing this and him being the most liked child by adult and little friends alike. I have reason to believe the fierceness you try to infuse in him is not his nature. Also, that metal

foot gives him a bonus in terms of kicking and it's not to be encouraged."

"Do tell," James replied, a bit ruffled. No one likes to be told one is not doing a good job of parenting.

"I'm sure you appreciate what I have said, Mr. Sheppard," she rebuked his attack.

Folding, James agreed he'd think about it. He got up and called Stephan to him who happily danced into his outstretched paws. "Daddy!" Stephan called, and received a hug upon reaching him.

"He adores you, Mr. Sheppard. He will tell all about you, when asked."

"Oh, do you?" James asked Stephan, feeling cheerful.

He made to go and looked back to the teacher, Stephan on his hip.

"Well, until tomorrow, I guess?"

"Mr. Sheppard?"

"Yes?" James wondered what she might possibly add now.

"Thank you for your time, I am pleased to speak freely without having to paraphrase everything I say in dummy talk."

That was unexpected. He blinked, slowly phrasing his reply, "Thank you, I guess?"

He could see she was feeling very self-conscious. A sort of internal conflict was going on there.

"It's okay, Miss Othmar, my lips are sealed. See you tomorrow."

She relaxed visibly and nodded. So was this a precious moment of the true Miss Othmar? James let it be, returning his interest to Stephan.

"So, Stephan, let's go home, what do you say?"

"Yippee!"

### 3. Dinner

Once home, he set about preparing dinner. Simple, just macaroni, leek, onion and meatballs. James knew how Stephan would likely abhor the sauce, but he was going to make sure some fibers would get into that puppy, whether he liked it or not. He rolled the meatballs and fried them in a thin layer of oil, eyeing the clock. What was keeping her?

At half past five, there was no sign of Zig yet and James put the dish in the oven to keep it warm. The pasta would dry out a little, unavoidably, but a meal enjoyed together completed both his and Stephan's day. He went outside with Stephan to catch the last rays of the sun and felt how his muscles loosened in chasing Stephan. It was a marvel, to see how Stephan could run around without any ill effects of the artificial foot. It looked and moved just like his other 'real' foot. The only thing was: they had to visit the hospital every three months to get it adjusted because he'd grown.

When Stephan went inside of his own free will, he knew he could not postpone dinner any longer. He tried calling Zig on her phone, and got no reply. So he checked her position, assuming her phone was in her purse, and recognized the coordinates as being near the studio. Probably a drink because of some reached milestone. That was typically Zig: teambuilding at every occasion. However she might have called, or answered at least. Not nice.

Zig's absence didn't make dinner any easier. He ended up putting Stephan in the hallway twice, the toddler crying his eyes out and screaming. But he got most of the food he wanted him to eat, in there.

After a kids-show on the screen of the entertainment system he brought the child to his bed.

"Where is Ziggy, Daddy?"

"Your aunt is working late, very busy. You'll see her tomorrow."

Teeth brushed, face washed, Stephan jumped into his crib. James took a seat and started reading a bedtime story after which he left the toddler to find sleep.

Back down, he cleaned the kitchen and prepared Zig's meal for use in the microwave. Chances of her eating it were slim, but it was the least he could do. Tomorrow, a janitor from ZZ-Studios, Darke Katt, would be along to clean the house. To prepare for that, he started clearing toys and magazines away. He'd tried to talk Zig out of it, but she still had this idea he wasn't cleaning the house well.

At ten o'clock he heard the fine whine of the hydrogen engine from the 4x4 outside. James had his feet up, and was enjoying a book. He liked the quiet, until just now only interrupted by the ticking of the clock.

The front door slammed, none to gentle. That indicated Zig was unhappy. Allowing for her prerogative as the sole money source, he decided to swallow his anger at her unresponsiveness and absence. It was certainly worse for her to find an irritated husband at home if she had had a bad day.

Zig took a long time to reach the great room.

"James?" she called, at the door.

There was a pained strain hidden in there, one he could not place.

"Here honey," he said, looking up.

She looked at him, and he had to say she was certainly not steady.

"Drink at the bar?" he asked carefully, keeping any accusing tone out.

"Uh-uh, guess who I ran into?"

Guess? How could he guess whom of the thousands of people she knew, that could be? So he waited instead for the answer that would no doubt ensue.

"Your swindling buddy, Doug."

"Doug's not a swindler, he didn't intend that bust of the firm to work out the way it did!" James bit back. Zig had not been a great fan of Doug after that. Right now he dreaded the issue raising its ugly head again.

“Pah! All guys are untrustworthy, good for nothing, swindlers!” she spat, confident.

A whiff of alcohol vapor drifted to James, tickling his nostrils. She looked like she'd been trying to drink the bar dry. Great, not calling in and then getting home intoxicated. At least the Doug-issue had passed and he felt he needed to press her irresponsibility.

“Do you know what would happen if you'd been pulled over?” He asked in a hot tone. James threw caution to the wind, saying that, but he was mad at her for driving in that state.

“Cute girls don't get tickets,” Zig managed, half laughing, her tail went up to support her claimed hilarious remark. James wasn't fooled though. This position of her tail was the normal 'happy' stance and through it he only got angrier.

“Yeah? Cute girls can run playing kids over, kids like Stephan, eh! If you'd been caught you'd've been incarcerated, for life!”

The mention of her nephew reached through her haze, he saw. Zig Zag frowned. A soft “Ohhh” escaped her muzzle.

“I feel... quaint,” she added and rolled her eyes.

How on Earth had she even reached home? She could hold her liquor, but this was seriously too much and she'd been driving like this all the way from the studio. James felt he needed to inspect the car for damage or even the remains of any pedestrians she might have run over.

Zig looked at him, giggled, hiccupped and put two paws to her muzzle to keep vomit inside. She ran to the toilet, dripping from the corners of her muzzle. When she reached the toilet, he heard her throw up. It certainly didn't sound gentle.

“Good grief, Zig!” James exclaimed, and looked at the floor. It was a mess, a disgusting trail of sour smelling alcohol reached from the middle of the great room to the hallway. He was glad the carpet was out on account of Stephan still getting potty-trained. He rushed to the kitchen for a bucket while Zig had collapsed in the toilet, a giggle could be heard in between the retching. James returned and looked dismayed at the greenish liquid on the wooden floor.

Not even beer. She'd been drinking heavily.

“I don’t get it, why did they let you go home alone in this state?”

“Alone... uugh,” she replied from the toilet.

He heard her retch once more, noting her tail was forced out into the great room for some reason. On his knees, he mopped the floor with his paws.

“Zig Zag, what happened?”

His anger had been replaced by fear. It was not like her to be so irresponsible. James cleaned the rest of the floor and waited for Zig to reappear. When she did, the thing he noted was she’d cried. Also, she’d removed her shirt and bra, which were hanging from a paw, both of which were soaked with alcoholic vomit. Her skirt wasn’t spared either.

“What’s the matter?” he asked softly, worried.

“Ohhh,” she said, “I... had a little bit too much.”

“I should think so.”

“Hold me?”

Like that? James swallowed. A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. Damsel in distress and all that.

“Please?” she said in a tiny voice and he saw her begging, wet eyes.

He let her squeeze herself against him, battling the smell. Then, she sobbed, clinging to him.

“Come, we should get you into a shower.” James said softly, trying to keep from breathing too deeply. He guided her upstairs to the bathroom. On the way, he found she leaned so heavily on him that he adjusted his plan and helped her get into a bath while it was filling. Collecting the clothes he announced, “Just putting these in a bucket,” and went out. He’d have to wash his own clothes as well.

When he got back for a quick shower, his robe at paw, the bath had filled and Zig was looking a little better. He sat on the edge of the bath, next to her head and stroked her between her ears.

“Why are you so good to me?” she said.

She reached for his torso, fondling his fur. It was a nice feeling, but at times, he wondered why he accepted all she did. Right now he would have read her the riot act if it would have made any difference.

“Because I love you.” he said instead of that. He meant it.

Zig sniffed, “You know Petra?”

James searched his memory. It had to be one of the actresses.

“Um, cat ... from Poland?”

Zig Zag nodded, distraught. She’d mentioned her sometimes, James reflected. Maybe she liked that cat. He couldn’t be sure. Zig would keep that away from him anyway, per his own request.

“I got her bimonthly test results today.”

Ouch, that probably meant she had kept hidden some kind of unpleasant disease, possibly linked to their job. But to get in this state, because of it? She’d dealt with that kind of thing before.

“She’s got...” Zig Zag said and cried. James waited for her to collect herself. “It’s breast cancer. Advanced stage.”

James could not fill in all the blanks here. Zig was not sober, so it was impossible to tell how much it touched her. Still, it must be hard to hear it. He didn’t know what to make of it. His own experiences with cancer, in his family, were long enough past.

“I’m really sorry, Zig.”

“Yeah... sorry... I liked her so much,” Zig Zag said, “*everyone* I like gets it.”

“How did she react?” James tried, in order to say something, anything, while trying to think how something like that could go undetected for so long.

“I haven’t yet told her. I stopped for a drink, some courage, you know?”

Courage? He knew how to drink sleep, he had done that long ago, before Zig had happened to him. Even a total stupor, when she happened. But he didn’t know how to drink courage, yet she would say things like that. So he nodded.

“One drink led to another, then that stupid Doug...”

James was happy Doug didn't really have anything to do with all this, after all. Their firm had gone bust because of other factors than their joint hard work. Doug had simply decided on a different method of securing his old age than he had. James had been hit the hardest by the chapter eleven, which was probably a fitting end too as James felt responsible for the demise of the company, SCS. Zig Zag still seemed to think some 'swindling' was in there, but Doug had even offered to help him out, financially. It was sad, but through one dumb remark, at the wrong time and place, Zig had ended up between him and Doug. He'd chosen to minimize contact with Doug rather than lose her. Doug had understood, which was perfectly like him. James felt sad they didn't get together anymore like they used to, but life goes on. He could handle it.

"I can't take it anymore, James, not after what happened to Nanda and Renate, and you know I have to keep my muzzle shut or suffer the financial setbacks."

These were names that, without context, meant nothing to him. He could not keep up with the ever changing inhabitants of the studio, with the 'stars'. However, he did recall two girls in the last five or so years, who had left the studio, having been diagnosed with something bad. And at such a young age too! The two had simply vanished from his view of the world, but for Zig it had meant a great deal more.

He did remember though, that both girls had had support from the whole studio crew, two times a deep gash had been left on many a soul in there. The sight of her coworkers, collected for the final goodbye, stood clearly in his mind now. Money-wise the sickness forced goodbye of those two had caused a serious lapse in the production. Schedules had slipped, revenues had been hit, and the whole studio finance had reached rock bottom. If only he wouldn't be such a leech on their funds! The bankruptcy of his former business was costing even today. The dumb choice at their marriage made Zig accountable too. It had been a joint choice, but stupid nevertheless. He could easily understand why meeting Doug would have ticked her off: he wasn't paying off debts. It was easy to understand why Zig would not go around telling everyone, from the start. And it was costing her, oh it was costing her.

Zig eyed him. It was always a little bit scary when she looked at him like that. He recognized the gaze as if she was reading his face somehow.

“Think of your aunt Ginny, back then, you understand that?”

Yes, he did. But Ginny had been much older! Would she really be going through that feeling for this employee, this friend, even? He saw how Zig stared at him still. Mind reading him, it seemed. She nodded, arched her brow into a slight frown and cried once more.

“Ouch,” He said.

She nodded again, a few tears in her eyes. Maybe he should switch the subject, something with more positive content.

“How was...” sniff, “your day?” she sniffed, her head resting back, beating him to his own intention to broach something upbeat.

She twitched her ears and moved the long white hair from her face then rinsed the tears from her muzzle fur. James raised his eyebrows and peaked his ears. Uncanny, that was the only word he could come up with when she did this. Was she really reading his mind?

“Actually, I had a very good day. Stephan appears to be the center of a lot of attention. He’s the most popular kid at school. A friend of his asked, via his Gramma, to visit him. His teacher feels we should not encourage his fierceness so, since he obviously doesn’t need it.”

James put it all in one go.

“What does she know?” Zig said derisively.

She clearly did not agree with the teacher, and her drunken state would not add to any understanding. This was going to be a tough evening, James recognized.

“I’ll leave you to stew for a moment, shall I?”

“No, I’m getting out of this. I need to be on the set tomorrow.”

“Like this? You’ve got seven hours of night left! You’ve just spilled all your guts, there wasn’t any food in there, I saw!”

“Most went into the toilet, you couldn’t say for sure.”

Exasperated, James threw his paws in the air.

“Is there any food left?” she asked, “I think I should eat something.”

“In the microwave, at the push of a button. Macaroni dish.”

“Hmm.” Zig said. She looked at him, “I don’t deserve you, James.”

James decided not to say anything to that. Besides, his nose still held the odor of vomit and food was the last thing on his mind. She did not cease to amaze him.

###

By the time she got into bed, he was nearly dozing off and had his eyes closed. Zig was quiet, absorbed into something probably. Something he was not made a part of. She put her head on the pillow, sighing. Then she turned on her side, away from him. She’d think him asleep, no doubt.

Then he heard a sniff, a sob. It certainly had gotten to her. He turned his head to her; the mass of white hair shook a moment in the limited light. Maybe, he could offer solace? He felt his way to her back, touching softly, a little stroke.

The reaction was not inviting, she turned on her back and sniffed again.

“You go to sleep, James. Tomorrow Stephan needs to be at school on time.”

He recognized the request for solitude and left her alone. Sometimes, he thought, it would be nice if she could use him as her bosom friend, her closest mate. In times past, she would have called Brandy no doubt, talk it out and over with her, but now... Zig seemed to build walls around her.

His eyes closed, he was a little startled by her kiss, immediately after which she was back on her side. This took away the feeling of not being close to her and he liked her for it. It was a shame he could not help her with her grief, this was the way it was.

## 4. Visitors

The next day, James woke to Zig's low voice on the phone. He heard the concluding remarks of the conversation only.

"-yes, you do that... about noon I guess. No, no, I'm fine. Yep, same to you."

"Who was that?" James asked, drowsily.

"Marvin," Zig replied and sagged back onto her pillow, emitting an "oof."

He recognized the name, the badger who planned the takes.

"I'm glad you took my advice to sleep in," James scolded her.

"Not so loud," Zig Zag managed. She winced.

That hangover was the least she should endure, James thought. He hadn't forgiven her for the reckless drunk driving. It was about six AM and he was still sleepy. With a yawn, he turned on his side and drifted off until Stephan was demolishing his room again.

Zig was up, he smelled coffee. He could not understand why his wife never seemed to get the hang of 'sleeping in', but fresh coffee in the morning was a good solution. Once he arrived downstairs with Stephan, Zig had baked an egg and put a bowl of cereal out ready for Stephan.

"Good morning," he announced happily.

"Good morning," Stephan agreed, he looked fleetingly at Zig and added "Ziggy, your boobs are visible."

James looked at Zig Zag, mute. He recognized his own line there, shaking his head to indicate he had not expected it to stick in that little head. Of course, Stephan clearly didn't catch the portent. In reply she fastened her robe to conceal all, and Stephan ate on as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Who says that kind of thing, Stephan?" James inquired of the little guy, knowing he was the source. He hoped he wasn't the sole source of such comments. He and Zig tried to keep that sort of subject out of any discussion around Stephan.

"Ryan," Stephan squeezed in between scoops of cereal.

“Who’s that?” Zig asked, interested.

“A little squirrel, being raised by his grandmother,” James explained. He added a few words about what the granny had said concerning Ryan’s mother. A successful lawyer, who was away so often she had offered to keep Ryan with her. And, not a word about the father. He saw Zig didn’t exactly buy that story, but it wasn’t his to begin with.

“Ryan’s mom is driving a Ferrari.” Stephan said suddenly. He had of course heard their discussion.

Zig smiled at Stephan, rested her head on her paws near him and said “Does she? And did Ryan say what his mom does?”

Stephan nodded vigorously, “Yes! She’s callgirling.”

Zig looked at James, who felt this was not the right sort of subject. Even worse, she asked Stephan if he knew what that meant! He was certainly too late to stop this.

Stephan explained, “Ryan says she calls to him, every night. She is the beautifullest squirrel in the world.”

Zig and James looked at each other. Stephan noted this and added, “She calls from heaven.”

“Now you can decide whose story is right, James,” Zig said with a nod and pulled one of her smug faces.

From there on, breakfast went downhill rapidly. Stephan started playing with his cereal and he got it in his fur, on the floor, in his clothes. Everywhere but his mouth, in short. When James pulled the little coyote from his chair and placed him in the hallway, yelling and kicking, Zig interfered. In the end he kicked her ankle, causing another angry parent.

He arrived late at school and decided to accept to have Ryan over, the next day. He hadn’t been able to talk it over with Zig Zag. At least the usual fight getting Stephan in the car had been skipped since the large truck was available.

Now, Zig was on her way to her shooting location. She had been pretty worked up by the time she left. Afraid it would be a big mess. James thought it exaggerated but when he said so she only got mad at him. It was clear she was on edge, had a headache still and

simply wanted to direct her movie. Once she'd gone, it took him a lot of time to quiet down. Why did everything have to be so difficult?

The bell rang while James sat on the porch at the back of the house, recuperating from the hard work on the bed for Stephan. It had been his solution to battle the anger.

Now, who could that possibly be?

Darke Katt stepped onto the porch with her bucket and cleaning materials.

"I thought no one was home," she said, crashing the bucket on the porch and pulling her ear for a second.

She walked in, clean past him, and started cleaning the kitchen. A cat of few words, he knew. James waited outside. Darke would only get angry if he were 'in her way'. But when he heard her move to the great room, he went to the kitchen.

Upon passing her, she growled, "that kitchen was spotless. I don't like coming over for nothing."

She was mopping the boards. "You puked here?"

To his surprise that was a slightly amused question. She would smell it of course.

"Zig Zag was... not too well."

Darke grinned, "Thought she could quaff it, better than this," she sniffed, "'s not beer..."

"No," James agreed.

He saw her wince as she turned her arm in a particular way. She cursed.

"Is that arm still bothering you?" He knew she'd been shot in that arm, almost two years ago. She had fallen victim to the same miscreant that had cost Stephan his foot.

"If I ever see that creep, ever again, I will eat him. Alive, if I have to, that damned piece of shooting vermin."

James had the distinct impression she was a hundred percent serious about the eating. Actually, he could not recall Darke making a

joke. He didn't know her all that well. No one did. Zig seemed to know her best, yet Darke never featured in her stories.

"Care for some coffee?" James tried. It was a long shot, with Darke, one never knew where one would end up.

"Hmm. Maybe," she said.

She rubbed her arm, at the scar the bullet had left. No fur had returned there. It was amazing how Darke could achieve a scruffy look while being perfectly clean. That is, if Zig Zag was right about her hygiene. In the kitchen, he prepared two cappuccinos. When he was done, he found her in the kitchen behind him. Silent movers, those cats.

He proffered the cup on a saucer, "Here you are."

"Mini coffee, yum," she scoffed.

"I could make you a big latte, if you want?"

She looked up, yellow eyes in a dark face, "Would you?"

Oh, oh, a precious tender moment, James saw, as he said, "Sure."

He used a large mug and had a hot latte ready in no time.

"Want some cocoa on top?"

"Pfff," Darke stuck her tongue out.

This could only mean 'no, I don't fancy that, thank you.' She took the mug and leaned her behind on the high chair. Her shot arm went into the pocket of her dark grey overall.

"Nice," she said as she drank the beverage.

James sat on a stool and sipped the cappuccino. It was good. Her loss, wanting a big mug of fake coffee. In a way, Darke was refreshingly clear. No layers of conduct steered her reactions. She kept quiet, through her drink. When she placed the empty mug on the table, rather aggressively, she suddenly asked about Stephan.

"How's his foot?"

"Good, it doesn't show in any way. Amazing, what medical science has achieved."

“Hmm. A patch of fur is too much, though.”

She looked at the scar on her arm. James decided not to explain how he had stopped Zig from pouring a big wad of bucks into that fur-transplant for Darke. Maybe he'd been wrong, but in the end Zig Zag had agreed it would be too expensive. Now, he stared at the piece of pink skin. It was true: missing fur marked one. Very much so.

“I've got this fur cover piece, which works. But I can't clean with it. So...”

Darke shrugged.

“Gotta move on, Mister James,” she said, as she walked past him, continuing in silence.

When she left, an hour later, James still was thinking about that day, two years ago. That unsavory person had intruded on their peace. Zig Zag had explained to him how Stephan had shot his own foot off with the gun left on the floor. She'd been worried about him at the time, not about the gun, as he'd been unconscious on the floor.

If it weren't for Stephan's foot, he would have considered it a bad dream. Parallel universes? It was a load of rubbish. That big company employing the skunkette Tabitha was hiding things from them. At the same time that corporation had made sure Stephan had received all high tech help available. Top surgeon. Good care, priceless. They would not have been able to pay any of that.

He went back to his wood work, in the shed. In an hour, he'd retrieve Stephan. He really looked forward to that. Stephan always was happy to see him at the end of the school day. He hoped Zig would not be so late today.

###

That afternoon, Stephan was swinging on his swing, in the garden. He hung onto the thing, draped over it rather than sitting. He was too short, really. James diverted his attention to the task at paw: starting preparations for tonight's dinner. It would be 'chili con carne' he'd decided. By the time he had the single-pan meal going, he found his mind drifting to more vegetables than just beans and bell pepper.

The fridge supplied him with ingredients for a salad. He turned to put it all on the kitchen sink when he found his way blocked by a black and white menace, glowering at him with bright blue eyes.

“Wow! You’re home early!”

“Hi,” Zig Zag dropped, off key.

“What?” he asked, she could not expect him to read her mind the way she did.

“You know perfectly well what!” she spat.

Subsequently, she stamped out of the kitchen to the garden, where she tried to lure Stephan into a tag-game. Stephan of course felt the tension and this only got her more wound up. James watched the scene from the kitchen window. What had he done wrong now? He shrugged knowing she would confront him with his misstep in a moment. It did not matter since experience had taught him to let this kind of thing lie for a moment. Especially at this time of the month!

Stephan ate a lot of the beanie meal. Surely the little guy was trying to build a store for more meager times, that is: when he would not like the food too much. It was nice to have a moment to eat without having to clean the kitchen after the little whirlwind went through. During dinner, apparently being in high spirits, Stephan tried to get a smile from Zig. He walked his fingers over the table to Zig’s arm, pricking her but to no avail. The dark mood was not lifted. As his teacher had said, Stephan’s sixth sense, for the moods of people, made him docile. James decided that as a result he was sweet as sugar. Stephan certainly sensed the strain between his parents and he slunk to his toys in the corner of the room after dinner. There was not a single request of ‘louder’ once the TV show was on.

When he brought Stephan to his bed, the toddler stopped at the foot of the stairs.

“I have to say goodnight to Reeldad.”

James waited for this, feeling at ease. The storm that was plaguing Zig Zag would be raging, unleashing its fury upon him with full effect, in a moment. Better to savor this moment while he could.

“Good night Reeldad.” Stephan said to the picture of Max, Zig’s missing little brother.

Uncharacteristically, Stephan then looked up at him. “Can I give Ziggy a good night kiss?”

James nodded, this would be interesting. Stephan quietly went over to his brooding aunt, who was absorbed in the news, playing on the screen.

“Ziggy?” he said sweetly.

She turned to him, picked him up from the floor and hugged him, softly saying, “I love you Stephan, I love you so much, gimme a hug, a big hug!”

Stephan clamped his paws around her neck and she kissed him. With the puppy so cooperative, James had him in his crib in five minutes and read a story to him. Then, he walked down the stairs, apprehensive. This would not be nice, but there was nothing for it. James took a seat close to Zig. She turned the screen off, dutifully. James braced.

“What did you tell Darke?”

James thought about that question. What again had they talked about?

“Could you be a little more specific?” he ventured, afraid she might lose her forced ease.

“I don’t like being the laughing stock of my studio, Jimmy.”

That was nasty: ‘Jimmy’ meant she was seriously mad. The sarcasm just wafted off this remark, inexplicably reminding James of several layers of meaning that he was supposed to see through at once. Well, he couldn’t, she had to understand that too.

“I’m sorry, Zig, I really don’t know!”

She pulled a paw through her hair, talking a staccato, “Can you act more stupid?” upon which she eyed him with that particular gaze. The furniture was getting bigger, he felt, his wife had her moments when she felt he was on her turf and this was one of them. A nasty gleam passed through those blue eyes. Just a fleeting moment, but he knew where to look and saw it. He shuddered, at that. His reaction made her gasp.

“I scare you that much?” she asked, acutely emptied of malice.

“Sorry,” James said, recovering. He scratched his back, reaching as far as he could. Her anger recalled the night attack when they had just met. The scar itched now, as if to remind him of that episode. Zig sank back in her chair. All contact with the world was lost for a moment, while she revolved in her own private hell. Her eyes darted all over the place.

“Demons of the past, Zig are just that. You’ve beaten them,” he tried, emphatically.

“Hmmm.” She agreed, but she still had bad memories locked down in there. Of late, she would do this more often: pull back into herself. The anger was gone at least, he was glad that that was over.

“Why did you tell Darke I puked all over the house, over myself and all that?”

At least he now understood what this was all about.

“She cleaned the great room and smelled the alcohol. She asked if it was mine and I said, quote ‘Zig Zag was not too well’, unquote. I swear that is all I said about it.”

She looked at him, squinting a moment. Then she studied the beams of the ceiling, expressing tiredness above all.

“Maybe I gave myself away...” she mused, addressing the beams more than him.

James kept silent, warily. If he wrongfully assumed a deflation of anger, the consequences would be disastrous. He missed the tender moment, hugging her. The opposite, another quiet night which would fortify the wall between them, was not his idea at all. Switching the subject to Stephan always worked and he chose that path now.

“Zig? Could I ask you something else?”

“Sure hon, go ahead.”

“Tomorrow I’ll have that Ryan kid over. I accepted that invitation.”

“Good, no need to discuss that with me, I understand. Well, you do what you must eh?”

She got up, looked at him coldly, and said, “I’m going to review today’s takes.”

In a final attempt to break the building barriers he called after her retreating figure, “Did you tell Petra about the test results?”

This got her attention, in a positive way too, and she looked up, her ears turned to him attentively and said, “Why, yes, I did.”

“How did she take it?” he asked, focusing all his awareness on her.

“Uncharacteristically, I might say. She refused to believe me and when I showed her the result she said it must be someone else, like a mix up at the hospital. In the end she accused me of wanting to break her spirit. You know I can’t tell anyone else...”

“That is ridiculous! She must feel the effects, right?”

“I should think so,” Zig looked past him, into the distance outside. Her mind was running circles too, he thought. How to deal with this?

“Maybe you could force her to the hospital with some ruse?”

At this, she exploded, and ears flat, tail up in attack mode, she started a series of accusations, “Of course! I just do that, force her! Are you even listening? Did you get any word I said? You know what? You just go ahead inviting kids over in my precious time. The few seconds per day that I can look at you will be filled to the brim with other people. Real nice!”

A few decisive strides bore her to the hallway where she disappeared from view into her office. James realized full well what Zig had said, but this was ridiculous. It was not fair to behave this way. He had as much right to charter their time as she did. In this derisive mindset, Stephan’s cry saved him from darker thoughts. The little kid must be having a nightmare! Stephan would, if he went to sleep as quickly as he had. James went up and found a crying toddler in the crib, grabbing something unseen in front of him.

“Mine,” Stephan kept repeating.

James tried to get his attention but to no avail. In the end, he picked his nephew up and took him downstairs to get him out of the dream. By the time he had quieted down, Zig had appeared in the door frame. She was silent, looking at Stephan.

All three of them were startled by the doorbell.

“What a weird moment to call,” James thought.

Zig closed the door to the great room and went to open the front door. He heard Zig call something. After a moment, as nothing seemed to happen, James called, “who is it?”

He got up, Stephan clinging to his leg, when Zig, her eyes shining, entered followed by a large, broad skunk. James was struck speechless. It was Maxwell.

“Hello... Max,” he managed.

James had no control over the emotions that this arrival called up. He felt happiness for Zig, at the same time neutral to Stephan and finally sadness for himself. ...Max... He remembered Max leaving. He could recall the event, vividly, as if it had happened yesterday: Zig fussing over her ‘little brother’, a member of a Special Forces unit, a medical specialist, to venture far into occupied territory. A ‘simple reconnaissance mission’, Max had said, in and out in a jiffy. Just to get him acquainted with the mission structure. Max had walked out with a big smile, “See ya Sis, bye Stephan, Dad’ll be back in the blink of an eye.”

Three and a half year’s worth of a blink.

Bummer!

He was sure Max was history. James nearly punched himself for thinking like that. Max had given over three years in the service of his country. If it weren’t for such guys... James didn’t finish that thought because Max was on his knees to examine Stephan.

‘Examine’, because there wasn’t really any other applicable term. It must be a medical tick, he decided.

“You’ve grown, boy, you’ve grown into a handsome little man, haven’t you, squirt?”

James shook his head. ‘Squirt’? What kind of way was that to talk to one’s son? He abhorred it. Stephan was backing into his legs. Max, on one knee, shuffled forward while Max’ big sister simply glowed with giddy happy disbelief. Zig was momentarily incommunicado. Stephan stepped behind his legs and held them tight, his fingers pulling at his fur.

“Daddy?” he said, referring to him, in a little voice.

Maxwell misunderstood, and reached for Stephan, saying “yes! It’s Daddy! Come to Daddy squirt!”

“Max, maybe this is a little sudden on him?” James intervened, for the sake of the scared Stephan. This earned him four angry eyes and two scared ones. James picked his nephew up.

“Do you know who that is, Stephan?”

Stephan nodded aggressively, shaking with everything his body could move with. Stephan said, “Reeldad,” and pointed to the photograph at the base of the stairs. Max frowned at the little photo and went to see it.

“Gee guys, that is nice...”

Zig came to stand next to James. She grabbed his arm in her paws, so now both a heavy Stephan and a leaning Zig were hanging on his shoulder.

“It’s...can you... Max!...” she said, lost for words, still in spirits so high she must be touching heaven.

James could only think how he might evade this happy get-together, before he would say something unpleasant.

“I think Stephan needs to be in bed, Zig.”

His wife nodded and left him, so she could touch her little brother again lest he evaporated on the spot. James pushed past the skunk family and ascended the stairs with Stephan on his hip. Stephan clung to him as he went past the skunks. He touched Max’ tail which seemed to be proudly upright all the time and also did not react to his touch at all. Weird.

While he was picking another story to read to Stephan, he heard sister and brother reminisce.

“Why is Reeldad here?” Stephan asked suddenly, facing him.

“He’s back, Stephan,” James replied flatly. In his mind something augmented that with, “for you, Stephan.”

“I don’t like Reeldad. He’s not like you.”

James heart nearly skipped a beat. Warmed by that remark, James sat next to him and opened a book with fairytales.

“Max has been to a war, Stephan, he has fought for the country.”

“Oh,” Stephan replied. Apparently this was an extremely satisfying explanation.

After three stories, James noted Stephan was very quiet. The toddler was staring, and trying with all his might to keep his eyes open. He stopped and closed the book with pictures. Stephan simply closed his eyes.

“Good night,” James whispered, bending over to kiss his nephew between the ears.

He closed the door to Stephan’s room behind him and wondered what to do. Zig and Max seemed to be talking still, but it was not a continuous stream anymore. That would figure, what would you talk about after three years? She had not been that close with Max to begin with. James went to join them, dueling with his inexplicable anger. What was it that had set him so on edge? Maxwell was a great guy, wasn’t he?

“Stop it,” he admonished inwardly. Reasoning with your feelings, that was too much.

Still, his mind went on, “Time,” James thought, “In time, you get your answers, old coyote.”

## 5. That blasted movie

James had bid the pair good night. Retiring early was the best recipe for this slightly tense atmosphere. Neither Zig nor Max seemed to be talking freely with him around. In bed, with his book he finally found peace. He turned the book over and read the inlay at the back. Interesting writer, that Bruner guy, James thought. What would he be going through to write his stories? He put the book aside and wondered about his marriage, his second one.

Zig Zag. She was an enigma, he knew that, had always known it. His mind returned to that initial meeting. A simple computer-repair had resulted in the most unlikely relation this side of the Earth. He recalled those preliminary meetings with Zig Zag. He had not ever

thought she would consider him a mate. Why would she? She was the big porn star, fans abounding, she could get, well ... others!

The original troubles of their relation were a mist, that time seemed so golden now. Like an early morning mist over the flowing fields, while the sun peeks through. The malty taste of the wet air as it would cling to your nose, little droplets forming in your hair, hanging at the edges of your whiskers.

James sighed.

Up until about half a year ago he'd been really in tune with her. As far as he knew it had been the same for her. But then her hormones had started to act up, 'the change', ah how apt. She got grumpy during her period in ways never before experienced. At the same time she would lock herself away from him. Who could fathom the female mind in such moments? Things their body went through could not possibly be understood by a mere mortal male. Also, he understood how these changes touched on the core of her being. Sexual tension was so much a part of her life, her persona even, that any mishap her body presented in that way was enough to set her off.

"It'll pass," she would say when such a flare-up had passed. She would ravish him, happy to get control back. Right now she was quite in the middle of one of those mishaps. It seemed worse than before but who was to say? He could hardly judge it in a neutral way. He'd promised her, often, to give her leeway. And he had!

But this evening something else had happened, something darker. That flash of primal aggression that had passed through her eyes. James shuddered and scooted down below his blanket. He turned on his side. What had that meant? He knew exactly what her reactions were like. He knew how her eyes could glaze over with memories of the past, how her brow would knit in that particular way. The white lines up from her muzzle would nearly touch for a moment.

But that feeling of fear, something 'old', he could not put a name to it. Face it, man! He had had to fight the urge to leave the room, to put his very tail between his legs! He wasn't just any wild coyote, now was he? His intellect was unable to circumvent the issue. No matter what he thought of, he would find that silent moment of fear again. And then her reaction! She'd known what had happened... why? Why didn't she talk to him? What was happening to her?

He shook his head, willing to think of different things. James closed his eyes. What a wonderful world, people fancied dead turn up at your doorstep. Wasn't that great? James squeezed his eyes shut. He could not sack that feeling of dread. Thinking of Maxwell did not help.

Take Stephan, hadn't he been afraid too? But that was only natural... Little Stephan, darting to and fro. He could see him running in the woods from way-mark to way-mark. A little coyote with a skunk sized, striped tail, jumping excitedly as they encountered yet another way-mark. A walk in the woods, with his wife and his son. He sought her paw and clasped it. A warm paw, together they walked with their happy son, running in circles. Full of life and spirit.

Leaves in the canopy were turning golden and Stephan rushed through the heaps of fallen leaves, sometimes returning with a big leaf or a bug. He put an arm around his wife, pulled her closer. She put her body to his, falling in with his strides. He turned to look at her, and kissed her. "I love you, Beth," he said.

A slap to his face woke him. It was night, bluish dark. The full moon was bathing the house in the milky white light of a cloudless night. Through the drapes the light turned blue, to fill the room.

He blinked, feeling his burning muzzle.

Zig Zag was next to him. She had propped her torso up on her elbows. She was frowning, one of those 'seriously not happy' frowns, he recognized.

"Uhhh..." he said weakly.

The dream in the forest lingered in his mind. Had he spoken out loud? He'd called her Beth. This was one he could not talk himself out of. He felt he didn't need to, either.

"Jimmy, boy, are you playing with my feelings?"

"Sorry, Zig, I... was dreaming."

"I really don't mind you fondling me in the night, dear, all in for kisses and that, but I prefer it if my person would feature in that dream. I can't compete with her."

James looked at her, speechless. She sat up, swung a leg over him and easily parked her bottom on his abdomen.

“Care to retry this thing, with your eyes open?” she smiled.

It sure sounded like that girl he’d married. Maybe her hormones had resumed their default. She leaned over him, her nose touching his.

“So, mister husband, how about it?”

James looked down, following her body and curves. She wiggled a bit, playfully.

“Zig, I...”

Sitting up, she let the excited feeling be, saying “Okay, maybe you are right: some talking is in order. You start.”

James quickly told her about his memory of the computer-repair. She smiled at that.

“I see where Beth would turn up. I was afraid I had an adversary, a dead one at that.”

“Not funny,” James retorted and retaliated with, “Zig, are you going to go to the set early tomorrow again?”

“No. We’ve got all we needed from that location.”

“You really have to explain to me some time why that movie has ‘locations’ all of a sudden.”

“It is not just a movie, it is a work of art. We’ve got well thought out dialogs all through it.”

“I know it’s not my business, but is that a good investment?”

She launched herself off him and landed on her back beside him.

“I would love it if everyone would stop asking that question.”

“Ah,” James said, as it dawned on him why she was under such stress of late.

“I suppose you are the director, more than the producer?”

She nodded, still not looking at him.

“Is this ‘the big one’ you always talked about?”

She turned her head to him, a hint of contentment glimmered.

“You understand?”

“Of course I do! You’ve been making those movies for ages and you’re good at judging scripts, I mean you know how to put things into view in your mind. Why not take that small step outside your turf?”

“I thought you would hate me for wasting money?”

“What are you saying? Don’t you think I would support you in this?”

“You haven’t seen the bills of the setup.”

“It’s yours to do with as you see fit! If I’m not mistaken, you aren’t the one whose business went bust.” he joked.

Zig grinned, just a moment. She turned on her side, staring.

“James, what did you feel, this evening when... when I... well you know. You shuddered in your chair, just after you brought Stephan to bed and...”

James cut her off. “You needn’t be so specific; I know exactly what you mean.”

“Erm...”

He waited for her reaction. After a moment she sat up, on her knees. Her tail stood proudly behind her, ‘attack mode’, so to speak. She brushed her hair from her face and collected it with two paws behind her head. James regarded his wife, he liked what he saw and recognized from this she was through this month’s bad weather.

“Well?” she asked, waiting, with her paws on her knees.

James put his paws behind his head, crossed his legs and thought a moment, thinking how to start.

“I felt deathly afraid. It was a primordial emotion. Rooted deep inside, Zig, I fought to just remain in that seat.”

Zig gazed at him. James hoped and waited. Would she really tell this big secret now?

“James, I -” she began and stopped.

He didn’t say a thing lest he dispel the magic of the moment. Zig took her position on his lower stomach again.

“James, do you like what you see?”

That was just weird, to ask that. He looked from his belly, following her features up to her muzzle, her ears, and ended at her eyes. They were smiling.

“I can safely take that as a yes,” she said happily and moved her bottom to the back a bit.

Looking down on her body, she asked “Do you like my stripes, James?” and then sat motionless.

“Of course I do! You’ve asked that countless times. You know I do. Why?”

“Really?”

“I like *everything* about you! What’s going on here?”

He didn’t like this line of interrogation one bit, but there was nothing for it but to go on even if it felt like sticking your neck through a noose.

“Do you know where they come from, these stripes?”

“Is this a trick question?”

“I want to hear you say it.”

“Your gramps was a tiger, a Siberian tiger. Happy now?”

“Do you know anything about tigers?”

That was a trick question for sure.

“Anything specific?” he ventured.

“Don’t you go smart on me, mister.”

James thought hard. “Tigers...” he mumbled. Now what on Earth could she be driving at?

“Two years ago, that thing with that tigress and tiger from that horrible corporation Tabitha works for. What was it again? ‘Tiger craze’. No, I wouldn’t know. But then again, I don’t know any tigers personally.”

“You know me.”

“Methinks you don’t qualify as a tiger.”

“I don’t?”

“No! You’re my skunkette!”

She was on him suddenly and kissed him deeply. When he could finally gasp for breath, she sat up.

“That, honey, was a very nice thing to say.”

He still didn’t know what she wanted to impart on him. He knew she liked her grandfather, why she now felt happy to not be a tiger was beyond his comprehension.

“Zig, please, tell me what it is? It would help me so much if I knew what is eating you!”

She sat silent for a moment. Her eyes stared into the distance, something she did often lately. He heard the air passing in and out through her nose as she thought. This was it, she would tell now or he would be left in the dark on this forever.

“James, my grandfather told me about his kind. He told me things I can’t tell you ever.”

“But...”

“No! Listen! You do not want to know, James, you don’t. Trust me.”

“I trust you. Trust you so you can tell me!”

“I promised gramps I would keep this to myself.”

“Great. So I have a contender too, eh? One who also is dead?”

“Touché, but it’s not the same.”

She rearranged her seat on him.

“You recall I told you I would visit my grandparents, as a little girl?”

He nodded.

“I would hope sometimes, to wake up a full tiger. Did I ever tell you this?”

He nodded again.

“Gramps found that endearing, but he would always say that tiger kind had its own problems. He’d say...”

She stopped, stared, and went on, “James, you know most tigers frown upon others species as ‘lesser’, they feel themselves lifted. In order to keep their lines pure a serious amount of inbred stupidity has occurred in their ranks. Especially in the ‘tiger high society’.”

James was listening, not sure where this was going.

“That stupidity appears after their fifties, the ‘purer’ the bloodlines, the worse. That, James, is the fabled ‘tiger craze’. Tigers who, in behavior, resume their ‘natural’, wild course.”

Zig sighed, pausing, so he might react.

“And how has this anything to do with you?”

“Gramps warned me, he could scarcely control himself at times, he said. He said he knew it would lie within me, dormant if I were lucky. He said I had to be vigilant.”

“For what?”

“For loss of control, James, at my age.”

“But you’re not out of control?”

“Not even with that blasted movie?”

“You are *not* stupid, Zig!”

“Stupid is not the operative, James! Remember that gash in your back?”

James nodded. How could he forget? It had been stitched all the way. He wore the scar as a constant reminder of Zig’s dark memories, demons from the past.

“Remember how I freaked when I found out what I’d done?”

He nodded again, as her crouch on the other side of the room at that time was imprinted in his mind and through that image he felt uncertain now. He wasn’t so sure he wanted to know where this was leading.

“Imagine I would be attacking you like that, with all my wits about me, knowingly.”

“Sorry?”

“Indeed! Sorry! I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“Why not simply take a gun?” he joked.

“Ha. Ha. No love, primal instincts refer to primal weapons.”

She flashed her teeth and held up paws with sharp talons. Although limited compared to a tigers’ she had nearly ripped him open that time. The combination of skunks’ talons with a tigers’ set was fearsome.

“Stop that, please?”

She folded her mock attack.

“So... how big you recon, is the chance it would happen?”

“Not so big. I think,” and she looked at her paws, adding, “I hope.”

“What can I do if that happens?”

“Good question.”

“Well?”

“Take Stephan, go up to the attic and lock it, wait until I find my sense.”

“You’re kidding, right?” James asked, hopefully.

Zig sagged onto his torso and put the side of her head against it.

“Happy now?” she asked, softly, as her head rose with his breath.

“I still love you.”

“I love you too. Can we make love now?”

James smirked.

“Nothing deters you, once you’re out of the woods with those hormones!”

She got up, smiling again. “You bet!”

## 6. Maxing it

James placed an additional plate on the kitchen table. It only just fit.

“Guys!” he called from the kitchen.

Stephan was scooping his cereal with an amazingly precise failure to get it all in his muzzle.

“Stephan!” he tried to correct his nephew again, “I know you can do better. Don’t tempt me, Stephan.”

The little coyote looked up and held his spoon in a tilt. He grinned and put a laden spoon carefully and perfectly into his muzzle.

“I’m watching you, buster!”

Something large bumped into his back. He turned around.

“Oh, hi Max. How are you?”

He’d expected Zig Zag, but she had taken a lot of time to groom her fur all over. That too was part of the recovery sequence. Fully aware of her array of inviting body parts, she wanted everything in place. Max sat on the additional stool. His tail stood strangely upright again. Stephan looked at it.

“Daddy? That is a funny tail.”

Stephan pointed and looked at James, waiting for him to acknowledge this assessment.

“Uh,” James began. But Max butted in.

“Stephan, my tail is a fake tail. For the looks only, y’see? In the war, bad people cut my tail off.”

Max gritted his teeth. “Without anesthetic I might add. Assholes!”

“Please Max!” James nodded towards Stephan to indicate he should keep his language civilized.

“It’s my kid, James, and I am trying to put it nicely. Besides, I take orders from no one around him, eh squirt?”

Max ruffled Stephan’s hair. Stephan shied away from his touch.

“Hurry, Stephan, we gotta go!”

Stephan suddenly ate as if possessed but he did so with extreme precision and was done in record time. James’ muzzle nearly fell open with amazement. Once he arrived at the school, he got another treat from Stephan’s behavior. Miss Othmar, the rabbit teacher, inquired why Stephan was brought to school in a diaper again since he nicely asked to be allowed to go to the toilet when needed. On the way back, James recalled all the ‘incidents’ with Stephan and poop and pee. He gritted his teeth. Was there a law against strangling a child on account of this?

Once home, he found Max on the porch at the back of the house.

“Yo Jim, woodworking again?”

“Yep,” James replied. He sat down next to the big guy.

“What happened on that mission?” he tried, for conversation. Maybe he would understand Max better if he talked a bit. He hoped.

“That’s classified, smartass.”

James knew all about classified military facts and didn’t push Max on that.

“OK, let me rephrase that: what happened to you, there?”

“You’re always smart with words eh? I told Tonya she would not be happy with you, you know that? I’ve told her so many times.”

James was taken aback by this full frontal attack. Also he was completely lost on him using her ‘old’ name. He had no idea why Max did that.

“Zig Zag,” he said, putting stress on her name, “should be the judge of that, don’t you think?”

“Yada-yada,” Max remarked, evasively.

He threw a stone from a heap next to him and exactly hit the swing. He took another and again hit the swing. That swing was over fifteen feet away. It moved with the impact of the stone.

“Right,” James announced.

“Yeah, why don’t you get to your woodwork, hey buddy?”

“Listen Max, I really don’t mean to be rude, but your sister,” he stepped around the issue this way, “would like you to consider this place your sanctuary, for now.”

“Sanctuary,” Max mimicked him, “my home, you mean?”

“Um yes.”

“Well, that is nice.”

“I hope we can get along just so, she would not like it if we were at each other’s throats.”

“Ha ha, no she wouldn’t. Neither would she see that because it would take exactly two minutes. Get my drift? We’ll get along all right, like a house on fire.”

“What have I done to tick you off, Max?”

“You bastard, you are raising my kid calling yourself ‘Daddy’, what do you think I feel about that?”

“Stephan started calling me that all by himself.”

“Of course. Then another thing, what’s with his foot?” Max stood up and towered over him. He sure seemed displeased.

James stood as well. “What about it?”

“I saw him stomp around with it, you coyote! I’m not stupid, I know my trade, that kid has a prosthetic foot.”

“Oh that,” James replied suave, “Stephan has an artificial foot, a very advanced one I might add.”

“What happened to his foot?”

At least that was an earnest request, not an angry demand.

“It was... shot off.”

“What!” Max exploded and grabbed his arm, shaking him. This guy was unhealthily strong, James realized.

“Stop!” James whimpered. He couldn’t help it, but that’s what he did: whimper.

“Tell me!” Max thundered.

"I wasn't there! Well I was, but unconscious! Zig told me what happened!"

"You better not lie to me, you hear me?"

"She said Stephan found the gun and played with it and shot his own foot off."

"Your gun?" Max demanded hotly.

"No not mine! I don't even have a gun anymore! Your sister hated them and I sold them for a dollar each!"

Max relaxed, but only for an instant. "What gun?" he asked slowly, hanging close to him. An unsavory smell rose up from Max. He sniffed and turned his muzzle aside from the smell.

"Smells nice eh?" Max added, "happens when they burn your musk glands off your arse, without anesthetic 'I might add'."

"They what?" James asked aghast.

"Hot poker up them, hurts until you beg them to kill you..." Max said.

"...but they don't eh, do they? No, they cut your tail off, stick it on your head for fun." Max narrowed his eyes. Then he locked his eyes on him, looking him in the eyes. "Now spill it!"

James tried to talk through the events, about two years ago, of some stranger entering their house with a gun, passing out from some head injury and leaving a gun on the floor. Max didn't buy it, he saw.

"Ask Z... your sister, Max, ask her! She'll corroborate!"

"I hope you mean she backs your story, else you're in big trouble, boyo. If you are right, though, I take it that creep is dead?"

"Sort of," James said, before he realized that was not a good answer at all.

"Ask your sister!" he blurted.

"I will, now off to your woodwork, Pinocchio!"

He shoved him to his shed. James willingly made sure he put some distance between himself and this coiled up bag of misery. Had they tortured him for three years? What would that do to one? To one's mind? He tried to get the image of a hot poker into a musk-gland out of

his mind. He put it aside. It was best left alone. He would concentrate on his work for now. Hopefully the day would crawl along, that way. It was positively shocking to be assaulted in his own home by his brother-in-law no less.

The afternoon with Stephan and this 'Ryan' was still waiting for him, augmented with Max. Oh joy.

## 7. One down

James fell onto the bed, he was exhausted. Although the day had started with an enormous brightening, it had not ended too well. When he arrived with Ryan and Stephan at home, both were in high spirits and they had nearly talked his ears off on the way over. Then it appeared Max was absent, and in his joy about this he had decided, a bit too enthusiastic in hindsight, to bake cookies. Of course, with two four year olds one cannot simply prepare such, hence the kids had participated in weighing the flour and sugar and mixing with butter. For Stephan it was maybe the third time to bake cookies, but Ryan had been so overjoyed, exhilarated was the appropriate term, he'd hardly been under control. The cookies had succeeded, the kitchen had ended up one big mess and so had the two kids. Both had shown the same ability to get butter in their tails. At the time he'd thought it a problem. Ha, what a misconception of the description of 'problem'.

The serious problems had started at the reappearance of Max.

Just when he was trying to clean two mighty big tails, the huge skunk had appeared. Both Stephan's and Ryan's tails outsized his and he couldn't understand why Zig was so happy with hers when he saw all the effort needed to keep that mass of hair disentangled. Add the fright of the two kids at the appearance of Max and: pandemonium.

He had cleansed the tails, although he couldn't exactly remember how, but his experience with helping Zig had helped. Then both had gone outside for the swing. The two weren't so active anymore.

Stephan had been more than completely subdued when he had found his father, Max, was back in the house. He had clearly been hoping Max had disappeared somehow. At five, he'd returned Ryan to

his grandmother and driven back like crazy to be home in time for Zig. Stephan had been weird when he returned, having been alone in the house with Max. Dinner wasn't too glamorous and he'd kept himself busy with Stephan, evading Max all the while, hoping to get the little guy a bit more relaxed for bed.

After putting Stephan to bed, he had said 'hi' downstairs and had gone straight to bed himself. Stress was locking his muscles all around. The woodwork had not helped, it rather had taxed his frame more than usual, and he felt sore all over.

###

Zig sat looking at Max, just like the day before. She was still having trouble, coming to grips with the presence of her little brother here before her. It was a sort of a dream come true, even more so because Max had agreed to stay. He had never accepted that before.

"You're staring again, Sis," Max said, not seeming to care one bit. Maybe that was more to appease her than for his own feelings. Zig wondered if he cared more than he let on.

"Sorry, Max. You must understand how bright this moment is for me. You do, don't you?"

"I see lots of things Sis. I see that grey rug that's following you around, for starters."

"You're too hard on James, Max. He's doing a great job over here."

"House keep'n? Wow," Max said off paw, as if he was trying to make sure everybody understood he was not making conversation.

Zig decided to go over a new leaf. Dwelling on James did not help things along one bit. She simply had to satisfy her curiosity.

"Are you sure you can't tell me a single thing about that time in the war? You're a doctor, I mean, not a soldier?"

"Nope Sis, I'm a part of a team. Was a part... of," Max reached for his glass with water, took a swig, and went on, "... a team."

This way she was completely left in the dark whether this was a coincidental dry throat or a covert operation to swallow a lump caused by feelings.

“But you weren’t going to fight, were you?” after she said it, she wasn’t so sure if that was an allowed question, but hey, this was her little brother.

“You know, Sis, I don’t think it would be smart to tell you if I was going to or not. First of all, it’s classified, secondly it’s not something I prefer to talk about. I did not take medical schooling so I could just kill people.”

“Kill?” Zig said in dismay.

“I don’t like guns any more than you do, Sis. Part of the job they said, well: fat lot of good that did.”

“Max, I’m sorry, I’m going to try to talk James down once more. You guys should have a chance to talk a bit more, don’t you think?”

“Talk? Sure, we’ll talk all you want. I don’t think your canine rug is too happy with me.”

Zig got up, and looked back as she ascended the stairs. Max’s muzzle was following her every move.

###

In the bed, James drew the covers to his muzzle, he reached for the bed light. At that instant, Zig walked in.

“Why are you shunning Max so?” she wanted to know.

It was an open question he noted. She really wanted to know, it wasn’t an accusation.

“Oooh,” James groaned, in response to his aching body, “has he asked about Stephan’s foot?”

“Yes?” Zig said, slowly, inquiring.

James thought how he should try to put this.

“You know what he called you, today?”

Zig raised eyebrows and her tail went from half-held to limp. A bad sign.

“Well?”

James knew better than to speak that name, and said, “Your old name.”

“He did what?”

“Also, he was mad about Stephan’s foot, and he was mad at me for having Stephan call me ‘Dad’.”

Zig tilted her head.

“Can’t blame him to feel unhappy about that, I suppose?”

“No, I suppose.” James agreed, drained.

“I really hope you guys get this sorted out, I want Max to stay, James.”

He knew she would want that.

“Hmmm,” he murmured.

“And I can’t convince you to come down for a drink?”

“Zig, wild horses could not drag me from this bed, right now. I’m spent.”

She walked over and kissed him, said, “Good night, dear,” and she left.

###

Zig dropped into the seat, puffing, “Won’t come. He’s done a bit too much it seems.”

“Hard work, all that fatherin’, isn’t it?” Max said with a sneer.

“Come on, Max. That is not fair, he does everything around here he sees and takes care of Stephan. He’s doing great.”

“He’s not supporting you, is he?”

“Nothing’s changed since when you went away, Max, if that’s what you mean?”

“He’s a twit.”

“Come on Max, you’ll like James once you get to know him.”

“I know enough, Sis.”

“You weren’t so hostile to him when you left, Max. What happened to you? Are you going to work in a hospital now?”

“You know, Sis, you’re just like Brandy.”

Zig frowned at the mention of her baby sister.

Max studied her; he seemed pleased with her reaction. That was mean.

“We were ambushed, Sis. Bad luck, because that area was supposed to be deserted.”

Zig snapped out of her turmoil of emotions regarding her sister. Max lifting a tip of the shroud around his failed mission was interesting enough to clear her mind instantly.

“And?” she prompted.

“Four of us were dragged to their lair, we was going to be trading material.”

“They said that?”

“At first, then one of them got a bit mad at number one, that’s the sarge, and ripped his belly open with his claws. He didn’t even scream while he bled to death.”

Zig found she had put her paws to her mouth instinctively, she sat gaping at him.

“I can see you’re all for this, Sis, so I’ll spare you the details of my buddies. I’ll get you one though, seems one of them felt unhappy about skunks. He took a piece of building steel. You ever seen them? Well, he put it in a fire at my feet. Nice and warm, it was cold there, you see.”

“They used that on you?”

“Sure, all over my back. And then, the topping,” Max eyed her deviously.

Zig's stomach went into knots, causing gut wrenching nausea, as she hung on his words.

"This guy stuck the poker up my glands."

Zig crossed her legs, scooting back onto her chair, searching for a secure spot, far away from any instruments of torture that might fall out of the sky.

"Max!"

Max smiled easily, he folded his paws and rested them on his belly, while he looked at her.

"Makes you uncomfortable, Sis?"

"It's..." she began, but found she could not put suitable words to such atrocities.

"I'll let you in on a secret, Sis. You see, that was a special moment. I cried, like a baby, begged them to kill me. But they didn't, that's when I lost my tail too and gained something else."

"Gained...?" she whispered, suppressing the need to rush to his side, and hold him.

"I saw the light then, Sis. I was still alive, and I was supposed to be. There was a reason for me to live through that."

"A reason?" she cried out, "How can there be a valid reason for anyone to be mistreated so viciously?"

Max pointed upwards, to the ceiling.

"No," she said, knitting her brow in disbelief.

"God's shown me the way. It's easy once you know how, Sis. You should try it sometime."

"God and I aren't compatible, Max, you would know that."

"It doesn't work that way. But you are right, that job you've had all your life is not really in line with the idea."

"James and I are of one mind in this respect."

"Suit yourself, just goes to show I was right about the four legged rug up there, wasn't I? Just remember that anyone, even you,

can find your way to the Lord. I know you can. You don't need to pursue that line of work, Sis."

"I need a drink, Max," she said to get out of the intense state Maxwell had developed. It was getting to her, very much so. She could not recall ever feeling so uncomfortable around her little brother. The way he spoke now... what had happened to him, what had really, really been done to push him to this state?

"I could use another glass of water, some ice in it would be even better."

In the kitchen, she pulled the fridge open and reached for the pitcher with ice water. Her paw was shaking with all the images Max had planted in her mind. With effort she was able to fill her glass and that of Max with cubes and water. He'd survived, for Stephan, for her, to come back and be with her. That was not mean, that was good. But at what price? She felt he had gone partly mad, at the same time everything she believed and held true yearned for Max to be here, to feel secure and safe. To be able to shelter him was fulfilling her greatest wish. It wasn't right, she shouldn't feel like this, she scolded herself, but how very right this all felt. That thing between Max and James no doubt would be smoothed out with a little attention. Little Max, he grew up in that small house, with her family, with the monster. And he never experienced the wrath of *him*, she couldn't hold it against Max. She wouldn't ever. Brandy had, time and time again, until they decided not to talk to each other anymore. She knew her sister was happy though, that was what mattered. Right now, she wanted Max to be happy, more than anything in the world. She'd been so happy when he had completed his training, she hadn't minded at all when he decided to join the army. That first mission should not have resulted in Max's radical change in demeanor, then again he was alive, maybe she could thank God for that.

"Zig!" she admonished herself under her breath.

With two glasses, tinkling because her paws were unwilling to stay still, she reached the great room.

"Here you are, Max."

Max took a swig and then crunched a cube between his teeth.

“Glad your drink tastes nice, Max.” she joked, trying to loosen up the dark mood.

“Ice seems hard, but it’s not so if you force it correctly. It’s a bit like a little child, like Stephan. That grey rug of yours is forcing Stephan too much.”

“Little kids need rules and regulation. They thrive that way.” Zig said, deliberately sidestepping yet another of Max’s attempts to draw out her feelings on James.

“Yeah, rules and regulation. Hmm. Just like that eh?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked testily, knowing full well that Max was referring to their father. The idea he would bring him up now was unforgivable.

“Rules, is good. Lots of rules in the military, Sis. Good, dependable rules.”

Zig let her anger go, Max had meant something else. She was doing him wrong, to think of that monster at once. She felt mean, then silly, and ended in simply feeling embarrassed.

“Are you blushing?”

“Me? Never,” she said and concentrated on her breathing.

“Who would have thought that of you, Sis, blushing... that coyote upstairs has had some effect on you, I’ll say.”

“I like him very, very much, Max. You two just need a little time to understand each other.”

“I understand him alright, he needs a total makeover. Like turning him inside out, that would look better.”

“You’re not touching him, Max!”

“No?”

She looked him in the eye.

“I solemnly promise to not kill your sorry husband.”

“Max!”

“I swear, may God be my witness, that I will not kill your sorry husband. He skulks around your job, Sis? Does he?”

“No, Max, he does not. In fact, we decided in mutual agreement that his presence there would be way too distracting for me. He rather works his wood here, I rather work effectively there. James keeps the house in order and takes care of Stephan,” she realized suddenly that she didn’t spend much time anymore on the pup and felt guilty.

“So, he’s your maid.”

Zig considered an angry remark, but swallowed it. Driving Max away would be painful, without gain. She simply asked, “Max?”

“Sis?”

“How is it, you say you have found God, yet you are so aggressive to me, to James. We’re doing our best, aren’t we?”

“Sis, listen, you and that mangy piece up there are doing a lot of things, but neither of you take responsibility for the wrongs you’ve done, if I can help the two of you to see that, I will have saved two more souls. It will result in purging Stephan’s mind of the influence you have over him.”

“Are we being bad parents, is that what you say?”

“The interpretation is yours, Sis, I can’t do that for you.”

She didn’t like the way of Max’s slippery, evasive answer at all, and again felt like she had to swallow her pride to keep the peace. There was nothing to interpret! He was attacking her way of life. She looked at him again, and felt pleased and aggravated at the same time. Max was happy, she saw, and she must accept a little of Max’s views. It was that simple.

She yawned, widely, inciting Max to follow suit.

“Whadda ya say we call it a night, bro?” she said pleasantly.

“Sure thing, Sis,” he agreed and lifted his torso out of the chair with one smooth move.

Zig tried to do the same and found her body less cooperative in that muscles ached all over from the sudden move. With a few jerks she stood next to him.

“Need a walking stick, Sis?” Max joked, good naturedly.

She smiled at him, feeling the joy at seeing him like this, and followed him upstairs.

###

The next thing James knew was the racket Stephan made, a byproduct of the usual waking-process of the puppy. James had had a good night and full of purpose he started the day. The charged action he jumped into lasted exactly until his arrival on his feet, next to the bed.

“Ahhh!” he growled, stiff with pain.

Muscles screamed for attention all over his body. A bit tuned down, he woodenly moved to his clothes on the chair. This promised to be a hell of a day: a Saturday with Stephan as well as Mister ‘Reeldad’ Max. Hurray. James regarded the bed: the other side of the bed was empty. Zig would be downstairs clipping and editing her movie, he guessed.

He sure hoped Max would like to sleep in.

When he finally got his clothes on, Zig was rushing into the room.

“Hey, sleepy head!” she patted his back, “James, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure honey,” James said automatically.

“Yester eve Max said he thought you were too hard on Stephan, but I’m sure you can talk some sense into him, male thing I suppose.”

“He what?”

“Will you?”

“I do what?”

“Hearing problem?” she tapped his ears repeatedly, making them flinch.

“Hey, stop that!” he swatted her paw.

“Listen Zig, I can’t talk to Max! I’d have more chance talking to a... rock.”

Zig stopped her play.

“James?”

“I mean it Zig, he’s...”

“What is it with you males? I thought all that swearing and stuff was male bonding?”

“Bonding? With Max? Are you out of your mind?”

“I...”

Their eyes met. “James, I...”

She put her paws on his shoulders, locking their gaze to one another.

“Zig, I know how happy you are to have Max back, it’s just...”

“I think I missed out on what was happening to you?” she said, softly.

Banging from next door interrupted their close moment.

“Work calls?” James ventured.

“Our child calls, Daddy James.” She said, with conviction.

Half an hour later, Stephan was playing with his food again. James regarded this just a little different, given Zig’s statement on what Max had thought of this. Max’s presence was getting to him, he realized just as stomping on the stairs indicated the imminent arrival of the big fellow and Stephan looked at him with a little fright. As was to be expected, this was dispelled quickly. Stephan was getting used to Max much more easily than James was. In a minute or two, the cereal was again arriving at many places other than the little muzzle.

Max looked at it. “Stephan?” he said in a low menacing voice.

The little coyote looked up.

“You will eat nicely now.”

Max had put it like a statement. Stephan indeed proceeded much more accurate but this didn’t continue too long. Max noted this,

of course and he addressed Stephan, “If you don’t stop that, I will take your meal.”

Max really chewed those words, hissing and forcing. James thought feverishly for a way to stop the chain of events that was unfolding here. He was certain Max would take Stephan’s breakfast in a minute with the most assured effect of an exploding little kid. Indeed, Max reached for the bowl when Stephan again let half a spoon drip past his muzzle on purpose. Stephan was even checking if Max was looking, just to be sure how far he could push the boundaries with his biological father.

“Mine!” Stephan cried angrily when Max pulled at the bowl.

Stephan fought with two paws on the bowl to keep it close to him, the contents were spilling already. Then he started screaming.

“Ziggy!” he cried loudly.

James raised his eyebrows in surprise. That was new. He couldn’t remember Stephan ever calling for his Aunt. Also, this didn’t go down with Max too well.

“There’s no Ziggy in this house, Stephan, do you hear me?”

Max was certainly mad now. Maybe that was due to the fact that he had gotten cereal on his fur everywhere but that could hardly be the sole reason. Stephan went berserk.

“That was Stephaaaan’s!” he yammered with an ear-splitting ‘a’.

Then he clambered out of his high stool, jumped to the floor and, with a trail of cereal went looking for the presumably missing Zig Zag. Stephan of course thought Max had meant Zig Zag was somehow not in the house.

“Ziggy!” Stephan cried, running to her work room, then back to the great room, out into the garden.

James was amazed. Stephan knew Zig was supposed to be somewhere, Max saying she was ‘gone’ so much didn’t fit, that Stephan went positively ballistic. At the other side of the table, Max got up. James recognized the strain in those muscles. He went to the great room and waited for Stephan. In the mean time, Zig got out of the toilet and walked into the great room.

“What’s going on here?” she called out.

Stephan ran in and clamped his paws to Zig’s leg.

“Ziggy!” he called, jumping, relieved.

Max grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him towards him. He sat on his knee to get level with the little kid.

“That, Stephan, is Tonya. Is that clear?”

“No!” Stephan said, totally convinced, “that is Ziggy!”

He smiled, having made this remark. To Stephan this was surely a word-game. Zig, in the meantime went quite rigid, she was swallowing and trying to keep from bursting out in anger.

“Max...” she began, slowly.

“Can it, Sis.” Max sat quietly.

Stephan sensed something was afoot.

“That is Ziggy,” he said once more, a little hesitant, pointing.

He started to cry. All the tension got to him.

“Tell me Stephan, who is that?”

Max pointed to James.

“Daddy,” Stephan answered dutifully through his tears, stopping crying again since the game was apparently on.

His finger indicated Max, he said, “Reeldad,” then moved his index finger, “Ziggy,” and he pointed at her.

Max struck the little guy. Just like that. James felt cold inside. Stephan was silent for a second. Then felt his head, and screamed, tears flowing. He tried to wrench his wrist lose. Zig’s eyes went livid. The one way to piss off Zig was physical abuse. Not in the least concerning her loved ones. To hit a child, let alone Stephan, was wrong in too many ways to count.

James saw Zig grab her brother’s wrist, in a steel grip, freeing Stephan who made a bee line for his daddy. James collected the toddler and held him close, protective. This would solve it all, Max would leave and life would return to normal. He carried Stephan with him to the wood-work shed, to get away from the yelling between

brother and sister. In the shed, it was quiet. He dare not butt in between the two skunks.

“We’ll wait for the storm to pass, Stephan.”

The little coyote was still crying. He kissed him, again, “is that better?”

Stephan nodded a tearful muzzle. James knew Stephan well, and this would take a lot of soothing. James showed the hammers, nails and saws again.

“And what do we do with the saws?” he asked after a while.

Stephan said, “not touch!” and smiled for a second. Then he sobbed again.

“Now, Stephan, it doesn’t hurt anymore. No need to keep crying like that.”

It went on like that for, well until Stephan was more or less himself again. Maybe half an hour, James had no idea. When James was sure of Stephan, he returned to the house. Max was nowhere to be seen, Zig sat on a chair in the middle of the room, watching them. She had been waiting and had been very smart not to intrude on them. She knew he would get Stephan quiet that way where she would wind him up only.

“Ziggy!” Stephan yelled, full of joy, right into his ear.

He put him down and his legs were pumping before he hit the ground. He ran to his aunt and started his favorite task: grab Zig’s tail.

“No Ziggy, you can’t take my tail!” he would repeat, again and again.

Zig laughed merrily with the actions of Stephan. James watched the scene, this was much better.

“We could take a stroll through the woods, gang?” James proposed.

“Yay!” Stephan jumped up and down with enthusiasm.

“I suppose we could,” Zig added and she smiled widely in spite of her sullen remark.

Stephan ran to the door, “With the Daddy’s car!” he screamed.

“First your coat, dear,” Zig said, relaxed.

Once Stephan had his coat on, and that took a bit of work, they were driving. Stephan was playing, in the back seat, and seemed to be totally immersed in his game.

“Where’s Max?”

“Went for a stroll,” Zig replied languidly while she was watching the road and scenery passing by.

“Ah,” James said. He’d hoped for a more definite state of affairs. Then he watched Stephan in the rearview mirror. He saw one ear turned forward. It was better to leave the subject for the moment. They would arrive at the forest soon.

Once they were walking, Stephan was true to his active nature. He ran from tree to tree. Quite busy all by himself, James noted content.

“So, I suppose Max will be leaving then?”

“No. Why would he?”

“I just assumed...”

“Listen James, we had a solid discussion on his behavior. I even compared him to my father.”

She was silent for a moment. James understood the portent of that statement. Something so heavy, it was nigh impossible for her to compare anyone, let alone her brother, to that monster.

“How did he take that?”

“I don’t know, seeing as he’s a bit inapproachable. It figures, though. Thing is, you’ve got to cut the guy some slack, James.”

“*Some*,” James blurted, “slack?”

Zig stopped dead.

“You know about the demons of the past, he has them too. He has new ones as well.”

“He said they...” James began and swallowed as he thought about what Max had told him about the torture, tail clipping, and all that.

“Don’t say it, please?”

He saw how she squeezed her eyes shut and he put his arms around her for moral support. She returned his hug meaningfully. A shiver went down her spine.

“Sjeems! Ziggy!”

Stephan came running to them with a branch that required their immediate attention, according to the toddler. Once the both of them had acknowledged the wonderful shape of the branch, he was gone again.

“Looks like a stiff coc-hmpf-” Zig started when James put his paw over her muzzle.

“You know he has good hearing!” James scolded her at once, referring to the coyote heritage of Stephan.

“Pfff,” Zig puffed, unimpressed, “He’ll know such things eventually anyway.”

“Fine, super, but not while I’m around to postpone that moment. Is that clear?”

She started walking again.

“You know, I really like you when you are like that.” She was grinning.

“I know you do. But I’m not like that for *your* sake,” he said sternly.

“I don’t mind. I’m just enjoying the ride. Eh, eh.”

She playfully pricked his side.

“Why, you!”

He darted after her as she took an additional step to mock-get away from him.

“If we’d be home on a weekday I would sooo ravish you, James!”

“Right now we’re responsible parents, don’t you forget that.”

“I wouldn’t, for the life of me!”

“Which brings me to Max, again.”

“How so?” Zig eyed him with a slight frown.

“What’s his position with Stephan? You’ve seen how he tries to bend him to his will?”

“We discussed that and he will amend his ways. You have to be very understanding towards him. Promise me that?”

“Uh, uh. Very.”

“Hey! Not that male mumbo jumbo now, James! I need a straight answer.”

“I will proffer the gentle skunk my most sincere apologies on any matter deemed unsuitable pertaining to my conduct, milady.”

He bowed with a rotating sweep of his paw. Zig put two paws to her muzzle, stifling a giggle.

“Cut that out!”

“This non-male enough?”

“You know that type is about the only sort I would reject, physically!”

“But not if it were the last male on Earth?”

“No, of course not.”

She said it as if the mere idea of rejecting the last male on Earth, no matter what he would be like, was so preposterous it couldn’t exist at all.

“But no, really, Zig, I will do my best. That’ll have to do.”

“I know you will, honey. Max said he would not object anymore to Stephan calling you ‘Dad’, after all, you started out with ‘sjeems’, remember?”

“I do.”

“I told him he could not reprogram Stephan like that, without causing lasting damage.”

“Well, well, and he dug that?”

“No, but I was, well, pretty clear on that.”

James imagined Zig and Max, how could that huge guy be impressed by Zig? Probably a brother-sister thing, he decided.

“Right, so he won’t try to kill me over it?”

“Exactly. He swore he wouldn’t.”

“But he did not actually consent to being nice to me?”

“Um, no, not that I recall. You will have to endure that for a while. Could you please? It would mean a lot to me.”

James sighed.

“You’re asking a lot, even if it seems simple.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him, I’ll work from home for the time being anyway.”

That was a good idea, James felt much better with that in mind.

“That leaves the one thing,” James mused, looking at the yellow trees.

Zig said nothing, he was sure she knew what he referred to, the ‘Tonya’-thing.

“What kind of truce did you reach there?”

“You know, James, I don’t know what happened to him, there in Pakistan.”

“But you said he-” James began but Zig put a paw over his muzzle, stopping him.

“I know what I imply, but I mean his head, James, something in there, well. I don’t know. Maybe it’ll mend, by itself.”

“Yeah, maybe it’ll explode.” James mumbled.

“I heard that. And it’s not nice. I think we should help him, not rebuke him.”

“Good, I agree with that. But you haven’t answered the question.”

“It’s difficult. I think he knows what it means to me, I’m sure he knows why I changed my name back then. I just don’t know what drives him to do this.”

“He seems to refer to you as ‘Sis’ constantly. That solves it.”

“Yes, but he is adamant I change Stephan’s behavior in that.”

“I see, and how is that different from Stephan calling me ‘Dad’?”

“Ohhh!” Zig put her paws on her sides. “Do you really think this is about you?”

“I didn’t say that,” he began, but saw she was about to drop the subject. So he still didn’t know how she solved that issue.

“James, we’ll have Stephan call me ‘Mommy’.”

“On account of Max? I *like* it when he calls you Ziggy!”

“Listen, honey, I’m cutting him some slack, OK?”

Some slack. James wondered if there was any sentient being on this Earth that got this much slack, undeserved even, from Zig. Ever.

“OK?” she asked again, with a persistent stance, seeking his eyes for an affirmative reaction.

James hesitated nevertheless. Max was daunting, to say the least.

“James, Max is ... fragile, I can’t put it more concisely than that, he needs me, us, right now. If we can present him a stable home base he’ll recover from his post traumatic stress quickest.”

The only word that really stuck was ‘fragile’ and it reverberated.

“Fragile? Like what? As delicate as a concrete wall?”

“I need your support on this James, not scorn.”

The serious conversation, followed by them standing still, had sparked the interest of Stephan who had neared them. This sort of pressed him.

“Right, Zig, I’ll back you up. I’ll be giving leeway and cutting slack like a rubber implement.”

Unintentionally this would kindle her imagination, and she smiled deviously.

“Hee, hee,” she said, hoarsely, “rubber implements with attachments?”

James slapped his head.

“Not now, Zig, please?”

He nodded towards Stephan, to underscore his point.

“Sure, sure, no word passes my lips concerning *that* and *him* in one room,” she began then frowned and put a paw on his chest, “But are we clear on the Max thing?”

“Yes. Pretty much clear.”

She twitched her whiskers and accepted his statement.

“Come on gang! Let’s enjoy the scenery!”

She dashed to Stephan and chased after him, both of them laughing. To James the image was heartwarming. It pushed the hard reality of facing Max again to the background.

## 8. Retry

James had to admit that Max had kept up his part of the deal: no outbursts to Stephan at all, and a mild annoyance towards him. Even that was something he might be imagining. On Tuesday, Zig announced she would pick up Stephan to go shopping. He’d grown out of his pants and James was glad he never needed to buy Stephan’s outfits. He didn’t like shopping and least of all when clothes were involved. He and Max stood waving while Zig drove off with her nephew.

“Smile and wave, Jimbo, just smile and wave,” Max said.

James felt a cold shudder run up his spine. The way Max had said it, felt just like before the incident of Saturday. He remembered his promise to Zig. He would do his best not to react to any remarks from Max. Turning, he closed the door behind him.

“I guess I’ll get some wood work done today, Max,” he said conversationally.

“Jimmy, that teacher of Stephan, that brown rabbit, she’s not too impressive, is she?”

He let the diminutive use of his name pass undisputed: give him time, and space, like Zig had asked.

“I don’t think so, no, why do you ask?”

“Do you wonder why Stephan pisses all over the place here? Huh?”

Max leaned over him again, cutting off any escape in the process.

“I think I am missing some information, Max,” he replied in a forcedly relaxed manner.

“You,” Max tapped his chest, “have even less of a presence than that sorry rabbit. That is the problem. You are a fart, a semi-intelligent column of air that is stinking this place up. And as a skunk, I am in the know on stink.”

James had no idea where this was leading, even if he felt ready to challenge this skunk it would go against Zig’s request.

“Listen, Max, your sister asked me to keep my distance, so I will.”

He backed out from under the paw and tried to round the trunk-sized skunk. This let him meet the other paw.

“Leaving? Are you chicken?”

James repeated Zig’s request in his head. It was very sudden, this attack and it coincided so well with her absence it must mean Max had just put on a show for her benefit.

“I don’t think she would like it if we would get physical, Max.”

“Ha, ha,” Max said, very slowly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He knew he was losing his cool, but the guy was really pushing. In response, he found a huge paw, sharp nails pricking, around his neck.

“Uh..,” he managed before life preserving instincts caused his own paws to battle the iron lock on his windpipe.

“I wouldn’t kill you, I promised Tonya. So I won’t. Skunk of my word, Jimmy.”

James felt how he was slowly being lifted, his toenails were the best support to the floor now, and the rest was up.

“Ghghg” he said, wheezing, battling the loss of consciousness.

“However, I didn’t say I was going to be *nice*. I think we must discuss something.”

Max let him go and he fell into a sorry heap on the floor. He felt his throat, wheezing.

“No marks there, boyo, wouldn’t want Sis to think I was at yer throat, har har.”

Max pulled him up by his ears. James screamed, spots filled his vision while he battled the mean gripping paws of Max on his ears.

“Sissy, you make a lot of noise.”

Standing, he now had his paws on his ears. That was rotten!

“I would like to hear when you are leaving this house. One Daddy too many, I say.”

Max’s finger pricked him at a specific place on his chest, it seemed like no force at all but somehow he got all the wind kicked out of his lungs and he fell to the wall, gasping for air, again.

“Gets ‘em every time, that solar plexus prick-trick. Yep, I do remember one or two things from my medical training, hee, hee.”

Once he found his breath, James got a slap to the side of his head, sending him flying.

“You dirty...aaargh!” he found himself screaming, on the floor, once he’d recovered from the specks in his vision. He threatened Max, “You know I will tell Zig you did this!”

“Tonya would not take your word over mine, family values weigh heavily with her.”

“Oh yeah? Family values would exclude your father, I presume?”

“That,” Max said with pleasure, “is something Tonya will happily believe me you said.”

He winked and James knew he was fighting a losing battle.

“You can’t make her choose between me and you! That’s... immoral! She *married* me. That’s a choice, no, a lock to another person, until kingdom come!”

To his surprise, Max stopped his barrage of physical and mental violence.

“That,” Max offered a paw, “might be the first sensible thing I’ve heard you say.”

Uncertain, but still surprised, James accepted the outstretched paw. Max pulled him up. If only he knew what exactly it was he’d said. And which part of it that apparently had touched Max.

“Coffee?” he proposed instead, counting his blessings, enduring the pain in his head, ears and throat.

“Sure.”

Max went to the kitchen as if nothing had happened. Five minutes later, Max was in front of the screen in the great room. He was watching a sermon. James realized suddenly that his reference to the divine nature of marriage was what had reached something in the thick black and white furred skull.

After ten minutes, Max switched it off. He was pensive for a moment. Then he regarded him.

“You speak true, James. Tonya chose you. I don’t know why. Who am I to question why? I’m but here to do and die.”

Although James would have loved to make a statement on that quote, he didn’t. Something was forthcoming, and it didn’t smell good.

“But, talking of belief and faith: she cannot cast away her given name. It is false. False is the work of the devil. My belief of the false path has brought me chastise, James. The devil laughed, I screamed and penitence has brought me back.”

James drank every word of this.

“So, you understand then, James, that I will not accept other than her true name lest I allow the devil in here. Therefore, I must root out that evil in my son, and in his keeper.”

He eyeballed him.

“I swear I did not teach him to call her thus!”

“Negligence leads to downfall, and so I shall fight you. But I can't kill you, and I can't force my sister to abandon you. But you can leave. It solves everything.”

“Um, a good husband stands by his wife,” James tried.

“Yes. And what happens to bad husbands?”

He recognized the loophole he had left.

“A good wife stands by her husband, also,” he added.

“True,” Max said and seemed to consider this.

“Jimmy, I think I misjudged you. You aren't brainless and not entirely see-through. I hope you will take my advice and leave.”

He got up and went to the porch. James felt forlorn. Instead, he would take up his wood work, maybe his mind would unlock that way.

## 9. Distance

He'd spent the whole evening, that is, their time together, making his case to Zig. It was clear that Zig wanted to believe him, but she'd already gotten Max's story while he was playing with Stephan. When he was done telling, she sighed and shook her head.

“I can't believe you referred to that monster as 'family', James. What were you thinking?”

So, everything he'd said had not affected her opinion in any way!

“Did you hear a word I said?”

“Don't change the subject, James.”

“I'm not a child, Zig. I don't deny saying that, but he had thrown me, near strangled me, pulled my ears almost lose, how-”

She interjected, “a playful push, a tug at the ears... are you a man or a mouse? Since when did you get such a sorry childish character?”

James still had his muzzle open in mid sentence, but he had completely lost his apropos. Zig went on.

"I can't expect anyone to understand what I went through when I was a child, but *you* of all people..."

She looked at him, frowning. Now how was he supposed to counter this? Was he supposed to, at all?

"Did Max tell you about his new found faith?"

"You're changing the subject again!"

"No I'm not! The subject is 'Max' and how we're supposed to get him sane again, isn't it?"

"I didn't say that," she retorted as she crossed her arms and looked away.

"Cheap move, accuse me of childish behavior and not giving me a single opening to rebuke anything. Classic."

James crossed his arms and looked away as well.

"I'm tired, good night," she moped.

As Zig said it, she turned on her side with a show, pulling the sheets. James couldn't go to sleep like this. He was tired, sure, but now his head was running wild with the implications of Zig's reaction. He couldn't remember this much distance between them, ever. How could she throw away over twenty five years of friendship, love and understanding between them? He knew she was protective of her family, of her sister Brandy, and her brother Max. Brandy had liked him at least. She thought Zig had a good catch with him. Max always had been distant, should he have invested more time in Max back then?

Questions kept surfacing like this, he could not think of answers. It was maddening. He got up, took trousers and a shirt and went downstairs. He needed a walk, to be alone for a moment, to think. Zig didn't stop him. That made sense, she would think he was being obstinate.

Once outside he put on his coat. It was a crisp night. The moon provided a bluish-white sheen over the surroundings. Out here, the background illumination level was low but with the moon he still could not see many stars. He traced one constellation with bright stars. James followed the road, with large strides until he felt really alone.

The spiff he put in walking had warmed him. A little cloud of breath formed before his muzzle. With clenched fists he looked up to the moon. He loved Zig, he knew that to his core. He knew she loved him back. How had that rotten Max wedged his way in? The thought stewed in his mind, he wanted Max out of his life. In frustration he pointed his muzzle up to the sky.

James let out a howl.

That felt good, but his head still hurt everywhere.

Then, from close by another howl went up. It was a clear response. James started at that. Nervous, he scanned the copse of trees to the side of the road. An old coyote stepped out from the trees and walked up to him in measured steps. He watched the old canine close in on him and he prepared for something, anything.

“Stay your anger, youngster,” the old coyote spoke, slowly.

“What are you doing here,” James asked curtly.

“You’re asking me?”

James felt stupid. It was a stupid question. He watched the rag tag clothed coyote, this guy was serene.

“I just answered your call, my young fellow,” the old coyote answered his unspoken question.

“My... call?”

“Make no mistake, I can see the shepherd part in you, but you sure are a coyote too, I heard it. To the core, my friend”

“I’m not your friend!”

“Yep, that’s the all important brain speaking, what does your heart say?”

“What?”

“Go on, listen to it, your howl came from there. You only need to follow it.”

“Who are you?”

“You really think that is important? We’re both coyotes in the land of coyotes. Isn’t that enough?”

James felt sort of outnumbered.

“Well? Aren’t you going to try?”

The old coyote sucked his lungs full and howled to the moon. This triggered something inside, and James felt he needed to return the call, respond to the invitation. He howled too. Again he felt freed.

“This doesn’t make sense! What are you?”

“That, my friend, I can answer at least. I’m a shaman.”

James considered various responses but as he did, the shaman shook his head, emitting ‘tch, tch,’ noises.

“Heavy case, you are. Full of howl and feeling yet totally barred by your brain.”

“Why are you doing this?” James asked, exasperated.

“When you reach my age, youngster, you will understand easily that life is too short to wonder about that. For now, you may accept that I have nothing to gain by refusing your call.”

“I didn’t call!” James cried, getting worked up.

“Yes you did. Clearly, even! True coyote style, haven’t heard it for a long while, I’m not afraid to tell you I feel warmed.”

James’ control over this conversation was slipping.

“Sure you don’t want to try? Listen to your heart, so easy, solves many things.”

The old coyote didn’t seem too well off. More a vagabond, James decided. Listen to your heart and end up like that?

“Let me guess, you wonder if I got like this, listening to my heart? Certainly! But I have never walked alone, not when my soul mate was alive, not now. I can feel her.”

He held his paws over his heart.

“Here, always. It’s warm. Hmmm.”

Now that was a different story. James closed his eyes, like the old coyote in front of him. Listen to your heart? What does my heart say?

James pictured Zig.

Oh, Zig, why are you so wrong to me? Why repudiate me? I'm true to you, so much, so intense. A warm glow welled up another howl and he let it out, as if all tension drained that way. He looked again. He was alone.

Quite alone.

There weren't even footprints on the hard ground before him.

"Hey!" he called out, loudly.

He tried howling again, but he didn't know how. Nothing happened.

"My heart... what does it say... it's so quiet."

James clutched his paws over his heart. It didn't feel warm, it hurt. He didn't want to say anything smart, he wanted to talk about his feelings.

"Zig!" he cried in dismay.

He heard a car come up the road. It was his truck and James waited, quietly, as it drove up.

A foot from him it stopped, he just stared into the headlights, feeling lost. The door opened to let a tiger striped skunkette out, who rushed to his side.

"James!" she called, "James!"

He heard it, but his brain was locked up. His head kept returning to his hurting heart. He'd found the route to his heart all right, and now it was locked. Locked and smarting. He felt Zig's arms around him, shaking him softly.

"James! Say something!"

"Hi," he said, and sagged to his knees.

Tears streamed, a sign of his unlocked hurt. He knew this. He had felt like this before. A memory formed, so solid, too tangible. A gravestone with his wife's name formed in the air before him.

"Not again..." he mumbled.

He read the letters, of his first wife, Beth, in that grave. He had felt translucent. And the emptiness inside him now tugged at him.

“I love you James! I’m sorry about all that! Speak to me!”

He heard it and he tried to catch the words, grappling to no avail.

“Zig!” he wailed, and clutched her, pulling her towards him, “Help me...”

At home, on the couch, he sat staring. His mind was running in circles. Zig offered him a glass of water, and sat next to him, holding his paw in hers.

“James?” she said softly.

“I’m here, I think.”

“You scared me witless! What happened?”

“I went for a walk, and then I met this old coyote and we howled.”

“I heard only you, I didn’t see anyone else. Because I heard you, I came looking.”

“I was looking for my heart, Zig.”

He looked into her blue eyes. They weren’t the fresh blue eyes of her young self, but of all she had to offer, he liked them most. Full of concern she waited for what he had to add to that.

“My heart felt as if you were missing from it.”

“What are you saying?”

“From my heart, Zig, you are a part of me, you know that?”

“You sound like our fox friend, James, like Chris. You’re scaring me! Are you all right?”

“I’m not like Chris. I could live, if you would be gone, but not without you in my heart. Don’t you understand?”

“You’re confusing me, James. You sure you’re OK?”

“Do you realize how much you mean to me?” James pressed.

“Well I, what kind of ... you mean... but how could I ever... James you’re imagining people, what is the matter?”

James frowned. “Are you listening?”

“You don’t sound so ‘OK’ to me, James.”

“Zig, I’m fine. Really. I talk of love, of feeling. Feel it Zig, the answer is in your heart. You can listen to that, it won’t lie, ever.”

“I feel many things, now, James. It’s a hard time for me to keep my bearings. The studio, Max, that new movie project, my lead actress’ breast-cancer and her refusal to accept it, Stephan in general, it’s a lot. I need you to be here for me. Do you realize there is not a single thing in my life that I can lean on the way I can count on you?”

“That, Zig, is nice, really, but you can lean very well on a couch. Am I that, to you? A couch? Or am I a lover, a husband, a part of your essence?”

“Oh, no, James! You know better than that.”

“It would help me a lot, Zig, if you would say something about how you feel about me, rather than how comfortable it is to have me around.”

Zig looked up to the ceiling. She closed her eyes. Her tail hung limp over the side of the couch.

“It’s late honey. I want to go to bed. I have a long day ahead of me tomorrow. I’m going to take Petra through her medical test-results again, and you know what that will do to her...”

“I understand the load, but how you evade me hurts, Zig. Your reaction is almost like admitting you’re afraid for me because you need a housekeeper. I would do anything for you, but I would do that because I would know you love me for it, not for naught.”

Zig turned her body on him.

“Would you make love to me, here on the couch?”

James set his jaw. Zig and her physical obsession sometimes drove him mad.

“No! You can’t fill my heart that way, what is the matter? I can feel you are keeping something from me.”

Zig sniffed.

“It’s Max, isn’t it? What did he ask?”

“He said he ... hoped ... you would go away.”

Zig buried her head in her paws, sobbing, wailing softly “why-hy-hy does he do-ho-ho that?”

That, at long last, was filling the emptiness in his heart. He saw the pain she suffered because of him. He held her and took her along to their cold bed.

“I would make love to you, Zig, lovingly so.”

Zig looked up, tearful, “I love you, James. You *know* I do!”

He kissed her, in their embrace they crashed onto the bed. Instead of lovemaking, they talked, about Stephan, the little friend that came for a visit, about Max and how he needed to be healed. How Zig would do the right thing to get Petra to accept her situation and seek medical attention. The few hours of night that had been left to sleep were finally used for that purpose.

## 10. Break

He'd not slept for an hour when he heard a voice downstairs.

“Sleepy head?”

James got out of the bed, as silently as his ticking toe-nails allowed. With his robe against the cold he descended the stairs. Best to check this out before he'd wake Zig. It was dark downstairs. Of course it was! What was he thinking?

“Hey?”

It came from the kitchen. He snuck over, flicked the switch around the corner and jumped into the kitchen.

“You!” he said to the shaman coyote.

“You,” the shaman replied, at ease.

“Who let you in?”

“You left the back door open.”

“It's always open!”

“And so I invited myself.”

“I'm calling the police!”

“Who will get here long after I’m gone.”

“Why are you following me?”

“I heard your heart, mister, it calls out. For justice.”

“What do you know about justice?” he spat.

That stupid old fag could not possibly understand his turmoil.

“Your wife seems a smart lady.”

The shaman watched through the window into the darkness outside. Clouds made the window a starless, moonless black hole.

“She is the smartest lady I know, and thank you for keeping your muzzle out of my affairs.”

“I can feel such things, my friend. You can’t hide it from me.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to put it to me.” James felt relaxed.

Talking with this old geezer settled things in his brain. Why wasn’t he concerned for this stranger in his house?

“Maybe, you should pay some more attention to her.”

“Hmm. She’s got a heavy day ahead of her.”

“See, now that is a good reason for a nice breakfast in bed!”

“You know, I might. Not such a bad idea at all, I’ll just be to the toilet for a sec, right back.”

When he got back the kitchen was deserted.

“Hello?” he called softly. Then he checked everywhere but the guest room.

Once back down, he sat at the kitchen table.

“Strange fellow, that,” he said softly to the empty kitchen. In half an hour Zig might decide to get up, to leave for the studio in time to get the things done they’d talked about, earlier this night. He set about preparing a meal for her. On a tray he put toast, a boiled egg and a glass of fresh squeezed juice. Coffee was prepared, to be added at the right time. And finally, a yellow autumn flower from the garden in a little vase. At six thirty he carried his payload to her.

Zig was on her belly under the sheets. He took a moment to take the scene in. Her tail draped to the side, one foot sticking out, just over the side of the bed. Stephan slept on his belly too. Actually, Zig's active spirit was just like Stephan's.

"Zig?" he called softly.

She moaned and turned on her back, taking the sheets along. Her paw fell to the empty side of the bed, next to her. Her searching fingers missed him.

"Hmmm?" she said.

After a moment she blinked and checked the bed beside her visually.

"James?" she said, surprised.

Then, more fearful she repeated his name.

"Honey?" he said, holding the tray, still.

"James! What's that?"

"Breakfast. Special order, for the smartest lady in this world."

He operated the switch on the wall with his elbow and placed the tray on her lap.

"My, I had no idea you needed some attention so badly," she said in a teasing voice.

James found himself still amazed at her ability to wake up so quickly.

"Yum!" she said and dug in.

"I just figured, you should get a good start today, what with all the stressful things you want to do."

"Hmm, hmm," she nodded, chewing.

She swallowed, and looked at him. "That's been a while!"

James sat on the edge of the bed. Just looking. He said softly, "Please don't let me distract you, I'm drinking in the image."

Her eyes rested on him, searching just for a second. Finding nothing amiss, she continued.

Half an hour later he waved, from the door. He was still feeling her loving embrace all over his body.

“Love you...” he said softly to the red lights disappearing in the distance.

Now he had more than enough time to wake Stephan. Breakfast would be easy that way, all he needed now was a friendly Max and this day would be a breeze. An hour later, he felt slightly less optimistic. Max announced his desire to accompany them to kindergarten. Stephan had indeed eaten his cereal with a minimum of spill, Max had been quiet and now this.

“You do realize that might be a bit confusing for him?” he tried.

“Cut the crap, Jimmy. I’m going to bring my son to his school, and there is nothing to keep me from doing so. Eh squirt?”

He nudged Stephan. To his horror, Stephan smiled and returned the nudge by means of a slap, while he said, “I’m fierce!”

“Stephan, your aunt and I have decided you can be a little less fierce.”

Max glowered at him.

“My son is not a sissy! You be fierce Stephan! Daddy says it’s good.”

Stephan looked at him, searching for approval. James remembered the words of the teacher, and shook his head almost imperceptibly. Max got up, leaned over the table, and grabbed his throat in two paws. He pulled him up, towards him. The foul smell of the infected glands tickled his nose.

“You think you are funny?”

“Hghgn,” James gulped.

Max let him go and he collided with the table in a loud ringing as all on it jolted. James tried to collect his dignity, sitting back onto his stool. Stephan looked from Max to him, a few times. He said nothing. What was that puppy thinking?

Once they arrived at the playground outside the school, James gladly accepted the absence of the old squirrel lady. Stephan was immersed in his games with the other kids when they left.

“That was fun,” Max said when they drove back.

“Indeed,” James noted, with little enthusiasm.

“Say, you got out on the wrong side of the bed this morning or what?”

“Max, you even told your sister you think I should be going. Do you hate her?”

“That, buddy, is none of your business.”

“I’m her husband, I think that qualifies it as being my business altogether!”

“Say, Jimmy, talking of Tonya, shall we visit her work right now?”

“That would be a bad idea.”

“It was not a suggestion, sissy.”

“Would you mind being a little less foulmouthed?”

“You know sumting? I would.”

“I said no, Max.”

“Stop the car.”

“I’m driving. And I’m driving home.”

Max pressed his foot on the brake, making the car skid. James fought to keep going straight. With a jolt, the car halted in mid traffic. Horns erupted behind them as others had to find a way around them.

“Do you want to get us killed?”

Max hit him. James heard only parts of the next sentence.

“Drive ... studio or ... angry.”

“Wh-what?”

Max got out, walked around and pushed him into the passenger seat.

“Destination, ZZ Studios!” he yelled into the navigation system, which promptly indicated a u-turn.

Unable to stop this pending disaster, James was carried along by the tidal wave called Max, down to the studio.

“What’s stopping you meeting her, idiot?”

“Max, I have an understanding with Zig. It’s her job, she does not need my distraction there and apart from chauffeuring her to the location, I don’t go there if I don’t have to be. She likes that, and I like that. I always call before dropping in. She doesn’t like it and normally hasn’t got time for it either. Is that clear enough?”

“She would be cross with you if you would visit her?”

“That is mildly put,” James said, beginning to get the feeling he might yet stop this string of events.

“Too bad, Jimmy,” Max said, and grinned an evil grin.

Soon they reached the parking lot. There, he saw Zig’s car. It was right near the entrance and that made it clear how early she had arrived. Next to it, James recognized the beaten up little car from Darke. All the rest of the spaces were filled with cars too, it was certainly busy.

Max got out, leaving the car running, and walked stiffly to the entrance. Darke was just carrying out the trash to the dumpster at the side of the building. She stopped, dropping the bags. James had to lean over to unlock his door because Max had locked him in.

“Hey, you!” he heard her call to the big skunk.

James pulled the key from the car to stop it, and hurried after Max, who took a short look at the black cat and approached the entrance, unperturbed. Darke tapped the big skunk. He was so much larger and bigger, Darke was completely in his shadow.

“What, cat?”

“You’re Max, aren’t you?” Darke demanded, in her typical aggressive tone. James was surprised Darke would know Max at all. Darke was mad, she spat the words and saliva splattered onto the tough dark blue material of Max’s coat.

“So?” Max said reproachfully, as he wiped a paw over his coat meaningfully then eyed her. Darke’s eyes locked with Max. It meant Max was looking down to the small cat in front of him. Darke, short and stocky, was looking up, as if peering to the top of a skyscraper. Every inch of her body enraged.

“Wanna make something of it?” Max added, sweetly. He was enjoying this, James thought.

“Ohhh, make my day,” she put a leering smile on.

“Move aside,” Max pushed her to the side and walked to the door.

James feared Darke might attack Max right then, the way she clenched her fists. Instead, she ran past him, inside. James hoped she would get Zig Zag out in time. Hoping to avert the confrontation, he closed in on the large skunk, who was walking to the door at his leisure. It was as if he was waiting for his sister to meet him outside. Zig appeared in the entry and put a paw out to stop Max. James was too late to catch the beginning of the discussion, but it turned out Max was suggesting he had been dropped here by a certain James, rather than of his own free will.

“What!” James exclaimed, horrified at the allegation, “Ask Darke! She saw him get out from behind the wheel!” he cried in dismay.

Darke appeared from behind Zig.

“Well?” Zig asked her, loudly.

“I... was minding the trash.”

Darke looked at him, forlorn. She raised her eyebrows, she really hadn't seen.

“Seems to me, the trash still needs minding!” Zig bitched, nodding to the two bags still on the ground. She knew full well what Max thought of her line of work and she was already on edge from the idea of finding Max here to confront her in front of her crew. James felt lost, he would not do that, Zig must know he wouldn't! Yet she believed Max. Darke in the meantime shrugged and with an uncertain gait due to stifled anger went to pick the bags up while mumbling affronts continually. James only caught ‘Hmmpfpsdf’.

With that sorted out, Zig regarded her little brother.

“Sorry, Max, I think James forgot to call before appearing, he should not have brought you. Maybe he misunderstood our agreement he shouldn't...” and she clenched her jaws, “drop in on me unannounced.”

James felt he should at least try to place a reply, "I know how you feel about that, honey, and we agreed on that, but don't you see Max..."

"Don't you 'honey' me, James Sheppard! I know what you're driving at, setting me up nice with the breakfast this morning and then appearing here with Max! Bah! You mustn't meddle between me and my brother, *husband*."

"But Zig, you don't understand," he began.

"I will talk to you this evening, *honey*, now please get Max home?"

Zig kissed Max on the head and patted him.

"It's all right, Max, I know you didn't want to be here, OK?"

"You know it all, don't you Sis?" Max said slowly, obediently.

He turned back to the car. Zig stood with her arms crossed, glaring at James.

"Well?"

James shrugged and turned to the car too. The situation was beyond salvation anyway. He hadn't even made a remark on her attire, the short robe she wore, which indicated she was doing something active around the set. She'd promised him she wouldn't do that anymore, or tell him at least. That wasn't nice either, sure it was no acting and he knew that, but this? It really was better he didn't come here, and he knew it well. Now he was angry at Max for setting him up and for getting him down about Zig's work. Brooding, he got into the driver's seat. He had a headache of epic proportions.

"Nice going, bro!" He spat, once he sat.

"Yes, that went rather well, don't you think?"

James drove off, clenching his jaw. Max was a mean plotter, a stinker really.

"I smelled the breakfast this morning. If you want war, you get war, Jimmy. And I'm a soldier, don't forget."

"You're putting me between you and her. That was low, Max. Very low."

“No, that was smart. Very smart.”

The rest of the way was spent in silence, both entertaining their own thoughts. Max looked at the scenery with a happy smile and James recalled the last incident with Zig and her ‘suggestions’ on a particular stage. She had long since stopped in front of the camera and now had more and more taken position behind it. James at first had supported it wholeheartedly but then the problems started. She would show a stance, move, whatever, to get her idea across. In the end, one particular male actor had made some remark about the supposed attractiveness of her body. Zig had been a devil for a while after that. He couldn’t even recall how long anymore, but it had put serious strain on their relationship. With a lot of work and easing up at all ends she had gotten back into shape. And now he found she had again been ‘explaining’, else she would not have worn the robe. James gritted his teeth, sneaking a peek at Max who eyed him with disdain. It was really getting to him, James thought, he should be more than senior enough to laugh about this. He wasn’t, his relation with Zig wasn’t so easy. It never had been. He could draw a map of disasters all the way through and every time their deep rooted love for one another had kept their ship on course.

James suddenly sat easier in his chair. He loved her, so much, he would find a way around this obstacle. Of course he would!

###

That evening, Stephan was nagging about his dinner again. James finally had him eating a little bit with the threat of not getting dessert. When Stephan started playing with his food again, he announced ‘no dessert’, after all, he had to be clear with the four year old. Max got up, retrieved the pudding and placed it on the table. James’ eyes went wide in wonder. What the hell?

“Max, I just said...”

“I heard you. I think Stephan likes his dessert, doesn’t he? Eh squirt?”

Stephan nodded very emphatically to Max, crying “Yes! Yes!”

“And I say you get dessert, isn’t that nice?”

James groaned inwardly. Max was actually *buying* his son and at the same time killing off all the pedagogy he’d developed on Stephan. This would take a week to repair!

After dinner, Stephan and Max were playing in the garden. It was clear that the pudding action had earned Max a lot of points, in Stephan’s view. Zig Zag watched them from the kitchen window.

“Isn’t that lovely?” she said.

“Depends on your view, Zig, he should not have overruled my dessert-decision.”

“What? Max? Just this once, James, what will it hurt?”

“Right, and that’s my wife talking who doesn’t want to spoil him?”

“Hey, smooth talker, I haven’t given you the lecture you still deserve!”

“What, about that surprise at the studio? Max kicked me senseless in the car, shoved me to the side and set the navigation system. Then he told you I’d driven. Do you think I was happy?”

Zig pricked her finger in his chest.

“Are you saying Max is a liar?”

James pricked her chest, just above the breasts, saying, “Yes I am!” Then he stood back, folding his arms over his chest to support his view.

“That’s unbelievably low, James. Give me one reason why he would do that?”

“Ha! He told me himself: he said he needed to counter my breakfast!”

“So, this is just a game, then, to you? You make breakfast for me, like a piece in a chess game? And I’m supposed to like that?”

“No! You are getting it all wrong! I decided this morning you were entitled to some breakfast. I didn’t know Max would come along to kindergarten!”

“What, you think he shouldn’t have?”

“Of course not! Stephan fears him, you should have seen him in the car!”

“That Stephan?” she pointed a thumb.

“Yes... um, well, before the pudding he...”

“So it’s all a conspiracy?” she said sweetly. It was not like Zig to be so mean.

“Don’t you see he’s driving us apart?” he asked exasperated, his paws in the air.

“Oh!” she was at a loss for a second.

“Max wouldn’t do that, James! I can’t believe you actually said that, tell me you meant something else, please?”

James felt his fur bristling. What could he possibly say now, that would not make matters worse?

“I don’t want to lose you Zig, can’t you see that?”

“James, you’re not losing me? I wouldn’t let you go so easily, what you feel, how you feel: it is important to me, it binds us.”

“You mean that?”

“Of course! Don’t be silly. James, that thing we have, our marriage, our love, this is not a trifle. I would not endanger that.”

James went up to her, and they embraced. Holding her close, he whispered, “I have neglected you, haven’t I?”

She pushed him at arms’ length and regarded him.

“What makes you say that?”

“When we arrived at the studio, I saw your attire. I assumed you explained something in some way on the set?”

Zig smiled deviously. “Of course, sometimes I really need to spell out what I mean, to my stars, you know that.”

“Sure, and that requires changing clothes nowadays?”

Her friendly smile evaporated. She pushed him away.

“James, I don’t like that tone. We’ve discussed this over and over. You know I am true to you!”

“I didn’t say that, I was just...”

“Bag it! I can read between the lines! You did go there to check on me, didn’t you?”

“No! That’s not at all... Max drove and...”

“Brilliant, James, just brilliant! And you almost had me there, you know that? All that talk about our marriage, what does it mean to you? Tell me!”

“I wouldn’t hurt you for the world, Zig, I would die before that!”

“How dramatically put, using my own words. Yet, as you say it, a poison dagger wriggles in my heart!”

She stamped out of the kitchen and went outside to join Max and Stephan. James took a look at the kitchen which stood filled with the remnants of the dinner. It was so empty, so cold. Stephan’s empty high stool stood turned away from the table. He’d build it himself, a lot of work too. Was happiness meant to be present in short bursts only? Like it was some sort of built-in mechanism, something to make sure that if you felt happy, you got it rubbed in: this only lasts a moment. You better enjoy it while you can.

“Grievous, isn’t it?”

He looked up, the shaman stood in the kitchen, leaning on the door frame. Again, his surprise at seeing the old coyote simply evaporated. A part of his brain worried about this.

“I’ve got a headache you won’t believe,” he said.

“Are you a worthy adversary to that Max?”

“Worthy? I can’t lift a finger against him or Zig will kick me out, you heard her!”

“Sure did. What does your heart tell you?”

“Kill that interfering Max!”

“No, that is your anger. You must be careful not to mix that up. Young folk do that all the time.”

“Young, ha! That was a while ago. I don’t know if I can ever conjure up that feeling again.”

“Of course you can. Look at Stephan.”

He did. Stephan had just escaped one of the forced hugs with Zig and ran to the swing. He took a leap, landing on his stomach on it and he swung along with it into the air. Max stood next to the swing, smiling.

“You are not looking at Stephan.”

The shaman was right and so he focused on Stephan. After a moment, he noted the puppy was searching. Stephan got off the swing and circled his aunt and ‘real’ father. After a moment he actually called ‘Daddy!’ very loudly. Max naturally thought he was being invited and went to Stephan who pushed the big paw away and called again. But now he yelled, “Daddy sjeems!”

A warm glow spread over his limbs at once. That little guy wasn’t fooled by the stupid pudding-action from Max. Zig was right, and after all: Max was Stephan’s real father. It was not strange that Max would want contact with Stephan, his offspring. But that did not mean he’d be a ‘Dad’ to Stephan. Not now, not soon. Max could aspire to be another Dad, but it was impossible for a four-year old to replace one father with another. He turned back to the kitchen. He felt proud about the high chair. Good work, sturdy. He’d clean up in a moment.

James went out, sat on his haunches and called the still searching Stephan to him. A moment later he was on his belly in the cold grass, a toddler on his back who was trying to steer him by his tail. James knew what Stephan tried, having watched him at the playground: one toddler would ‘steer’ another, and he went along with the game. The worries of this world seemed much less now. Maybe the old shaman was right. The answer was very often walking around. You just need to look in the right place. He noted Max’s expression, while not hostile, it was clear he didn’t like this. He kept his distance. Zig was completely oblivious of her little brother. Her attention was one hundred percent on Stephan. She smiled. Maybe the little guy had chased the dark thoughts she had projected to him as well.

That rabbit teacher was right: Stephan could sway any adult with his easygoing mannerisms. He needn’t be fierce.

###

Later that evening, he was putting Stephan in his bed. Max had luckily decided to remain downstairs with Zig.

“Daddy, who is Tonya?”

He nearly jumped out of his fur at that.

“Sorry, Stephan, but I don’t know. Maybe you have to ask Ziggy about that, once, okay?”

“Oh, OK.”

“What’s the matter, Stephan?”

“I don’t like Tonya.”

“How can you dislike someone if you never met them?”

“He walks around my room at night, Daddy.”

“He does? That is bad! Tonya can’t do that. But if you stay in your crib, he can’t touch you, OK?”

At that age, the mind is nimble and so Stephan was happy with his solution. He immediately jumped to the next subject.

“Is Max fiese, Daddy?”

“I think Max is maybe the most fierce person I ever saw, Stephan.”

“What’s if you are no-so fiese?”

“The opposite of fierce, you mean, Stephan?”

Stephan nodded fast, going “hmmm!”

James thought for a suitable antonym, arriving at, “If you are not fierce, you are gentle, Stephan.”

“Can I be gentle, Daddy?”

“Can you be? But Stephan, you are so gentle already! Miss Othmar also says you are very gentle!”

“I like Miss Othmar, Daddy. Can she live here instead of Max?”

“You know what, Stephan? I will read you a story. That will make for a much better sleep than all these questions you ask.”

Stephan got up and pulled a book from the ledge. “This one!”

“Ah, the book about the feet, eh?”

James sat on the stool next to the crib and read the book.

## 11. Headache

James studied the beams of the ceiling over their bed. Maybe he ought to paint them once more, since here and there cracks were showing from splitting of the wood. It was already past ten pm, and Zig and Max were discussing things downstairs. Apparently it was not so funny because no laughter rose up. Suddenly he heard them mount the stairs. Finally!

Ten minutes later Zig dropped her body onto the bed. She'd been drinking again, strong spirits by the smell. It was a bad combination: Zig in a dark mood and liquor. James held his tongue, that was best. She belched softly, and said “oops”. Yep, far gone, he concluded sadly. It would be great if she could keep her paws off the booze at the slightest hitch.

A moment later, he found the full armory of Zig on him, she fingered her body in suggestive ways to kindle him. He found his body reacted but somehow not his brain. His head was locked in the questions Stephan had asked. If he would tell Zig, she might decide he had planted the suggestion into Stephan's head. If he didn't tell her, she might decide that anyway. She would get angry, he feared. Zig smiled showing her teeth all the way. He saw only danger.

“HmMMM,” she said as she mistook his muteness for submission.

James let her go about her business. He wondered suddenly how rape would feel. Luckily, Zig was too intoxicated to steer her feelings well and it didn't take long for her to reach a high. The alcohol had dulled her senses such that she wasn't really aware of his reaction. She rolled off him and shook once more with her tail. She kissed him and turned over, sighing happily.

He waited for her to fall asleep and propped his head on his paw. He looked at Zig, sleeping next to him. Her tail stuck from under the sheets. He looked at it intently, remembering the initial phase of their relationship. They had had so much fun with her tail then. He

shook his head and got out to go downstairs. Pulling his coat on, he took the car keys and made sure he left silently. Once he felt he'd driven far enough, he got out and listened. It was quiet here, next to the deserted road. The only sound was the ticking of the cooling engine. He filled his lungs and screamed for all he was worth, losing the frustration from this evening.

"Care for some howling?"

The shaman stood behind the car.

"No. I feel better already. I think."

"Just asking."

The shaman turned around, wagging his tail, and stepped out of sight. That was odd, but no more than that. James looked around, but didn't see the shaman anywhere. The only thing that bothered him right now was the continual headache. This pain was not normal anymore and he decided he would visit the physician first thing tomorrow!

By the time he sneaked back into bed, he felt seriously tired. He slept almost right away, until an angry alarm clock woke him. Seven thirty?

"Zig!" he nudged his wife who had been drooling over her pillow.

"Uhuh lemme sleep," she moaned.

"Seven thirty Zig! You will be late!"

"Hmm... end of the world..."

James sat on his knees and regarded the black and white shape in the bed. An idea formed, one he'd never thought he'd be able to pull off, but this was one of those moments. Blinking to battle the headache he rounded the bed and yanked her tail. He could not remember ever achieving that on her while she was caught unawares.

"Yeh! Hey!"

She was awake now and held her head, eyes squeezed shut.  
"DJeez!"

"Coffee, madam?"

"Please! Not so loud!"

James was down in a jiffy, walking and working was an improvement. Better than sitting still and feeling his head beat like a drum. He prepared coffee, set the table and broke four eggs in a pan on the stove. Then he rushed upstairs with water and offered that to Zig who sat on the edge of the bed, looking at herself in the mirror.

“Am I getting old, James?”

“I sure hope so.”

“Not funny!”

“You honestly expect me to reply in a sincere way to the most dangerous question a female can ask?”

“Ha ha.”

“You better hurry, Zig; here, drink this. With pain relief, dissolved already. You’ll have toast with eggs.”

She looked up at him. “What would I do without you?”

“I recall a different remark, yesterday.”

He regretted it immediately. “I’m getting Stephan out,” he added and turned, hoping to get away with it. He opened the door to Stephan’s room and found him in the corner with his toy-house.

“Good morning, Daddy,” he said.

“How come you are so quiet Stephan?”

“I am gentle, Daddy.”

“I’ll say! Normally the crib is jumping through the room!”

“The crib wanted to sleep, Daddy.”

“Did it? That’s nice, Stephan. You know, we must get dressed and break our fast!”

“Ha ha Daddy! It’s breakfast, Daddy!”

“So it is! That is smart of you, Stephan. Come on now, we need to hurry.”

“Hurry! Hurry!”

Stephan jumped up and ran out of the room.

“Your clothes are here, Stephan?”

“Ziggy! I’m awake! Hurry!”

He ran to Zig who was in the middle of getting dressed. The sudden quiet that ensued made James follow the toddler to the bedroom. Stephan was making a study of Zig in her underwear. Or rather: she was sifting through her drawer with panties and did not wear one right now.

“Ziggy has no willy!” Stephan pointed.

Zig laughed, the dissolved pill had diminished the effects of her fluid imbalance a lot already.

“Daddy has a willy. Stephan has a willy!”

“Who says such things, Stephan?”

“Miss Othmar says boys have willies and girls don’t.”

“So, what does that make Ziggy?”

“Ziggy is a Mommy. Mommies don’t have willies.”

Zig walked to Stephan and picked him up for a hug. As usual, she did this so flimsy that Stephan pushed her away, using her wrapped breasts for leverage.

“Hey mister! Watch where you put those paws!”

“Let... go...” Stephan wrung himself lose.

“Shall we get dressed now, Stephan?”

Stephan jumped through to his room, with ‘yes’ at each jump.

“I think we all better had,” Zig said.

James had Stephan clad in a moment and let him run down the stairs. He followed him to the kitchen to turn off the heat under the eggs and went to get dressed. Five minutes later, Zig ran past to collect her breakfast in a box and left.

“I can at least make sure you eat decent!” James called after her as she ran to her car.

“Hurry Stephan, now we must get going!” he said to Stephan.

Totally unwarranted, the whole eating and getting going went smooth and he managed to get Stephan to kindergarten as the signal sounded. Driving back was the hardest, being alone with his headache.

“Nice car,” the shaman said.

James looked into the rearview mirror, to see the old wrinkle-cast eyes looking back.

“Hydrogen powered, hear the whine?” he explained to the geezer.

“In my day this was called a ‘gas guzzler’.”

“In your day it sure was, now it is a ‘safe’ car.”

“Stephan seems to like it.”

“He hates the other car, for sure.”

“She seemed friendly, this morning. What do you think they were discussing last night?”

“Beats me. If it concerns me, I will no doubt find out when I get home. Max will be skulking around the house.”

“Oh joy.”

“You take the words right out of my muzzle.”

“That movie of hers, you think she has put it aside for a bit?”

“Has to be, else she would not have been ‘explaining’ on the movie-set.”

“That was unexpected.”

“I really hope she is aware how that touches me, for now she seems to be evading the subject.”

“It hurts you, does it not?”

“She speaks of daggers; I know just what she means. Didn’t you ever have a fight with your loved one?”

No answer. He checked the mirror: no one. Of course no one. His mind was playing tricks, and he knew it. But he had no control over it. Should he worry? His headache increased, it seemed. He tried to concentrate on the list of groceries, drifting somewhere in the tangle of bear-traps in his head.

An hour later he stepped into the kitchen with his groceries.

“Hey Jimmy,” Max said.

James was pretty on edge from the continuous hammering in his skull. Driving sure was nasty business, feeling like that.

"It's James, Max. *James*. I would like it if you would call me James. Thank you."

"You ain't British, why call you James? Stupid name, if you ask me."

"Well I didn't and my parents did."

"You didn't change your name."

"I don't feel like talking this over with you."

The phone rang. James grabbed it, looking at Zig's head on the little screen.

"Honey, I really need Darke today. Could you do the house this time?"

"Sure! I'll have it spic and span, darling!"

"You won't forget, James, will you?"

"Forget? I never forget anything, Zig! I pledge my honor to it that this house will be clean, this evening."

"And don't forget the bathroom please?"

"Zig! What do you take me for?"

"OK, see you tonight."

"Bye."

He put the phone back on the kitchen sink.

"I don't think Tonya will be happy when she gets home."

"Au contraire, my friend Max. I will visit the doctor and then clean the house."

"Doctor? What for?" Max looked at him, with a little bit of genuine concern.

This was unexpected.

"I've got a headache, all the time, for days now. I have to have this checked out."

"Sissy."

What on Earth could possibly have made him entertain the notion that Max would be interested in him? Not even a little bit, nothing. To the big guy, he was just air. Semi-intelligent air, that had seized, no, usurped his rightful place as Stephan's Dad.

"Run along now, move it, move it." Max waved an irritated paw.

"Yes sir!" James saluted.

"My, you been in the army, Jimbo?"

"As a matter of fact I have. Happy now?"

"Hadn't thought it. I didn't know they accepted straw dummies. You were a combat dummy?"

"Ha ha. Your sister knows I was, for a long time in fact."

"Oh yeah? And what did you do huh?"

"That's still classified. You know what that means."

"You were in intelligence?"

"For the sake of argument, let's say I was."

Max regarded him, his eyes narrowed, he thought. Deep. Then he reached a decision.

"Twerp, get to your doctor."

James left, dismissing the issue, and drove to the physician. It was again a half hour drive and when he arrived he thought he was seeing double. He more fell than walked in and steadied himself at the counter.

"Sir?" said a stricken tabby behind the counter upon his disorderly arrival, "you can go right in, sir...?"

"James... Sheppard," he managed.

After a moment, he got his bearings and the world stopped revolving. She got up and guided him into the examination room then sat him on the bench and the doctor was examining his head at once.

"Ow!" he said as his ear was pushed aside for examination of the skin.

"What happened here?"

“New house mate... pulled my ear.”

“Pulled? You call this pulled? It’s been nearly severed, good grief! All along the edge, contusions.”

A moment later he winced.

“What’s this bump from?”

“A run in, with a fist.”

“A brawl of sorts?”

“No, no. Same house mate.”

“What kind of mate is that? Professional boxer?”

“No, the little brother of my wife.”

“Your wife... oh, yes.”

“Huh?”

“I have to say your wife’s physique kind of sticks in the mind.”

“Hmm. I hear that often.”

“Little brother hmm? Same looks?”

“No, skunk.”

“Same spiff as your wife?”

“I don’t consider Zig Zag spiffy.”

“Now, now, Mr. Sheppard, I remember quite well how you walked in here with your back ripped open. I may forget a name, but I don’t forget such singular things.”

It seemed like an age ago. The doctor picked up his reminiscence.

“Yes, I agree, long ago. We’re both old now, James,” he noted the doctor had in the meanwhile even recalled his name.

“Sit still. Let me examine this for a moment.”

Then the cat stopped and walked to the screen on his desk. He typed a moment and clicked around.

“See! I thought I remembered that...”

“Sorry?”

“You should be a bit more careful with your head! I just summoned up info on that amnesia you had in the hospital. Strange case, James, getting a serious lapse and then total recall.”

The doctor put a paw to his muzzle and fingered a whisker.

“I really would like to know what jogged your memory back then. It must have been something really special.”

“My wife did,” James lied. He really had no desire to talk about that weird species stranger that had walked into his home. A ‘human’, who had ever heard of such a thing?

The doctor went on, “James, you know what that specialist said, don’t you?”

“What, that doctor Macintosh?”

“Yes. You do know she is the best around, don’t you?”

“If you say so.”

“No, really, she’s really empathic. Right now I would recommend a CT or MRI scan.”

James shook his head, “No, you know I can’t do that. It’s not covered.”

“I am aware of the abysmal health policy you have, but I encourage you to talk this over with your wife. We’re talking your health here, remember.”

“Can’t you do anything? I’ve had a headache for days now.”

“Yes, you told me on the phone. Without a scan and an expert analysis: I can only say to use painkillers. I’ll have the nurse provide some and I’ll give you these right now, anyway.”

The doctor put three pills in a glass and let them dissolve.

“What? Three?”

“Certainly, it’s safe.”

He drank it and agreed to use the pills.

“I press it onto you once more, James: spend that money, visit her. For all I know she would even do the analysis for free. After all, you provided her with a great article.”

“Oh, that. I didn’t understand that article, much text, more hogwash. A scientific article of the medical persuasion has such intrinsic lingo I can’t possibly make sense of it, doctor. She was happy with it though.”

“Promise me you will talk it over with your wife, James. Please?”

“Sure.”

He got off the examination table and prepared to leave.

“Before you go, James, is there anything I need to know about that new house mate? That little brother of your wife? Seems a bit strange he would ruffle you this much for the fun.”

“Oh but he feels he has a reason.”

Should he tell this? Ah, what the heck.

“The guy’s a soldier. Presumably lost in action and suddenly he turns up at our doorstep. He’s a skunk, the father of Stephan, you know, my nephew?”

“Stephan! Of course, with the tail like your wife, right?”

“Yes, quite right. Hard to miss, I guess.”

“Indeed,” the doctor agreed, “so what about this skunk?”

“Well, very big and strong and seems to be mad at me ‘cause Stephan is calling me ‘Daddy’.”

“I see. Your wife, is she happy with all this?”

“Upbeat, to say the least.”

“And, you’re a little less than ecstatic, I gather?”

“Guy’s mad ‘cause Stephan calls me ‘Dad’,” he repeated.

“You must tell this mister skunk that he must be careful with your head, James. You get one head, and it must last all your life.”

His head was clearing already, from the medicine. The hammering had diminished to a dull beat.

“Good, thank you for the examination, doctor.”

The doctor had retired to his desk and sat typing.

“James, I will send a mail to doctor Macintosh, at least it won’t hurt to do so.”

“Thank you.”

He collected the pills at the desk and drove home.

## 12. Max, take two

In the passenger seat he noted the shaman coyote.

“You turn up whenever you feel like, don’t you?”

“I turn up when you need it, youngster.”

“When I need it...” James mumbled.

“Will you tell your wife of your medical problem?”

“I don’t know. I am afraid to load yet another burden on her shoulders. Tomorrow she will take that girl with the breast cancer to the hospital.”

“Heavy.”

“She’s not too happy to do it but she knows she must. It’s that girl’s last chance.”

“She does know that girl will reject her for doing so?”

“Yes, of course. She will drug her, sort of, and drive her there under the guise of an accident. Luckily the rest of her team backs her up.”

“They say so, but will they when the time arrives?”

“That’s exactly what I said. She just shut me out.”

“Not a great feeling. Hurts your heart, doesn’t it?”

“Right now, I will tell that Max to shove off and then I will clean the house top to bottom.”

“That’s the spirit! You can get to your wife’s heart this way, you will see!”

Having reached this decision he drove on with determination. That Max needed to pipe down. At the house he nearly ran inside.

“Max!” he yelled.

The big skunk appeared from the toilet.

“Hey, Jimbo! So, what did doc say? You diagnosed with total madness?”

In the face of the big skunk his resolve wavered.

“Max, you must call me James. And you must see that it is pointless to drive Zig Zag and me apart. You are only hurting her that way.”

“Hurt?”

Max eyeballed him, and reached for him.

“Keep your paws to yourself! My head has suffered enough already, and I’ve got this weak spot which might simply kill me if you hit too hard!”

“In that case you would die not because I tried to kill you, but by accident, right?”

James blinked.

“What are you saying?”

“Well, I would be keeping my promise to Tonya, wouldn’t I?”

“What?” James called out in disbelief.

Max grabbed his throat, squeezing tight. His head protested at once. He was dragged to the toilet. Max closed the door. James gasped for breath, for oxygen. Then he heard something against the door. He tried the handle. Max had put something below it.

“Max!” he yelled.

“I’m not killing you, am I?”

“Max!”

“Yes, ‘James’?”

“Open this door!”

“It’s rude to open a door to a toilet when someone is using it, you know?”

“Max! Open the door!”

“You didn’t ask nicely,” Max taunted.

“Max!”

“I’ll be in the garden, nice day and all. Good luck with the cleaning.”

“Max!...”

Nothing.

“...open the door,” he finished limply, softly.

James hammered his fist at the door. This was unbelievable! Max had locked him up so that he would not be cleaning. Of course he would make sure that Zig would hear his story first. Whatever it was he was not going to look good in it. Then, what could he possibly say to Zig? She would be mad! The house in a mess...

That stinker!

“Maaaax!” he screamed at top volume.

Nothing.

James sat down on the toilet. He made a study of the small tiles on the floor. In the corner he noted a little bit of paper. He got up and inspected the toilet. That needed cleaning. The house needed cleaning. It was so simple: clean the house, prepare food, Zig would be happy. It was so frustrating. He howled with frustration.

Time crawled by, seconds ticked. He counted them, sixty seconds to the minute required one to count in a relaxed manner but he wasn’t relaxed. He was completely strung up, he needed to do something. Another minute passed slowly. He tried the door handle again. Locked all right. On his knees, his head pressed to the floor, he tried to spy under the door. He saw the chair on its two legs, wedged. He pushed the door and saw a tiny movement. With a lot of wiggling of the door, he achieved the chair moving a fraction of an inch. He kept doing that until his breath gave out. His watch showed he’d been busy for nearly an hour now: wriggle the handle, rattle the door and check the chair. Finally, after another set of actions he heard the chair slide. The handle moved nearly enough now.

Almost!

He put his full weight against the door, and broke from his prison. Max sat looking at him, smiling.

“Bravo.”

“Max! ... You ... dirty...” he panted, “you could’ve... helped!”

“And miss this show? I think not.”

Max got up and reached for him again. No! Not again! James ducked and ran outside, Max in tow. Max was trained, quick, younger and stronger. Also, Max had not been spending all his energy to get out of the toilet. It didn’t take long before he stood leaning on his knees, trying to suck in enough air to supply his aching muscles and head. Max came to stand next to him.

“Wanna jog around some more?”

“Jerk!” James puffed, settling for the shortest word he found so quickly. More wasn’t possible for lack of breath.

“I could chase you around the house for a while, fun.”

“Why?”

“You’re chasing Stephan, I chase you. Fitting, isn’t it?”

James righted himself and regarded the large skunk.

“Don’t you see! My role is hardwired in that little head!”

Max frowned.

“Hardwired?”

“Of course! What do you think,” he gasped once more, “a four year old who *never* saw you.”

“I was locked up, strung down, don’t you think I wanted to see him?”

“His biological mother told me you didn’t lift a finger!”

“She’s mad.”

“True, but she has bright moments. Stephan means *nothing* to her, even when she is sensible. He means the world to your sister.”

“I know that, I see that.” Max spoke softly and emphatically.

“Do you know how it feels to be replaced as a father?”

He didn't. How could he know that?

"That is a rhetorical question, Max."

At this, Max exploded.

"You with your snotty educated manners!"

Max grabbed his paws and forced them behind his back. Pulling his wrists up he nearly lifted him off the ground and his shoulders protested against this unnatural move. Soon he was in the toilet again.

"I hate you Max! Damn you!"

"Colorful," Max replied behind that door, "wordy. I do not fear your damnation, James."

"Let me out! I need to clean the house!"

"I know you do. Sis will be very happy with you once I explained to her how you forgot. She believes me, James."

"I didn't forget! I didn't!"

"Only one more hour, James buddy. Oh, and I'll be getting my son from his school of course."

"You can't buy his friendship with desserts!"

"That is low, James."

"It's true! You know it!"

"Yes, I know it. I saw it. However, I will try this or fail utterly."

"What? What are you saying?"

"You'll see."

True to his claim, Max left him an hour later. He found he actually dozed off for some time and was woken by the return of Max and Stephan. He heard him searching through the house.

"Dad!" Stephan called.

"I'm here!" he screamed.

Stephan removed the chair easily and set him free.

"Oh Stephan!" he cried and picked him up.

Max stood in the door frame. It was absolutely impossible to fathom what was going on in that black and white head.

“Fetch the dinner, Jimmy,” he commanded.

He could and he should. It would be the least he could do. Zig arrived halfway through his preparations. She was early for a change, and she was loaded with tension.

“James Sheppard?”

He knew it was a lost cause but he could at least put his head on the stake himself.

“Max locked me in the toilet so I couldn’t clean. Sorry.”

“That has to be the most lame excuse in the history of lame excuses in this universe!” she exclaimed.

Her anger was picked up by Stephan who retired to the garden with an ‘outside, Daddy’ remark as he fled the kitchen which was rapidly growing to small for the super nova of Zig’s discontent.

“You can’t even do a task as simple as cleaning the house while I slave away at the studio, James? Tell me, do I look like a maid? Huh?”

James considered his apron. ‘Chef’ it read. Then he regarded his wife. He noted that she wore a different bra. Her original choice had been off today. She’d been ‘explaining’ something again. In the face of imminent death: go with a bang.

“I see you took it upon yourself to do some acting again?”

“What? how?” she said.

“Come on, I can see it in all the tell tale signs.”

“Don’t change the subject, James!”

“Zig, are we relation counseling material already?”

This stilled the barrage of words she had in mind.

“James! You promised to clean the house, your word! What does your word mean to me this way? You tell me that!”

“Apparently the same value your word has, even if I face circumstances outside my control. You promised not to meddle with the actors on the set.”

“It’s not the same!”

“Indeed.”

He turned around and continued his preparations.

“Hey!” she shouted and pulled him around.

“Max locked me up in the toilet. End of story. You don’t have to believe me, I won’t talk of it. Period.”

He turned back to his chopping and tried hard to ignore the huffing and puffing behind him. As the noise dwindled, he wondered what was keeping her there. A growl rose up. All the hairs on his neck stood out from that noise and his knife froze in mid slice. The feeling made him turn, and what he saw reached right into that little spot of fear. Something special that told him he was not considered as a person by those glazed over blue eyes. No. He was prey. He saw all her muscles tighten, paws flew to his shoulders and he felt talons dug into his flesh.

“Zig?” he pleaded meekly.

Another growl and an open muzzle with sharp teeth appeared.

“You’re hurting me, Zig” he tried, softly, unable to find a stronger voice.

As sudden as it had started, she stopped. Zig Zag blinked. She pulled her paws back, and looked at them, holding them before her as if blood were dripping from them. A feeling of horror passed her visage, as she recognized the loss of control. His heartfelt sympathy made him reach out to her.

“Don’t touch me!” she yelled, still trying to focus on two paws at once. Her eyes darted from the one to the other.

“It’s past Zig, you needn’t worry.”

“Don’t you touch me! I’m dangerous! Stay away!”

With that, she ran off, thundered up the stairs and slammed the door of the bedroom. Max appeared around the corner of the door, smiling.

“So, Jimmy, she finally cast you away?”

“You just entertain that thought for a moment, Max. You couldn’t be further from the truth!”

“Sure looks to me I’ve got it right.”

“No you don’t. Just now she ran off because she’s afraid she might do something horrible to me.”

“Ah, like kicking you out?”

“You’re getting it wrong Max, all wrong. She’s afraid she might eat me.”

Max laughed heartily.

“You know what? I’ll just go up there and congratulate her. How about that?”

“I would not do that, she’s not seeing anyone now.”

“She always sees me, always has, always will.”

Max strode off and mounted the stairs, with even, relaxed steps. James looked into the garden where he noted Stephan was standing close to the house. He was listening to all that was being said. It made no sense to him, for sure, but he listened and stored.

“Get away!” he heard Zig scream.

So much for ‘always will’, he noted with glee. Maybe Max thought he knew Zig better than was viable.

“Open the door Tonya!” he heard Max yell in reply.

This was going to be interesting.

“She’s not here,” he heard Zig scream very aggressively.

If she felt prone, she didn’t sound it. More like in full control and brooding.

“Five seconds, Sis! I’m counting!”

A wooden house meant that such discussions could be followed word for word, even if just a tad muffled.

“..three...two...one.”

A loud bang.

“There goes the door,” James mused. Ah well, it needed adjustment anyway. The door clattered to the floor. Stephan started from the noise. Seeing that, he decided to go to the little guy. It would be better if there was someone around him that was solid and, considering the events, normal. Stephan saw him move to the great room and walked up to the back door to meet him. The screaming and yelling of Zig upstairs meant they were having a sort of fight. That must be something.

The noise moved towards the stairs.

Max appeared with Zig over his shoulder. His tail was missing, Zig had ripped the fake thing off of her little brother. She kicked out with force and he had the impression she even attacked his back. Max endured this and walked down the stairs with her. Upon reaching the bottom, he planted her on the floorboards. None too softly, either. By that time, James was protectively cradling Stephan who dug his little snout in his ‘chef’ apron. The small ears were still locked to the noise though.

“Tell me you rejected that off key life form!”

Max pointed at him.

“No! I won’t! I never will, Max, never! You don’t understand, I flipped, like gramps!”

“I don’t know gramps, Sis, you should know that. Before my time.”

“A tiger-craze, Max, you ever heard of that?”

Max frowned and regarded Zig.

“You couldn’t...”

“What? I can’t what? Speak up, Max!”

“You’re not a tiger, Tonya.”

“She’s not here, Max.” This was forced to a volume which sounded *very* controlled.

“Tell me you aren’t, please?”

“Sorry, Max. James is right. My stripes don’t lie. Sadly also they don’t lie about that either.”

Max looked at Stephan.

“I can’t leave my son in your care, Tonya, Sorry. I’m going to have to leave here, with him. For all I know you won’t recognize him as a relative.”

“Whoa, how come you know so much about this tiger thing?” James interrupted.

“Jimmy, my capture in the war was because of my old compadre. A tiger who went ‘natural’ just when we were ambushed. Nice, he attacked on all fours. He even got one of them. Then I spent three years in that hell hole.”

“I’m sorry, Max,” James sympathized.

“Max, if you even *try* to take Stephan from me I will see you in court, are we clear on that?” Zig had her paws on her hips, and confronted her little brother. She was looking him in the eyes.

“You wouldn’t!” he growled.

“I would! I got father there, didn’t I? James will always be there to protect him from whatever I may be like.”

“What, that?” Max nodded in his direction. “You just try me, Tonya. I’m getting my stuff and taking Stephan along. You can’t stop me, no matter what you fancy you ‘achieved’ about Dad.”

Stephan’s paws were seeking a sort of leverage in his sides. Something was going on in that little head too. He screamed, “nohohoho,” and cried, cried big tears of sorrow and anguish.

“Look what you did!” she said to her brother, “he hears all, you idiot!”

“Come with Daddy, Stephan, we’ll go.” Max said.

He should have known better. Stephan sped to Max like an arrow and launched a full frontal attack on his ankle. Max looked down in surprise.

“Ow,” he said slowly.

His paw flew up, apparently preparing to swat Stephan from his leg. Zig ducked between them, collecting the strike and she rolled over with Stephan in her arms.

“I won’t let *anyone* hurt you, Stephan, ever!” she whispered, in a pain-laden voice.

Max looked to the pair, sunk in thought.

“Daddy!” Stephan cried, still weeping, he gulped air and said “Ziggy!”

He actually hugged her a moment. Max took this in. Then he went upstairs, leaving the Sheppard family to their own devices.

“What now?”

“He can’t take him. Stephan lives with us, we’ve got the law on our side, James.”

Stephan held on to Zig as she tried to get up.

“That was some blow!” she said, feeling her head with her free paw.

“I know, Max is strong,” James agreed.

“He hit you that hard, too?”

“Different, he hit me with a fist. The doctor felt...” he said before he could catch himself.

“You went to our physician?”

She was standing up now, Stephan on her hip.

“Um, yes. I’ve got this headache, I didn’t want to burden you with it.”

“But James...”

She sidled over and put her other arm around him.

“You surely know that your well being is important to me?”

“So is yours, Zig, I can’t push you over the brink of sanity for just a headache.”

“What did he say?”

“He thought I should have a CT scan. I said I would talk it over with you, you know, insurance and all?”

“Are you mad? Of course you go get that scan! Your health is dearer to me than some stupid cold money! We will always find a way to pay the debts of your computer enterprise.”

They were interrupted by Max, who appeared at the top of the stairs. On his back, he showed the reattached fake tail and his big kit bag.

“Max?” Zig spoke, in wonder.

He moved downstairs, unperturbed, and stood before them.

“I was wrong. The Colonel was right.”

Both James and Zig Zag waited for more explanation. Stephan, on Zig’s arm looked to Max with one eye, keeping his head buried near Zig’s armpit. Zig looked at James, empathically raising an eyebrow.

“Colonel Badger, he said I couldn’t. I thought I could pick up my life.”

Zig sighed, “You *can* Max! You really can, but not like this. Let me help you, stay with us and give us a chance.”

“No, Sis, I can’t. I’m not a father. I never was. James is right.”

James was perplexed. Max regarded him, a hint of disdain in his eyes.

“Yes you, you sissy. All that talk with fancy words doesn’t mean you can’t sometimes say sensible things.”

Zig looked at him, “What did you say to Max?”

“I don’t know what he refers to.”

“It doesn’t matter Sis, trust me. I can’t pull you two apart, I shouldn’t.”

“Your mind is made up?” Zig quizzed him, with a sad tone in her voice.

“This is final. I’m going. I told you about that project of the Colonel’s. I will take that job, so this could be goodbye. Final.”

Then he turned to James.

“You are a bloated bag of airy expressions but the kid likes you. You do right by him, or you will find me in your path when you least expect it, clear?”

“As much as you say you aren’t a father, I assure you: I am.”

“I’ll accept that as a ‘clear’, buddy.”

Zig pulled James closer to her still. Now Max turned to Zig and Stephan.

“Stephan?”

“hmmhmm” Stephan mumbled, digging his muzzle into Zig’s shoulder.

“It’s OK, Stephan, come, listen to Reeldad,” James ensured him.

Stephan looked at him and wiped a still wet eye.

“No Tonya?”

“No Stephan, he’s not around.”

James left the question in Zig’s eyes for what it was. This moment did not allow for an explanation on Stephan’s view of who or what a ‘Tonya’ was and if any of those were allowed to prowl his bedroom during the night.

“Look Stephan, Max is leaving us. You can tell him what you want.”

Stephan faced Max at last.

“Max is not bad?” Stephan asked James, carefully fastening his hold on Zig.

“Stephan, Max likes you a lot. He has trouble showing it.”

“Max is like Ziggy?” Stephan asked.

It is wonderful to hear the freedom in the mind of a child. Zig Zag giggled. Max had a smile on his face.

“Yes, Stephan, Max is like Ziggy. Max is Ziggy’s brother.”

“Oh, OK.” Stephan said with satisfaction.

The three adults exchanged a gaze of understanding with one another.

“Max is leaving?” Stephan asked.

“Yes, Stephan, I am leaving. I will go to another world.”

“It is far?” Stephan asked.

“No Stephan,” Max said kindly, “it is not far. It’s in the city in fact. Other worlds are not always so far.”

“Is there war too?”

After a silence, Max answered.

“Stephan, war is not fun. I lost my tail in the war. War is the end of things. I will leave you Stephan. I leave you with Ziggy and Sjeems. They care for you.”

“I like Daddy.” Stephan added, nodding.

“Stephan, promise me one thing, will you?”

“OK,” Stephan said.

James knew Stephan would say that easily, but now Max took it literally. He saw no reason to butt in.

“Stephan, being nice to people brings you further than you will ever know. Be nice Stephan, I know you can. Miss Othmar said so.”

“O-kay!” Stephan announced gravely. This was a bit of a surprise to James. He’d never heard Stephan react so. Max leaned forward and kissed Stephan. He sniffed his son’s smell. Then he repeated this, as if storing the essence of his son in his mind.

“Sis, you take care of that kid. I’m off. This world is at an end for me.”

“But ... he never actually said you would not get back!” she protested.

“I’m not stupid. I know the risks. But I can’t leave such unprotected gates into this country open. It’s my duty as a soldier to

confront whoever is behind that gate. Protect the innocent, Sis," he nodded to Stephan, "we will need a beach head."

Max walked past them to the front door. They followed him. At the door he turned around. "I called the Colonel; he will pick me up along the road. I'll need the solitary walk."

"So this really is good bye?"

Zig gave Stephan to James and hugged her little brother.

"Be careful, Max. And remember: if you see those shaven, fur-less creatures: first shoot, then ask."

"Got it Sis. Oh, and uh, I *did* hit James, I *did* drive to your studio and I *did* lock him up. It was too easy to resist. I can't see what you like about that sissy."

"Why, you!" she hissed.

"Bye. Live long and prosper eh?" he waved, winking.

Max turned around and set off down the street with a brisk walk. Stephan waved. They stood there, looking at the diminishing figure. After a while, Stephan began to wriggle lose.

"I want to watch my show," he announced.

James set him down, "you know how to turn it on, Stephan."

He said it without really looking at the little face. Instead he put his arm around Zig who returned the gesture. Together they watched Max disappear.

"He's walking out of your life again, Zig. It reminds me of the first time, when he left the baby Stephan with us. Then, as now, he said he needed the exercise of the walk."

"I think my family is doomed."

"No it's not, you are a great wife, an able business woman, and good mother to boot. Even Max, he has not once complained about the money you pour into my sorry state of affairs. He could easily have nagged about that."

"Uhuh, he could have," Zig said, meaningfully.

"You told him not to, didn't you? See, that is what I mean, you are my shining beacon, Zig."

In a moment of uncharacteristic mellowness, Zig did not rebuke that pansy line, instead she softly took her cue to add more mush.

“I pale next to you, James. Your heart contains more room than is healthy.”

James decided that was quite enough blubber, “You paling next to me is easy, you are more white than black, I am grey and black. For you to pale next to me is sound.”

“I was being serious.”

“Of course, how indifferent of me.”

She pinched his tummy, causing him to retreat.

“Do you want this house cleaned yet? Then I suggest you keep those nasty fingers to yourself.”

James could hardly believe it: Max was gone and he was playfully feeling his wife again. A weight had just been lifted off his shoulders. His head started throbbing again. He put one paw to it.

Zig reacted at once, “it’s your head again?”

“I’ll take another pill.”

“Tomorrow you are going to that hospital, James!”

### 13. Ophelia

James sat up. His head was too small for his brain. That must be it. What else could explain the pain? He got up and had to use the wall to keep him upright. The stairs looked dangerously long. Stumbling downstairs he used two paws on the railing to slide down. What was he doing? This was not smart!

“Don’t wake Zig,” he said to himself.

Downstairs, he sagged into a chair to get his bearings.

“Tough on you, kid.”

The shaman sat in the chair opposite.

“You just keep turning up, don’t you?”

“Listen, you should not make too much noise. Don’t want to wake her, right?”

“You said it.”

“She’s got a heavy day tomorrow. Drugging that girl is not allowed.”

“Bad idea I still think. They should talk to her.”

“What if that girl presses charges?”

“She’s a foreigner. Won’t happen.”

“Still, it’s not right.”

“No it isn’t, but it’s their final hope to get her treated.”

“Who are you talking to?”

The shaman and James looked at Zig who had softly walked down the stairs.

She was naked and James, alarmed, said “hey! We’ve got company, don’t you...”

He stopped. He knew perfectly well there was no shaman in that chair. But only half his mind agreed on that. The other half wasn’t so sure.

“You are talking to yourself, James, what is the matter?”

“I’m fine, really. I’ll have that scan. No problem.”

He got up, to show his resolve and fell next to the chair onto the floor-boards.

“Ow!” he exclaimed, feeling his tail. It was bruised at the base.

“James? What is it?”

“I just need a few pills. Headache.”

“This stops right now, I’m calling Ophelia.”

“No you don’t, we’ll go sleep and I’ll be all right.”

“You don’t look all right and you don’t sound all right. You are talking to an invisible friend for heaven’s sake! Those are supposed to be gone by the time you reach fifty five!”

“I’ve not got an invisible friend!”

“James, this is not funny!”

“He’s not a friend,” he said meekly.

Zig took the nearest phone and said “Ophelia” to the white brick.

“Zig! It’s midnight! You can’t call that doctor, for all you know she’ll come over here!”

“That’s the plan, now isn’t it?”

On the small screen a black and white ruffed lemur appeared, showing a busty upper torso wrapped in a revealing nightdress while she was busy, very unexpectedly, getting *out* of her robe rather than covering up. She blinked, a pleasant smile on her muzzle.

“Why, Zig Zag, to what event do I owe this honor?”

The British accent was thick.

“Ophelia, you once said I could call you at any time if I felt my husband was behaving strangely, remember? About his head?”

Ophelia’s eyes were clearly engrossed in something else, she was scanning the image on her phone by the looks of it.

“You’re not dressed!” James hissed.

“She won’t mind,” Zig said without any constraint.

“No, I don’t. Not at all,” Ophelia piped happily, then went on in a much more severe voice, “let me get his status, just a sec, I got a mail from your physician about James.”

“Zig Zag, could you feel over his head? You’re probably most familiar with it. Try to feel for bumps, anything out of the ordinary, especially at the base of his skull.”

“Do you have to do this now? I’m not dressed either, you know!” James whispered.

“Sit still,” Zig commanded and felt his head.

“Ow!” he said a few times, protesting.

“James? Who did this?”

“I told you, Max did.”

“With what? A shovel?”

“His fist. Twice or thrice, I don’t remember.”

“Ophelia? Three lumps, at least.”

“Get a light, put the phone close so I can see.”

“Hey! I don’t want to be half dressed on the phone with...”

“...a doctor,” Ophelia finished for him, “I see patients often, without too many clothes too. OK?”

Zig used a floor lamp to light his head and turned the phone this way and that as per Ophelia’s directions.

“It can’t be too bad, Zig Zag,” Ophelia decided, based on this remote-inspection.

“He’s talking to an imaginary person. I saw him do it,” Zig lamented.

James heard the mounting dread in that sentence. Zig was certainly getting more worried as she said it.

“Since when, James?” That was the slightly screeching voice from Ophelia again.

“I don’t know, let’s see, well when Zig drove out to find me was the first time actually.”

“Max hit you that day!”

“No, more like he battered me into the floor.”

“I would need to make a scan, Zig Zag. I can fit you in at ten tomorrow, is that all right?”

“No it’s not! We can’t afford that!”

“Don’t you worry about that, James. I can fix something up with the budget for Stephan.”

“Oh,” he said, “OK then.”

“At ten?” Zig asked unhappily.

“What’s the next opportunity?” she pressed.

“I’m off for a convention in LA, then on to Paris and ... let me see... about two weeks. I prefer to see James tomorrow; I really can’t

shift the other visitations. And mind you, I still will have to do the interpretation while you're there so it'll take an hour at least."

"Drat," Zig said softly to the floor.

"Sorry?"

"We'll be there, Ophelia. Thank you so much."

"Watch that man Zig Zag, too fine to lose."

"I'm all with you there, believe you me!"

"See you then, good night."

The phone went dark.

"What's the matter? Ten is great, we can drop Stephan off before!"

"I was going to get Petra to the hospital! It'll be very difficult if I'm not there."

"The others can...", James started but noted her crestfallen face, "wait a minute... you were going to do that alone, weren't you?"

"I told her I'd bring her a surprise, at her home. Yes, alone."

"But you said everyone was backing you?"

"I lied, no one knows."

"Why lie to me? About that?"

"I knew you wouldn't approve."

Not approve? Of trying to save a life? "Tell you what, if this all turns out to be no big deal, I'll help you."

"That's sweet, but you know there is something wrong with your head. Literally I mean."

James said nothing.

"How's Petra, actually?"

"She's fine, she thinks. Timebomb... tick-tick."

"I don't get it, how can one be so ill without feeling it?"

"Look who's talking, I'd say."

"There is nothing wrong with me."

"I really, really hope so. Right now, I'm going to mail around for a bit to make sure tomorrow's shooting is not wasted."

"Super, I'm going to get some pills."

James got up again, and almost fell over, again. This time he grabbed the railing of the stairs.

"Someone stop the room, please."

"Here, let me help you." Zig supported him. Guided by his wife, who was still naked, they arrived in the kitchen where he took the pills. Then she brought him to bed. She had tucked a tablet under her arm on the way there and sat upright next to him, composing some mails to have work in order, tapping the tablet in quick short motions.

"Right, this should do it," she announced satisfied.

The next morning, ten sharp, they were at the expensive looking private hospital outside the city, where Ophelia worked. This place called up some bad memories. Two years before, James had been there with acute amnesia brought on by a hard hit onto the coffee table while he'd fallen backwards. Chance had brought them to this hospital then, and now they were here again. Again for 'trouble in the head' as Zig Zag had said a few times. He liked her for seeing the funny side of it still. She had an unbeatable spirit. Most people would get their opinion on Zig fixed at the moment they saw her, or heard of her work at the adult movie studio. But below that thin exterior was the finest person he'd ever met.

At five past ten, they walked into the department of head-related injuries where they met up with Ophelia. She'd prepared the scanner already and the technician was at the buttons, when they entered the room.

"Come on, in you go, chop chop," Ophelia said.

James was quickly placed on the sliding stage, his head fixed, and the machine started pulling him through. In a minute he was outside again. Ophelia was pointing at various points in the slices of his head.

"It is as I feared, James. Here, look." she pointed at a small white spot.

Both James and Zig stood fidgeting and after this remark James felt Zig's paw on his back. He put his paw around her, for support. Ophelia's remark could only mean the worst. She went on, nearly oblivious to them while she peered at the images.

"Something hit the original wound. Luckily, it's already beginning to recede. You can easily see that in the surrounding tissue. Look, if I zoom in a little...ah too far."

A bulb on a wire appeared in the view. James felt already a little less fearful because of the ease that the thick furred lady who was leaning on the scanner console radiated.

"What're those?"

"Axons, yes, great resolution nowadays, don't you think so?"

"I'm lost," James said.

"Me too," Zig added.

Ophelia spoke with the operator for a moment and then waved to them to follow. They sat in her office and she showed a three dimensional image of James' head.

"Here," she pointed into the image, "you hit the coffee table. Trust me, it is a clear mark of the geometry of that table too."

"And?" they said nearly in unison, still in the dark.

"This is the place you've been hit, right next to it."

"And?"

"It's a swelling, it'll go away. I think the effects are temporary. James, that virtual person, does he or she look like anyone familiar?"

"Why do you ask?"

"It's customary that such persons are the result of people you saw or met. Your brain conceives them from a certain ideal figure, using bits and pieces of familiar images."

"You're saying I want to be an old shaman coyote bum?"

"If that's what this person looks like, there are undoubtedly aspects in that character which you will find good or correct. I'd say you're lucky this is only one image. It would be interesting to investigate this further, James, but I simply haven't the time."

“If you feel like doing another article about me, you’re welcome,” James offered.

“That’s very generous of you, James! Mind you, I might want to keep you to that offer. For now, don’t get too worked up and you’ll soon be your old self again.”

“Thank you, Ophelia,” Zig said.

James thanked her as well. The ruffed lemur lady had been right: one hour. He got the feeling of dealing with an exceptionally organized person.

“Anything for you, Zig Zag,” Ophelia said and winked.

“I might want to accept that offer too, Ophelia,” Zig said, as they left.

Once they were driving, James asked her what all that winking was about.

“She’s an accomplished doctor, and she still thinks I’m doing a hell of a job. Where do you find such people, eh? She’s a regular customer too.”

“And how is this connected to a wink?”

“I once said I might visit her, for some frolicking.”

“Is that what it’s called nowadays? ‘Frolicking’?”

“In any case, this was her way of inviting me, once more,” Zig spoke carefree, then added in a more concerned tone, “I recall you said you were okay with that?”

“With her? Whatever takes your fancy, Zig. I’m just glad you at least understand all the winking, Zig. Comparatively, I think males would just say what they mean.”

“I think so too, that is why you can make them do all kinds of nice tricks. You realize Ophelia would not mind at all if I brought you along?”

James felt too much scrutinized, so he switched the subject.

“So, how about that Petra?”

“Good point, we’ll visit her anyway, since you’re sort of going along with my idea.”

Half an hour later, Zig pushed the bell again, her jaw set with determination.

“I don’t get it, she promised to be home.”

“Are you sure that bell is working?”

“Beats me.”

The door opened and a young male rabbit prepared to walk out.

“Can I help you?” he offered, looking them over, reserved.

“We’re looking for Petra.”

“Ah, the Polish cat? She’s ill.”

“Ill? Can’t you let us in?”

“Um, I’d rather not. How can I be sure you know Petra?”

“You know her, then? Being so protective?”

“I’m her next door neighbor, and I think she might be consorting with the wrong kind.”

Zig described her quickly and the rabbit took them to her, satisfied of their good intentions.

“Petra?” the rabbit knocked at her door.

“Strange, this. I’m sure she’s home,” he said for no reason.

After a while, the door opened. It was Petra, in jogging pants and t-shirt. She was sweating.

“Oh Zig, I’m sorry. The bell doesn’t work. Forgot to tell you.”

She walked to a chair in her little, smelly, apartment. Kitchenette, bed and couch in one room. There hung a strange sweaty smell to complement the food odors.

“I’m not too well, I’ve got pain all over.”

“I could drive you to a doctor?” James offered after he’d introduced himself to her, assuming she’d not remember him.

“You would? I think I’d like that, I can’t lift a finger without feeling my muscles. It doesn’t make sense. I’ve never been so down.”

Zig said nothing, she was just listening and nodding softly with large eyes full of hope.

“Come, Petra, give me a paw and I’ll escort you to our truck. Zig will drive us.”

It took a lot of time for Petra to shuffle down the stairs and climb into the car. Zig was fretting all the time. She wanted to carry her to the car and get going. But James recognized the strong-headed appearance of Petra and kept her at bay.

Once they were driving, Zig took no more than minute notice of road-signs and speed-markings. All in all they reached city central hospital in under ten minutes. James, holding on for dear life, deemed the reckless driving unfit for discussion, lest he defer her attention from driving.

In the hospital Petra simply collapsed on the floor, unconscious, while they were waiting in the emergency room. Zig provided all the details she’d collected on Petra’s health and from there action was swift. An hour later they stood outside a room with Petra, still unconscious, with drips from various evil looking, colored and silver foiled bags. An intern was explaining to them what her chances were. He seemed quite positive actually.

“It’s a very fast growing sort. And well known. Despite the stage this is in, I believe there is still a chance she’ll survive. Why did you wait so long to bring her in? She must have felt terrible for weeks!”

“A chance...” Zig said wistfully, having heard only half the explanation.

She held James’ paw in hers. The intern interpreted this as a call for numbers.

“About ten percent, best guess.”

“Thank you...” Zig’s voice trailed off.

The intern nodded, recognizing that no more information was going to be conveyed anyway, and left.

“You did what you could, Zig.”

“Did I?”

“You go far beyond the requirements any boss has over their employees.”

“It doesn’t seem to bring much, does it?”

“Do you ever ask them, what they think of you?”

“You say that so often, James, and you know the answer.”

“Even Darke has a soft spot for you, Zig. I’d call that pretty special.”

“Hmm,” she leaned her head on his shoulder, her arm around him.

“Come, I’ll get you to the studio and pick you up when Stephan’s school is out. I’m sure you will be better off trying to do anything there rather than go sit at home, moping.”

“I’d like that.”

They walked away from the intensive care unit. As they left the elevator, she stopped him.

“James? How’s your head?”

“Good, actually. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t think I’ve really apologized for not believing you. I feel bad about that.”

“Don’t Zig, you’ve got enough to worry about.”

They resumed their course.

“It’s just that, you know, I sort of assumed you were, well, dishonest. I shouldn’t have.”

“Come on girl, you know me: let bygones be bygones. We live now, let history roam where it should: in the past.”

“And you know me: I can’t let such things lie.”

“True. So?”

“I’ll think of something, you’ll see.”

“To me, that sounds like a pampering session is about to commence,” he said, feigning indifference.

“Maybe,” Zig concluded.

They reached the truck and she got into the driver’s seat.

“I’ll drive, I’m feeling quite all right,” he announced.

Zig threw him the keys and moved over.

“Destination ZZ Studios.”

“James, I will keep my place behind the camera from now on.”

“I hope so, I couldn’t stand another row about your looks.”

“Hey! I didn’t start that! That guy didn’t have to call my behind wrinkled. What was I supposed to say, uh?”

James smirked. She sounded really like her normal self, again. He wanted to say “Nothing, show your intelligence and wisdom,” but somehow he didn’t feel like that. He felt happy. So he said, “You know, Zig, I love you.”

Zig continued as if he really had spoken his mind, clearly anticipating it, rebuking him with, “Is that so? And I ... what did you say?”

James laughed out loud. Of course she would have her reply ready without paying attention. She could be a bit too quick on the draw really.

“Ha, ha, I...”, he started, but he could not finish.

She was all over him, kissing and fondling.