

The Tale of a Tigress

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You are in a busy, crowded shopping mall, one of those with two separate levels and a large food court in the center, with a group of friends who have never heard of anthropomorphic beings before. You are walking along the upper level when you hear some commotion in the food court area. Being curious, as many people would be, you try to get to the guardrail to look down at the gathering crowd, but still you cannot see what is happening. Quickly, you make your way to the escalator, where, on your way down to the lower level, you see a figure, lonely and misplaced, at the center of the crowd, being gawked at by everyone who can see the figure. Shoving, you finally manage to make your way to the inner area of the crowd where a clearing of about ten feet or so across has formed with the figure at the center. You look over the figure, realizing that it is a female, dressed in an old pair of blue jeans, no shoes, and one of those elastic-looking tank-tops that hugs the upper chest, has very short sleeves and doesn't go all the way down to the waistline but ends just a few inches below the breast line. As your gaze trails down to her feet, you spot a striped tail wound tightly about her ankle, as if to hide it out of shame. Her feet, shoeless, are covered with a fine coat of orange fur and a black-gray stripe can be seen protruding from the cuff of one pants leg. As you look at the figure again, you realize that, from what you can see, her whole body is covered in this orange and black striped fur, except for what you can see of her chest between the bottom of her top and the waistline of her pants, where the orange and black fur gently fades into a finer-looking white, creamy color. Looking at the figure's face, you can see that, here, her fur is also orange with small strips of black along her outer cheeks with the fine white fur along the underside of her chin, going down her neck, and probably meeting with the white fur that covers the lower portion of her chest. Her face, itself, slightly resembles that of a human's but a feline nose is on the end of her muzzle, clearly stating that she is *not* human. Her ears also appear to be feline and pointed but her golden-blond hair, flowing from between them down to just beyond her shoulders, couldn't be anything *but* human, and her deep, blue eyes are not catlike but also appear to be human. The figure appears to be a tiger but has the form and body shape of a young woman of the age of twenty to twenty-three. There is no possible way that this could simply be someone dressed in a costume, you decide. She stands there, obviously nervous and frightened, in a stance that clearly shows her discomfort with her current situation, as she looks around, unsure of what to do.

Your friends shove their ways through the still-growing crowd to join you and begin making comments about the figure, but your mind is too far off to concentrate on what they are saying. You are debating with yourself what you should do. 'Should I go out to the figure to comfort her, ignoring all that is around me? Should I stay where I am so I don't humiliate myself in front of I friends and whoever else might be watching? Or should I try to contact mall security and let them deal with her?'

You settle with your first option of comforting the female fur. As you swallow your pride and take the first few steps out from the crowd and into the clearing around the figure, you can feel the crowd's attention focusing on you as the constant murmuring dies down to a hush. It probably would have been easier to stay with your friends, but it's too

late for that now, and besides, your curiosity has taken a firm grip on you, pushing you forward.

When you reach the figure, she is looking down at her feet, her feeling of shame quite evident from her posture. Her tail seems to tighten ever so slightly about her leg, as if to, once again, hide it from you and the crowd, as you come closer to her. Her paws (hands; they appear to be the exact shape and size of a human's but covered in a thin coat of orange fur with strips of black about her wrists) move upward to cover her muzzle, hiding it from view.

Standing before the lonely figure, you slowly and gently place your hand upon her shoulder, but, in a feeble attempt to hide, she turns away from you. You calmly walk around her to stand in front of her once more. Again, you place your hand upon her shoulder, offering her comfort. She slowly looks up at you, still shielding her muzzle. Looking into her sapphire eyes, you can tell that she has been crying to herself, the tears leaving furrows in her fine cheek fur. Not sure of what to do next, you take a careful grip on her wrist with your other hand and gently move her paw away from her muzzle before doing the same with her other paw. A faint, sad, frightened whine escapes her lips as another tear rolls down her cheek as she looks into your eyes, searching for something to comfort her. Her gaze drifts back down to her feet and, with her jaw trembling slightly, she sighs, finding little comfort in the fact that someone has come from the crowd of those who seem to have rejected her. It is as if she has simply given up and is resigning herself to her fate, whatever she thinks that may be. Gently, still holding onto her shoulder with one hand, you use your other hand to lift her chin back up so that she is looking into your eyes again. Trying to show her that you mean her no harm, you smile comfortingly at her. For a split-second, her lips part and she looks at you with an expression of curiosity and awe, before allowing hope to fill her eyes. Her tail, still wound around her ankle, loosens its grip, signifying that she, to some extent, trusts you.

You look back at your friends and to the rest of the crowd who rejected the fur, receiving shocked expressions from your peers and looks of amazement, surprise, and disgust, along with a few cruel remarks, from the gathered crowd. Ignoring the looks and comments, you turn back to the fur, gently taking her paw in your hand and slowly motioning for her to follow you. She cocks her head in silent question but follows you anyway, unwinding her tail from her ankle, but still being cautious of you. As you guide her away from the center of the clearing, the dense crowd gives way and forms an unnecessarily wide path for you and the tigress, indicating that they are still either somewhat afraid or unsure of her.

As you lead her through the thinning crowd, you both receive bizarre stares and she continues to follow you, but only at a distance and still glances around her every few seconds to satisfy herself with her proximity to everyone else. It is obvious that she does not trust you completely, but trusts you more than anyone else in the gawking crowd. Once you have led her to the outer edge of the crowd, you turn to face her, looking into her eyes, once again, placing your hand upon her shoulder reassuringly. She looks at you again, before taking another glance around her. You follow the direction of her gaze as it

sweeps and stops once, twice, and a third time on one of the many restaurant booths before moving on. Standing beside her, again noting the hushed murmur of voices from the other end of the mall, you lean close to her. She takes a cautious step away from you, but when you move toward her again, she does not shy away. You lean closer to her ear and whisper to her, asking her if she is hungry, to which she responds by taking another step away, looking back at you, and then taking one step toward the booth upon which her gaze had fallen so many times before.

Taking the hint, you walk a few steps ahead of the tigress before turning back to her and calmly motioning for her to follow, which she does but still at her previous distance. Upon reaching the counter of the booth, you wave your hand in front of the dumbfounded clerk's face, snapping him out of his overwhelmed state. After looking back at the tigress who is standing only three feet behind you, still searching the crowd for any sign of danger to her, you order a sandwich for yourself and something that you hope will appeal to the female fur from the stuttering clerk who is taking every chance he can get to look over your shoulder at the femme. You finish purchasing your meals and turn to the tigress, who has her back to you. You tap her on the back and, with the swift, fluid motions that one would expect from a feline, she jerks away from you, turning in surprise. Upon seeing that it is only you and not some kind of threat to her, she looks around you to see the bag of freshly baked food in your hand. She ever so slightly tilts her nose up and sniffs at the air and then fixes her gaze on you once more. You nod to the tigress before turning around again and leading her to a table that isn't occupied by someone who has stopped to stare in mid-chew. As she approaches the table, you pull out a chair for her, which she slowly sinks into, all the while peering at you from over her shoulder. You are surprised to feel something brush across your leg but relax again when you look down to see that it's only her striped tail as she wraps it midway about her waist to let it coil up in her lap, the white tip twitching every so often. With an unusually loud sniff, she pulls you from your train of thought and glares at you for a second, before allowing her facial features to soften again. Remembering what you were doing, you slide over to the opposite side of the circular table and, after pulling out a chair for yourself, proceed to sit down and open the bag. You take out her meal and your sandwich, unwrap them both, say a short blessing in your mind, and lightly push her meal in front of her. After taking a bite of your sandwich, you look at the fur before you again, but instead of seeing her eating, you see her still sitting there, watching you with her ears erect, flicking to all directions, trying to focus on all the sounds in the area. You place your sandwich back down on its former wrapper and lean part way across the table to place the palm of your hand gently on the back of her paw, which she is now resting on the table, in a reassuring, comforting gesture. She looks down at your hand on her paw, and, instead of pulling it away like you expect, looks back up at you again and for the first time, smiles at you, her eyes filled with hope and her face temporarily losing its cautious, sharp appearance to take on a softer look. You smile back at her, glad that she is finally beginning to see that you do not intend to hurt her, and motion toward the food before her. Finally, as you begin to retract your hand from her paw, the tigress takes the food and begins to eat.

By now your friends have regained control of themselves and are heading over to where you and the tigress sit, still the focus of everyone else's attention. The tigress, across from you, senses their decreasing proximity and shuffles uncomfortably in her chair and gives you a questioning look when her gaze meets yours. Your friends stop a few paces away from the table, all staring curiously at the nervous femme. She stops eating and cocks her head, looking at you when you rise up to greet the small group. You easily walk over to them and tell them calmly not to be afraid and to relax, which they do, but only slightly. Bringing them closer to the table and the nervous fur, you notice that she is gradually sliding around the table to where you were previously sitting, her tail still coiled tightly in her lap. The tigress obviously still does not trust anyone else. Your friends uneasily sit down across the table from her and you notice that the black and orange fur on her lower back and neck has perked up, but, as you settle into the seat beside her, she looks at you again, searching for reassurance in your eyes, and her fur begins to lay flat again. After receiving a nod and a smile from you, she is satisfied and turns her attention back to the small group ahead of her before taking a quick glance at her unfinished meal at the other side of the table. Following the femme's glance, the young woman in your group gently pushes the meal toward the tigress, who begins to become uneasy once again when the woman's hand comes close to her. However, the tigress calms down once more when you cover her paw with your hand, indicating to her that she should not be scared. She slowly and cautiously reaches out with her paw to take hold of the wrapper on which her meal is sitting, but quickly pulls her paw back when one of the guys in the group flinches for some uncertain reason, probably from being kicked by someone else under the table. After glaring at him and getting his sheepish grin in response, you rub your thumb over the back of the femme's paw, whispering for her to go ahead. Once again, she cautiously reaches out for the wrapper before pulling it, and her meal, back to her, allowing the slightest of grins to form on her muzzle.

As the tigress silently begins to eat again, her ears, once again, become erect and twitch in the direction of your friends' voices as they ask you questions about what is going on. You try your best to concentrate on their questions and answer each briefly before another can be asked. They continue to bombard you with questions about the tigress until, suddenly, you thrust your hands out in front of them, cutting them all off at once. To this, the femme beside you jumps in her seat before realizing that the gesture was simply one to quiet those before her, not an attempt to threaten her. Irritated by their rush, you ask one of the group members what his question is. He responds with the simple question of, "How do you know this...creature?" To answer him, you say that you never knew *her* before; you're just trying to do what you think is right. The woman then asks you, "Where did she come from? I mean, what happened to her? Has she always been like this... or is... was she human?" You think about this, realizing that you cannot give her an answer; all you can tell your friends is that only the femme, herself, can answer that question, but you nor they are going to press the issue unless she is comfortable with telling you or them of her origin. Upon finishing her meal, with a gentle push, the tigress moves the empty, crumb-less wrapper away from her and, placing her paws over her tail in her lap, looks humbly down at the table before her. Again, it is as if she expects to be punished for an unknown reason, like a servant or slave who has disobeyed her master and awaits her fate. In an attempt to comfort her, you brush your

hand over her shoulder, causing her to lift her head back up, looking at you with sad eyes, before lowering her gaze again. You give her shoulder a gentle squeeze before removing your hand and hearing one of your friends say that they are going to leave and that they might meet up with you later.

As your friends walk away, you stand up and look down at the fur who is still staring at the table in front of her. You get her attention by tapping her on the arm, to which she looks up at you before rising to stand beside you, her tail uncoiling itself as she does so. You put your hand on her shoulder, signalling to her that you are now leaving. After walking ten feet or so, you look back to see the tigress, still standing there where you left her, unsure of what is happening and looking around nervously. It becomes obvious that she has not correctly understood you, so you take a couple steps back in her direction and raise an open hand to her and smile cheerfully at her. Seeing that you are not abandoning her, she quickly trots to your side, her tail no longer tied about her ankle but swaying joyfully behind her. As you guide her to the escalator, the crowd continues to back away when you both come near. Once again, the femme is anxiously looking about her, but you notice that she is now walking closer to you than earlier. ‘Maybe my attempts to comfort her *have* been successful; maybe she feels safe with me close to her,’ you think to yourself. As the tigress is glancing around behind her, you both step onto the moving escalator, causing her to suddenly lose her balance and gasp, her face contorting into a gritted-teeth, wide-eyed expression as she claws at the handrail, terrified. You quickly swing your arm behind her in time to catch her before she can fall, as a few spectators in the crowd give short, quick laughs. With her hair hiding her face, she looks down, away from the laughter, tears forming in her sapphire eyes. You gently place a caring hand on her back, causing her to lift her head again, before you raise your other hand to the crowd, one finger extended upward, directing a rather impolite gesture at one of those who is still laughing. The man stops laughing and looks up at you, sneering. You turn back to the tigress and carefully tend to her, dabbing the tears from her eyes and brushing the stray strands of blonde hair away from her face. She looks back at you, a confused, questioning expression forming on her face, as if to ask, ‘why do you care?’ You simply smile at her and rub her hair down flat again before helping her off the escalator as you both arrive at the top. With the femme walking alongside you, you begin the journey back to the entrance of the mall. As the two of you walk, you are surprised to feel the tigress slip her warm, furred paw into your hand, clasping it with hers. You turn your head to look at her, seeing the slightest of grins on her muzzle. The voices of all those you pass fall silent as they see you and the tigress walking by, her orange and black striped tail swishing hypnotically with each step.

As you and the fur walk side-by-side, paw in hand, you think about the question the woman from your group had asked. You begin to ponder on how the femme could have become the way she is now, other questions forming from your current train of thought, churning in your mind. ‘How *did* she become this way? *Was* she once entirely human? Why hasn’t she said anything? Can she even speak?’ These questions lead to others, ‘What does she think of me?’ you ask yourself. As you are lost in thought, oblivious to all but the tigress beside you and the path ahead of you, a dull, yet lasting, pain shoots through your back, just to the right of your spine. A wave of confusion crashes over you

as your body is flung forward, snapping your head back as you fall to the thinly carpeted floor. Only then do you realize that the femme's paw is no longer in your hand, and you roll over in time to see your attacker backhand her across her face, sending her sprawling to the side with a sharp, painful cry. As your mind reels dizzily, the attacker turns back to you, approaching slowly, and you recognize him as the man from the crowd in the food court, the one who had kept laughing, the one whom you had directed the gesture at and had sneered back at you. While trying to stand up once more, you are struck again, this time in the side of the head, as your raging, anger-filled attacker delivers yet another blow, sending you, once again, to the floor. As your mind clears, you watch him continue his advance, waiting for him to come closer before agilely swinging one leg beneath him, catching his ankles and knocking his legs out from under him, bringing him crashing to the floor. You take this opportunity to climb to your feet and dash to the fur's side, seeing a thin line of bright red blood seeping from the corner of her mouth. After ripping a handkerchief from your pants pocket, you carefully lift her head up and wipe her blood away as she stares up at you absently with glass-like eyes. She then attempts to stand up again while you support her, but loses her balance and falls on her side, her tail caught beneath her, when a powerful kick to your side sends you sliding several feet and then rolling a few more across the floor. Upon returning to your feet, the pain in your side still throbbing, you are filled with an unrivalled, uncontrollable rage as you see the man approaching the tigress, who is still lying on her side on the floor, fresh blood dripping from a gash in her left forearm from where she fell into the sharp corner of the railing. With an enraged shout, you charge at the man's back, swinging your arm forward, landing a tightly clenched fist just below his left shoulder blade. Grunting, the attacker's pace falters and he stumbles forward before swiftly turning about again, swinging his pile-driver-fist at you. Instinctively, you raise your hand to catch his oncoming punch and, as he swings his other fist down toward your gut, your instincts take over once more, bringing your other hand down to catch that fist as well. Having caught the man's hands, rendering them useless until either of you gives way, you lean all your weight toward the man, forcing him to step backwards before applying all his weight in your direction. Your attacker, being obviously more powerful than you, as well as weighing more, begins to slowly force you back, causing your shoes to grind against the carpet while you strive to hold your ground. Looking up into the man's face, you sneer and grit your teeth at him before lowering your head again, tightly clamping your eyes shut, and making one last, desperate attempt to topple the man, pouring all your reserve energy and strength into your struggle. Suddenly, the man screams and stumbles backward. Confused, your eyes fly open as you stumble forward after the man but regain your balance before falling into him as his legs collapse beneath his own weight. As he falls, you are surprised to see the tigress standing, with somewhat of a limp, behind him, shreds of his now slightly bloodied shirt hanging from her claws, which, until now, have been hidden beneath the light orange fur of her fingertips. She breathes deeply, on the verge of collapsing, and slumps back against the guardrail, closing her eyes and tilting her head downward as you notice her blood matting down the fur on her arm. After the man uprights himself again, seeing that the femme is in no state to offer any resistance against another attack, he stalks toward her with his eyes slitted and teeth bared. Smiling deviously to himself, he raises and pulls back a clenched fist, preparing to deliver what could be a fatal blow to the now defenseless fur. However, before he can further injure

the femme, you grab him by the shoulder, swinging him around to face you, and punch him heavily in the jaw with all the force you can gather, leaving dull red marks on his flesh where your knuckles made contact with it. The attacker's eyes roll upward and he slumps to the floor, unconscious.

As the tigress reopens her eyes, breathing heavily, she lifts her head to look at you. You hold out your hand to help her up, which she takes in her right paw, her left paw clinging lightly to her right shoulder, the bright red blood contrasting with her orange and black striped fur. As you pull the femme back to her feet, her ears swivel toward the direction of loudening footsteps, and you both turn to see a pair of security guards running toward you, quickly closing in on you and the tigress.

Turning back to you, the female fur gives you a pleading look as the security guards draw closer. After giving her a faint smile, you shed the coat from your back and whisper into her ear to stay calm and quiet before throwing the coat over her head as she loosely winds her tail about her leg in an attempt to hide it. You then walk toward the lead guard, getting his attention as his running slows to a brisk walking pace. When he asks you who is under your coat you inform him that it is just your sister and that he is welcome to check her. As he walks past you, toward the hidden, bundled up tigress, you call to him, telling him that she does, however, have a very highly contagious illness that isn't easy to cure. You explain to him that you were taking her home when this drunkard lying before the guard attacked you and your sister, forcing you to defend her and yourself. You also mention that the drug needed to suppress the illness and her current coughing fits is back at your apartment. Upon hearing that the illness is highly contagious, the guard abruptly stops his advance toward the tigress and you walk past him to stand in front of and to the side of her. After glancing over your shoulder, taking a final look at the coat draped over the tigress' head, the guard hooks a thumb up over his shoulder and tells you to get her home and to keep her there until she's well. With a sigh of relief, you gently take hold of the femme's right arm and carefully guide her past both guards, keeping yourself between them and the fur so they cannot see her tail. Walking onward, you glance back at the two guards to see them both leaning over the unconscious attacker, baffled expressions on their faces as they examine the parallel claw marks trailing diagonally down his back.

Finally, you lead the covered up tigress out of the mall through its main entrance and then over to the side, out of the way of everyone else, before removing the coat from her head and smiling at her. After a few moments, you ask her if she needs a ride home, to which she responds by sighing softly and lowering her head, looking downward. Seeing her evident sadness, you lean close to her and quietly tell her, in a gentle voice, that she is welcome to stay with you if she wishes to. She looks back up at you with a glimmer in her eyes and a faint smile on her face. After lightly patting her on the back, you lead her to your car where you open the passenger-side-door for her. She leans into the car, poking her head in cautiously as she holds her tail out behind her, using it to keep her balance. After she slowly climbs in, still somewhat unsure about the idea of going home with you, you carefully close her door, keeping an eye on her tail, and walk around to your own side before getting in. You lean across her and open the glove compartment in front of her to pull out a first aid kit. Upon seeing the knife, scissors, and other sharp

objects in the kit when you open it, the tigress jumps slightly in her seat but complies when you softly but firmly tell her to give you her left arm. As you rub an alcohol-soaked cloth over the wound, you can hear a soft sigh escape her lips and you look up to see that she has clenched her eyes shut tightly. After rubbing some ointment onto the now sterilized gash in her arm, you proceed to wrap a long, fabric bandage firmly around her forearm and the wound before brushing her shoulder, causing her to open her eyes and examine her wounded arm and its new dressing. When she looks at you again, you smile back at her, catching the gratitude in her deep blue eyes. Then, as you start the car, you are surprised to see that she does not jump or seem uneasy when it springs to life; instead, she merely sits back with her eyes half open and watches the road before the car as you drive out of and away from the parking lot.

As you drive down the road, all is quiet, save for the faint, soft hum of the engine. Arriving at a traffic light, you pull up behind a stopped minivan in which two young children, probably about six or seven years old you guess, are sitting in the very back seat. You watch them attentively as the girl turns around to look behind her before grabbing her brother, making him turn around as well. Suddenly, a wide grin forms across his face and they both begin to smile and laugh joyfully, waving with incontrollable excitement. Concerned, you turn your head to look over at the tigress, only to see a gentle smile sweep across her muzzle. As you continue to watch her, she slowly lifts her right paw over the dashboard and calmly waves at the children in the minivan who appear to begin talking to each other excitedly before frantically waving back at the two of you. Smiling, you absently make a brief comment about how the children's parents are never going to believe them when they talk about this. Hearing this, the femme relaxing beside you lets out a soft hiss-like chuckle as the traffic light changes to green and the minivan pulls away. You reach over to rest your hand upon her knee, giving it a gentle pat and a rub through the denim material of her jeans. In response, she wearily turns her head to you, smiling faintly.

Upon reaching your apartment, you swing open your car door and jump out before closing it again and running to the female fur's side to open her door for her. You extend your hand to her, which she takes, and help pull her up and out of the car. You watch her tail, being careful not to accidentally close the door on it, as she walks a couple of steps away, looking downward with her arms crossed over her chest, her paws holding onto her elbows, as if deep in thought. As you tap her shoulder lightly, she looks back up again before following you to the entrance of the apartment complex. After guiding her up three flights of stairs, the tigress constantly looking around her for any signs of danger, you come to the door of your apartment, which you unlock and open before stepping back so that the femme may enter. However, instead of walking in, she continues standing there cautiously. You suddenly realize that she is still unsure about this and is only being cautious. Strolling past her and into the apartment, you glance around it, making sure she sees you doing so as you go in. After walking through all the other rooms and checking the insides of the closets, looking for anything unusual, and feeling a bit silly while doing it, you step back into her line of sight and gently tell her that it is safe, motioning for her to come in. She stands there for a moment more, as if in silent debate, before finally entering, closing the door behind her and fumbling with the lock

until it clicks. You tell the femme to make herself comfortable as she stands in the center of the room, and, after staying there for another few seconds, inspecting her new surroundings, she walks over to the sofa facing away from the kitchen area where you are standing, and lightly pushes against the cushions, as if to see how soft they are. You watch her curiously as she eventually turns and sits down on the sofa, tucking her legs up underneath her while draping her tail over its arm, and, after spotting a few pieces of blue ribbon on the coffee table before her, picks them up and proceeds to bundle her hair together into a long, flowing ponytail, tying the ribbons around it every few inches. After witnessing how quick and nimble the tigress is with her fingers, you head off to finish the chores that you had left from earlier in the morning.

Nearly an hour and a half later, you stroll back into the main room of your apartment, surprised to see the femme still sitting on the sofa in the same position in which you left her. As you walk in, her ears pivot in your direction to focus on you but she does not turn around, and, after gazing at her for a few moments, you slowly walk around the sofa before settling down into the armchair across from her. The tigress lifts her gaze to meet yours and you smile back at her in return. Leaning forward you stare at her as she watches you, a fair amount of curiosity and fear in her eyes. After sitting there, watching her for a couple more minutes, you finally break the silence by asking her, in a gentle and caring voice, if she is feeling any better now. Startled by your sudden question, she jumps slightly but quickly calms once more as she realizes what you have just asked her, and, with a faint smile, nods her heads slowly. You then ask her if she can speak, to which the femme responds by carefully opening her mouth and quietly saying, in a barely audible voice, what you believe to be a “yes,” before dropping her gaze to the coffee table in front of her again. Upon hearing that she *can* speak, you tell her that it’s okay for her to talk to you, that you won’t allow any harm to come to her. She looks back up at you again, a solitary tear rolling down through her cheek fur, and slowly, as if trying to correctly pronounce each word, says, “I can’t...speak...well... My...voice was...made...wrong.” Her English is somewhat labored with small growls that can be roughly heard as she tries to speak, yet her voice is soft and delicate, giving you the impression of her frailty and insecurity. Seeing your puzzled expression, she lowers her head again and you can hear her sobbing to herself, more tears seeping out through her clamped eyelids. Getting up from your chair and quickly hopping over the coffee table between you and the tigress, you sit down on its edge and place your hand beneath the femme’s chin, gently lifting her head up once more. As she opens her eyes, you take a fresh handkerchief from your pants pocket and begin to dab away her tears, still holding her head up, level with yours. While doing this, you explain to her that you think there is nothing wrong with her voice, you were simply surprised to hear her speak such fluent English, and, if anything, it sounds rather appealing. Her sobs cease and she looks deeply into your eyes before smiling as you rest your hand over one of her paws in her lap, which she turns palm up to grasp your comforting hand.

After sitting there for a couple more minutes, watching each other, it is the femme’s turn to break the silence as she asks you, “Why...Why have you been so good to me...? Why do you care?” Her quiet growls are now seemingly fainter than when she first spoke. Hesitating a bit, you try to explain to the tigress that when you first laid eyes upon her,

instead of seeing someone who was different from you and everyone else, which is how the rest of the crowd looked upon her and which is why they isolated her, you saw someone in need; someone who had been rejected by the rest of the world. When you first saw her, alone at the center of the staring crowd, you felt a great, overwhelming amount of sympathy for her and simply wanted to comfort her. As you attempt to explain this to her, she smiles at you again, her eyes filled with a deep gratitude, the tip of her tail gently brushing over the top of your hand as she begins to relax more, the slightest sounds of purrs coming from within her throat.

Suddenly remembering something she had just said, you blurt out a question, asking the femme what she had meant by her “voice was *made* wrong”? The tigress’ expression quickly changes from one of joy to one of sadness as she unwinds her paw from your hand, placing it in her lap, and sighs, tilting her head downward and looking away sadly. Realizing your mistake, you quickly try to make up for it by gently but firmly telling her that it is not necessary for her to explain herself if she does not wish to. Still looking at her paws in her lap, she joylessly says that there is no harm in telling you her story; that you have been so kind to her and it is the least she can do in return. Hearing this, you carefully raise your hand to her shoulder, placing it there, trying, once again, to comfort her. She responds by looking up at you briefly before tilting her head downward again, and closing her eyes gently, as if in deep thought.

Sitting before you, the tigress begins to tell you about herself and her origin, starting by saying, “I... I was not born the way you were... I was made.” Continuing, the humble femme opens her eyes once more and begins to explain to you how she came to be, as you listen attentively. “I am a failure... I was the result of a failed military experiment... I was to be the first of a new type of ‘Predatory Soldier’, a soldier that would sacrifice itself at the will of its commanders and display the utmost loyalty to them. By combining the DNA of a human with that of one of the fiercest known predators, the tiger, it was hoped that a creature of incredible speed, agility, power, and cunning would be spawned. Instead, they got me...” The tigress before you, her voice taking on a choked, growling sound, hesitates for a moment to sadly laugh to herself, but you notice a single tear forming in the corner of her eye. “The scientists were like a family to me, seeing to my well-being, providing me with clothing and food and shelter, and giving me all the help I thought I would ever need. They told me about their lives and taught me how to speak fluently, even though they always talked to each other about how my voice didn’t sound right to them; they even took me to an enclosed wooded area so I could see what the world was like outside the research facility that I was kept in. However, they kept trying to get me to hunt in that wooded area... I always thought it was a test to see if their ‘Predatory Soldier’ would be able to survive on its own. They would tell me of the horrors of the outside world, how people would never accept me because of what I am and how some would try to hunt me for sport. But when they weren’t trying to keep my curiosity at bay, they were trying to be the parents I never had.

“I lived in the facility for nearly nineteen years, until the experiment was ‘terminated’ due to my failure to meet their standards. They needed a soldier that didn’t know how to question its superiors and could withstand a physical beating without losing rational

thought and still be able to fight back, and, when a high-ranking supervisor came to inspect the progress of the experiment... about three years ago, it was concluded that I was not the powerful soldier that they were looking for.” Lowering her head, covering her face with her paws, the tigress quietly begins crying, her tears trailing down her arms. As you rub your hand over her back, she tries to continue, “The supervisor had me locked in a crate-filled, maze-like warehouse with a team of attackers. I was *supposed* to be able to evade and defeat each of them without any weapons... Instead, I was hunted down and surrounded before my attackers beat me severely with metal batons. The supervisor, then, instructed them to release me so I could try to run again. Again, my pursuers caught and beat me. This went on for another half hour. I can still remember lying there on the cold concrete floor, in a pool of my own blood, the attack team continually finding new places to hit me with their weapons as the supervisor laughed over the intercom, the scientists... my creators watching, horrified... helpless.” Again, the femme starts to cry into her paws as she relives her past.

“Before he left, the supervisor gathered me and the scientists who had grown to be my family, and expressed to us his ‘extreme’ displeasure with the results of the project... with *me*.” As she says this, the femme’s voice is overcome by growls and barely audible hisses, showing her immense anger. “He said, as the final part of the project, I was to be dissected,” the tigress says in a shaky voice, “...and something about checking other subjects. I’m not sure what he meant by that except that perhaps there were others like me created. The scientists, I know, did not want to destroy me, ...but they could not refuse.

That night, the supervisor came into my room, drunk, and began ranting about one of his superiors. I tried to stay out of his way, but when he saw me, he grabbed a metal floor lamp and started swinging the long, steel pole at me, backing me into a corner as I screamed out for help, but no one came... no one could hear me.” Once again, she hesitates before continuing, “When one of the scientists, the one who had been closest to me, came to check on me later that night, he found me, again beaten and bruised, huddled in the corner. I was barely breathing by this time and he had to connect me to some machine to help me. He stayed with me the rest of the night holding my paw, and I can still remember looking up at him, seeing his concerned face through my blackened eyes.” As you listen to her, you realize that this must be why she is so untrusting of humans, but, as you watch her, a small smile slowly creeps over her muzzle.

“That same scientist... my friend, took me to the enclosed wooded area one last time the day before I was to be killed and dissected. We walked through the forest late that afternoon and he told me how sorry he was that it would have to end this way. He led me to the high stone wall separating us from the outside world. By now I had accepted my fate and I asked him, ‘since I am going to die tomorrow, could you tell me about the outside world... one more time?’ As we walked alongside the wall, he told me about what life for him was like on the outside.” Sighing, the tigress lowers her eyes to gaze at her paws, resting in her lap as her tail twitches slightly. A tear slowly trickles down her cheek but she quickly wipes it away with her paw and snuffles quietly before continuing. “As we neared a tree that was closer to the wall than the rest, he told me that it did not

have to be this way, that I was not a pawn in someone's game. He looked up the tree and I followed his eyes to a thick branch that hung just over the top of the wall. When I began to walk on past the tree, he stopped me and pulled me back, telling me that this would be my only chance to live and that all I would have to do would be to fight him. I didn't understand so I stood there, looking at him. He suddenly grabbed me and shook me before releasing me again, but when I didn't move, he grabbed my shoulder sharply and backhanded me hard across my face. I fell over in shock but he picked me up again by my neck and punched me in my stomach, knocking me over again. When I tried to get up again, he lifted me up and slammed me back against the tree where he dropped me to the ground before turning away. Enraged by his betrayal, I jumped up and leaped onto his back, throwing him to the ground with me still on him. I jumped off him and picked him up, lifting him off the ground by his collar before slashing him deeply across his chest with my claws. He did not scream out and when I looked up at him, he was smiling. I threw him away into a nearby bush and then stalked toward him again. Before I could injure him further, he began pleading with me to stop..." The femme hesitates for a brief second, taking a deep breath. "Something in his voice brought back my rational thought and cooled my temper. Smiling as he looked up at me, he began explaining how he would have to be found there, unconscious, to make it look like he had tried to stop me from escaping but had been knocked out instead. That way, I could live and he would not be punished too harshly for aiding in my escape. He knew that I would not attack him on my own; he would have to provoke me into it. He told me about a small cave hidden by the underbrush far away from the outside of the wall and how to find it. As a true friend, he had planned out my escape and had buried a small supply of food in the back of the cave. As he lay beneath me, bleeding, he pointed up at the branch leading over the wall and told me to go. I started to stand again, but he grabbed my paw, squeezing it gently, and the last thing I heard him say before he lay his head back, unconscious, was, "God's speed... Spirit." Suddenly, the femme begins to cry again, her paws coming up to cover her eyes as her tears, once more, flow down through the fur of her arms. Between sobs, she says, "Until then... no one had ever given me a real name... but with those last words... he gave me one final gift... more than just something to call myself but something I could call my own; something that belonged solely to me; a sense of being more than just an object... Even if it was just a word, it gave me a sense of belonging." She snuffles again and smiles faintly at her memories.

When the tigress', Spirit's, sobs subside and she has wiped away her tears again, she goes on, "I found the cave later that evening just before dusk along with the food packets buried in it. My meal was short and I couldn't concentrate on eating, anyway. I never saw any sign of a search party but I heard dogs barking frequently for the next two and a half weeks that I spent running through the forest. I survived by following streams and eating any berries I could find on the trees and bushes; I tried to catch small animals, but I had no luck with it. One night, I finally came to a tree line bordering a small farm. I spent the rest of that night sleeping under a cold, damp canvas in the back of a pickup truck. When I woke the next morning and peeked out from under the canvas, the truck was stopped in the city amidst what looked like old, run-down buildings. Not wanting to be caught, I slipped out from beneath the canvas and began searching the deserted backstreets. I found one particular abandoned building that I felt I could live in, and after

dragging some chairs, a table, and an old mattress to the top floor where I covered it with blankets, I finally had a home. Since then, I have been living there, huddled under piles of blankets during the winter and stealing clothes from clotheslines when I need them.” Sighing as she closes her eyes, she admits, “Every week or two, I have to sneak into the back of a small store to get food to survive... but I try to leave something of value for the owners whenever I can... maybe a chrome hubcap from an abandoned car, an engine part that might be lying around... money if I can find any.” Again, the femme looks up at you with sad eyes, this time searching for your reassurance... or waiting for your rejection.

Placing your hand over Spirit’s paws, still in her lap, you look into her eyes and, after smiling at her caringly, explain that you understand that she had to steal to survive and that you admire her for trying to repay those whom she has stolen from. At this, she smiles warmly, laying her tail atop your hand. Giving her tail a gentle rub, flattening the fur with your hand, you tell Spirit that she does not have to be alone, that she no longer has to spend her nights alone and cold, huddled under old blankets. As she eyes you questioningly, you tell her how lonely it can be living alone in your apartment and that you would very much like for her to stay here with you if she so wishes. Still, she continues to watch you as if expecting there to be a catch, but after receiving another smile from you, tears of joy begin to slowly trickle from her eyes and down through her cheek fur as she springs up to hug you. Caught somewhat by surprise, you slowly place your hands upon her back, gently rubbing her there as she nuzzles your neck with her muzzle. Pulling away from her, you quietly tell Spirit that you are glad that she has accepted your offer and that you will work everything else out with her tomorrow. As you begin to turn away from her to walk back to your bedroom, she puts her paw on your shoulder, stopping you, and, when you turn back to face her once again, plants a quick kiss on your cheek before smiling joyously again.

Asking Spirit to follow you, which she does, you lead her to your bedroom and open the closet and dresser for her. After apologizing for not having any women’s clothes for her, you tell her that she is welcome to change into whatever she can find. You then proceed to make your way back to the living area of the apartment, closing the bedroom door behind you as you leave. About ten minutes later, you hear the gentle padding of the femme’s feet and turn around to see her behind you, walking toward the sofa where you sit. She has changed her clothes and is now wearing a pair of old mid-thigh length blue jean shorts accompanied by a light aqua-green, short-sleeved t-shirt. Her entire chest is now covered, but most of her legs are revealed to you and you can see that her white, cream fur trails to just below the cuffs of the shorts and ends in a “V” shape on the insides of the thighs, bordered by her orange fur. As you follow the horizontal black stripes up her legs, you can also see that those on her thighs begin on the outside of her legs but do not trail to the insides as they do on her lower legs, but only continue until they are nearly two inches from the white patches, where they fade away back into the orange. As she pads her way around to the front of the sofa, she performs a brief yet graceful twirl, showing off her new look as you watch. However, during her joyous spin, you realize that her tail is not where it *should* be but is tucked down through the right leg of the shorts and is dangling against her leg. With a brief chuckle you watch as Spirit settles down beside you on the sofa, and after watching as she shuffles on the cushions,

her face eventually taking on an irritated expression, you offer to help her. With a sigh of relief and a quick smile, she gladly accepts your offer and listens as you tell her that she should stand behind the sofa. Complying, she stands and you can hear the padding sound of her feet as she walks behind the sofa while you stroll into the kitchen. Once there, you open a drawer and take out a sharpened box-cutting knife and, lifting it over the counter, show it to Spirit. As you walk back to stand before her, she moves back slightly against the sofa and you detect a glimmer of fear shining in her sapphire eyes but it disappears once again as she blinks. Placing your hand upon her shoulder, you tell her that you are not going to harm her, nor would you ever intentionally do anything to jeopardize her trust in you, and, in a gesture of reassurance, you lift your hand, palm-up, to briefly stroke the fur on her cheek. You are surprised to feel her press her cheek into your hand ever so slightly as she allows a low, rumbling purr to emanate from within her. Lowering your hand once again, you instruct Spirit to turn toward the sofa and to lean over its back, and, after hesitating for a second, she does so, carefully balancing her weight as she rests her paws on the back of the sofa, steadying herself. Slowly, gently, you tug on the rear-most belt loop of her shorts, and, when a gap of nearly one or two inches has formed between the cloth and the tigress' back, you quickly slide your middle and index fingers inside the shorts, down to the base of her tail, causing Spirit to jerk her head up, which, until now, had been tilted downward, and gasp sharply, her eyes flying open in surprise. Suddenly realizing your mistake, you quickly apologize and politely tell her to try to relax, which she does, even though you can sense that she is now far more aware of her surroundings than she previously was. Carefully clicking the knife blade from its safety lock, you feel a gentle shudder run down Spirit's spine as your fingers pry the fabric away from the base of her tail. Allowing your fingers to slip to the side of her tail, you lightly push it out of your way and, hearing her growl at your slight intrusion in a barely audible tone, quietly, yet firmly, tell her to calm down without looking up from the task at hand. Her growling stops, a little surprised that you could hear her, but you notice that the portion of her tail hanging out the leg of her shorts has now begun to twitch nervously. Ignoring this for the moment, you separate your fingers inside her shorts, holding the cloth away from her body directly behind the base of her tail. After taking a moment to judge the thickness of the femme's tail at its base, you slowly lower the pointed blade to the fabric and bore a hole through the denim material being held out by your other hand. Carefully, you slice through the clothing, sawing the blade in and out of the newly created opening until a ragged, elliptical piece of cloth falls away, leaving a hole that you hope will be large enough for her tail to fit through. After pulling your hand from her shorts, you lightly pat Spirit's back, telling her that she may now stand fully upright again, while you retract the knife blade back into its sheath in your other hand. You walk back into the kitchen and place the knife back in its drawer before turning around to look at Spirit who is now bending around and arching her back in an attempt to see the new opening in her shorts. Giving up on this feeble attempt, she lifts her head to see you watching her, a smile of amusement forming on your face, as she grins back at you sheepishly, the faintest tint of red becoming visible beneath her cheek fur as she blushes intensely. Chuckling again, you suggest to Spirit that she might like to see if the new tail-hole in her shorts will do, and, nodding in agreement, she pads past you and back into the bedroom.

Sitting back down on the sofa, you begin to think about the hardships that Spirit must have faced during the past few years. Thinking about what it must have been like for her, you realize that, living in an abandoned building, she probably rarely had the opportunity to bathe, not that it is that obvious; she has somehow managed to keep herself clean. This particular thought gives you an idea and you slowly stand up again before walking into the kitchen. After grabbing a legal pad and a pen from the counter, you lean over the small dining table and scribble onto the paper, "Be back soon. Take care," As you listen to the very quiet sound of Spirit's humming coming from the cracked bedroom door. You then proceed to scoop up your car keys as you stroll past the counter where you had left them earlier, making your way out your apartment door, pulling it shut behind you, and walking down the stairs to where your car awaits, parked outside.

Upon re-entering your apartment after a short trip to the store a few blocks away, you find Spirit standing before the sliding glass doors that lead to the balcony, as if, once again, lost in thought, her striped tail slowly swishing side to side behind her in an almost mesmerizing motion. Hearing you enter, she turns around and briskly walks toward you, and, smiling warmly, embraces you in a friendly hug. Caught somewhat off guard by this, you stumble backward before wrapping your free arm around her to gently rub her back as she quietly says, "Thank you for everything you've done for me. I never thought anyone could accept me for who I am, but you have proven me wrong." Pulling away from each other, you both walk back into the living room where you tell Spirit to make herself at home, since that's what it now is, as well as yours. Leaving her to study her surroundings more closely, you move off down the hall toward the bathroom, still carrying the plastic bag in one hand. Emptying the bag, you set out the purchased assortment of shampoos and soaps alongside a pure white bath towel and matching washcloth on the bathroom counter beside the sink. Satisfied that everything is ready for her, you leave the bathroom to rejoin Spirit who has found the television remote and is settled comfortably on the sofa. As the current commercial break ends, a news castor appears and begins reporting on a rather unusual incident at a local mall. "...brawls are not frequent, nor are they very unusual at a public location such as this shopping mall. However, when a fight *does* break out and push comes to shove, it isn't often that shove comes to slash, which is exactly what happened in a fight here today," the news castor states as her image is replaced by a photo of the man whom you had defeated earlier in the day, Spirit's claw marks easily visible on his back. "The man who sustained this wound told us he was attacked by another man who was accompanied by a creature that was 'half human and half monster.' Witnesses report having seen a creature that matches this description but say it had the form of a teenage girl but looked much like a large, predatory cat. Mall security is currently investigating these claims."

"He deserved it," Spirit growls in contempt, snarling as she mashes the power button on the remote while you lean absently over the back of the sofa behind her. Sensing how tense she is, you tell her not to worry about it and shift your hands to her shoulders, kneading them through the fabric of her shirt. After massaging her for several more minutes, you stop and ask her if she is feeling any better. Having closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the sofa, purring softly to herself during your massage, she

re-opens her eyes to look up at you leaning over her and nods, smiling at you before allowing a frown to creep across her muzzle and says, "I'm hungry."

Laughing to yourself at how cute and innocent she looks like this, you slowly stand up again and give Spirit a gentle scratch behind her right ear as she giggles softly, the quiet hissing of her laughter barely audible. In the kitchen, you pull a can of soup from the pantry and, after opening it, pour the soup into a pot, which you then place on the stove burner. As the soup cooks, you set out two places at the dining table and, looking over at Spirit, see that she has turned the television back on and is flicking through channels randomly, not looking for anything in particular but simply trying to pass the time.

When the soup is ready and you have scooped some into two bowls, one for you and the other for Spirit, you call her over to you. She hops up from the sofa and walks over to the table where she takes a seat across from yours and waits for you to sit down. After taking your own seat, you look over at her and, seeing that she has lowered her head in prayer, do the same, saying your own blessing and giving thanks to God. Looking up again, you see Spirit's right paw hovering over the spoon lying on the placemat, as if afraid that her fur will tarnish its shine if she touches it. Smiling at her when her gaze meets yours, you tell her that it's alright for her to go ahead; the spoon won't bite back at her. She briefly scowls at your joke before finally making up her mind. Taking the bowl in both paws, holding it just beneath its rim, she carefully lifts it up to her face as you watch curiously. As the soup-filled bowl nears her muzzle, she quickly darts her tongue out and across the surface of the liquid, lapping it into her mouth. Even though it is obvious that she has some feline behavioural traits, this is certainly not something that you had expected. Lowering the bowl, she smiles back at you, and, in the same joking tone that you had used only a minute earlier, asks, "Aren't you going to eat? It won't bite," before grinning deviously, showing her teeth in the process as droplets of soup still cling to the fur around her lips. You grin back at her sheepishly as her tongue darts from her mouth again to lick the droplets from her fur. You both go back to eating as you slowly spoon the steaming liquid into your mouth, listening to Spirit as she quickly laps the soup from her own raised bowl.

After a while, you place your spoon in your bowl and look up at Spirit who has set her bowl back down again. Settling back into your chair, you hesitantly ask Spirit if she has ever had any dreams; dreams that she has ever hoped to fulfil. She looks at you quizzically, obviously confused, so you rephrase your question, asking her if there is anything she has ever wished she could do. Her deep, blue eyes suddenly light up and she straightens in her seat. After smiling to herself at the thought, she opens her mouth and begins to speak. "I have always wanted to see the sea... or at least where it meets the shore. I have never seen a real beach, only pictures and videos." Seeing the puzzled look on your face, she laughs quietly before continuing, "No, I don't hate water; you're thinking of domestic cats; I enjoy being in the water as long as I'm in the mood for it. I've dreamt about being able to swim through the waves and then running up the beach and being able to just lie back in a beach chair under the palm trees and wait until the crashing of the waves puts me to sleep." Leaning back comfortably in her chair, she allows her gaze to drift upward as a dreamy, relaxed expression forms on her face.

However, her relaxed look abruptly disappears and she frowns. “But I was never allowed to go anywhere but the enclosed wooded area. I really want to see the beach; I want to go there without having to worry about being ridiculed or attacked because of what I am...” While saying this, she rubs her right paw over the dressing still wrapped firmly about her left forearm where it covers the gash that she received back at the mall. “Maybe someday...” she says with a sad sigh, looking down into her lap.

You both sit there for several more minutes before you slide your chair back from the table and, after standing up, tell Spirit that you have prepared a bath for her if she would like to take one. Getting up from her own seat, she smiles at you and walks around the table to embrace you in another hug, again warmly nuzzling against your shoulder. As you regain the breath that was lost during her tight embrace, you slowly raise your arm to point down the hall toward the bathroom, and, after giving you a quick and gentle kiss on your cheek, she thanks you before trotting off down the hall as you stand there, your cheeks still burning bright red. Hearing the door close, you turn back to the table and begin clearing it of the bowls, plates, and whatever else you had placed on it before the meal, taking each item over to the kitchen sink where you rinse it out and put it into the dishwasher at your side. Looking at the clock on the stove, you see that it is much later than you had thought, nearly 10:30 pm, and looking at the windows, you see that sunlight has ceased to pour in through the thin curtains.

Turning back to the hall, trying to think of what else needs to be done, you hear the water begin running in the bathroom followed by a quick, loud yelp, instantly telling you that Spirit has confused the unmarked shower taps, turning the cold water on full instead of the hot. “Just one more thing that needs to be done,” you say to no one under your breath, remembering how you have been meaning to label the shower’s hot and cold-water valves. As you make your way back to the bedroom, upon passing the bathroom door, you conclude that Spirit has worked out how to adjust the water temperature to her liking, since she hasn’t made any sounds other than her initial cry. Entering the bedroom, you proceed to pull out a very old pair of loose-fitting black, cloth shorts and an old, equally loose-fitting, white t-shirt with a light-blue emblem on the front. Retrieving a small pocketknife from a table on the far side of the room, after flicking out the blade, you cut a moderately sized tail-hole in the rear of the shorts before closing the knife and tossing it back onto the table. Folding the clothes again, you take them with you back out into the hall and place them on the floor in front of the closed bathroom door.

Standing again, you walk back to the sofa and sit down, sweeping up the television remote from the coffee table as you go. After flicking through channels and finding nothing of any particular interest for several more minutes, you hear the bathroom door’s latch click and turn around in time to see Spirit step out, wrapped snugly from her underarms down in the white towel, before looking at the fresh clothes folded on the floor in front of her. Kneeling down, she scoops up the folded set of clothing before slowly standing again. She suddenly turns to look curiously in your direction and you force yourself to quickly snap your head back toward the television. As the bathroom door creaks shut, you can just faintly hear the quiet hissing of Spirit chuckling to herself as your face, once again, burns to a bright pink tone.

Before long, you, once again, hear the bathroom door open but refrain from turning around, afraid that the pinkish tint may still be visible on your cheeks. Oblivious to the murmur of the television, you listen to the soft padding of Spirit's feet as she walks around the sofa and settles down beside you, laying her tail out beside her. Looking over at her, you see that her fur has a fluffier appearance to it that seems to be accompanied by a soft shine. The new set of clothing that you provided for her seems to fit her perfectly, despite its loose-fitting nature, and she has removed the dressing from her left forearm and washed away the blood, revealing a not-too-deep scar. She has also taken the ribbons from her hair, which now flows gracefully over and behind her shoulders but is still slightly damp from her shower. Seeing that you are looking at her, Spirit waits until your gaze meets hers before smiling at you and asking, "Well, what do you think?" A bit taken back by this question, you hesitate for a moment before telling her that she looks wonderful and much more comfortable than when you first met her. She blushes intensely at this, the reddish tint barely visible through her cheek fur. Seeing her embarrassed expression, you smile at her again while reaching behind her to slide your hand beneath her golden-blond hair to gently scratch behind her ears. Closing her eyes, she leans her head back and begins to purr faintly. Feeling you take your hand back from behind her ears, Spirit half opens her eyes again before sighing contentedly and leaning into you, gently pushing herself against your side as she rests her head upon your shoulder. Trying not to disturb her comfortable position, you turn your head to the side to see her gazing up at you with half-open eyes, a dreamy smile forming across her muzzle.

After smiling again at Spirit, you turn back to the television as Spirit's low, rumbling purrs quietly resume. Moments later, you feel a lightly furred paw glide over the top of your hand and you look down to see Spirit's fingers slowly trying to curl about it. Smiling thoughtfully to yourself, you slowly turn your hand upright and allow Spirit to gently clasp it with hers before inching herself further back against you and looking up at you again, whispering a barely audible "Thank you" in between purrs.

Before long, you look down beside you again to see that Spirit has dozed off, still smiling softly as if she has finally found something that has long since been lost to her. As she reclines against you, she looks so frail and delicate, yet her muscles are apparent through the fabric of her shirt and in her arms and legs beneath her orange, black, and creamy white fur, and, as you watch her, you can see the steady heaving of her chest as she breathes.

Turning off the television, you slowly and carefully stand up while gently laying Spirit back on the sofa. After standing fully upright again and stretching, you turn back to Spirit as she lays stretched out before you, and, after kneeling down, you slide your arms beneath her, one behind her knees and the other behind her back. Slowly, you lift her up in your arms and ever so slightly tilt her toward you so that her head gently rolls over to rest against your chest. She stirs briefly but does not wake and soon relaxes in your arms once again. You carefully carry Spirit back to the bedroom and lay her at the foot of the

double bed before pulling back the covers and arranging the pillows for her. You then slide your arms back beneath her and proceed to lift her a few inches above the bed and move her over to its exposed portion, sliding her feet under the covers as you carefully lower her onto the sheets. As you pull the covers back up to her neck, you look at her face and are reminded of how innocent she looked earlier after you had massaged her shoulders. Standing there, looking down at her as she sleeps soundly, you think about how unique Spirit truly is; not just in her obvious physical appearance, but also in how she has had to endure the past few years alone and feeling rejected by all. And despite all this, all she has been through, she has made it; she has survived all this time without any friends at all, without anyone to rely upon. You begin to wonder whether you would have been able to do this, whether you could have lived all alone the way Spirit has. As these thoughts rush through your head, you slowly raise your hand to lightly brush her cheek, feeling her short, silky orange and black-striped fur beneath your fingers. After gently caressing her cheek, you bring your hand up to her forehead and brush away her blonde hair while you slowly lean over her and gently kiss the center of her forehead. She, once again, stirs but still does not wake, but, as you lift your head again, you see the faintest of smiles creep across her lips. Smiling to yourself at the figure before you, outlined by the contours of the covers, you walk back to the door and, after turning to look at the sleeping femme one last time, turn off the lights in the room and close the door behind you, just barely leaving it cracked open, as you walk out into the hall.

After unfolding the sofa bed, you make a short trip to the bathroom where you change out of the day's attire and do whatever else you need to do to get ready for bed before re-emerging back into the living room. You check the apartment door, making sure it's locked, turn out the lights in the kitchen and living room, and then, with the help of the moonlight streaming in through the glass doors, make your way back to the folded out sofa where you climb into bed.

As you lay there, you begin to reflect upon the day's events. You think about how you had first seen Spirit, separated from the rest of the crowd. You think about what had compelled you to go out to her, to comfort her, to do what no one else would. Why had you gone out to her? Why didn't you simply stay where you were? Thinking back to what you had told Spirit when she had asked you the same question, you remember the overwhelming sympathy and hurt that you had felt, and still feel, for her. Eventually, your mind takes you forward to the story that Spirit had told you about herself and how she came to be. You ask yourself how anyone could ever want to destroy a creature as unique and special as her. Dwelling on this question a while longer, you decide that the answer is well beyond you; to you, it is unthinkable and doesn't make a bit of sense.

You are so lost in thought that you nearly fail to hear the creaking of the bedroom door as it slowly opens at the end of the hall. A moment later, you see Spirit walk past you, the moonlight casting a dull glow upon her fur, making it shimmer here and there. You lay perfectly still, barely breathing, not wishing for her to realize that you are still awake, as you watch her walk to the glass doors and fold her arms across her chest as if trying to keep warm. Even though she is now silhouetted by the moonlight, you can still clearly see her as her tail begins to frantically swish to and fro before hanging still behind her as

she drops her head and breathes out deeply with a sad sigh. After hesitating for several more seconds, she lifts her head up again to look out at the stars that fill the night sky as her tail slowly waves from side to side behind her. She stays there, looking at the stars, for what seems like an eternity, not making any sound or movement other than that of her tail. Finally, she turns around and begins to walk back the way she came but stops when she passes your bed as you quickly shut your eyes and try to breathe at a normal pace, hoping she will think you're asleep. You stay like this for another moment or two, waiting to hear the soft padding of Spirit's feet as she walks back to the bedroom, but, instead, are surprised to feel the bed suddenly jolt. Your eyes fly open as you turn your head to see her lying on her side beside you, smiling warmly as she watches you. As you get over your surprise, the shocked expression on your face fades into a smile that is just as caring as hers and you hold up the covers while she crawls in beneath them. Pulling the covers back up to your necks, you feel Spirit place her paw on your chest as she wraps her arm around you, pulling herself closer to you. You look over at her as she purrs quietly beside you, and, as she happily smiles back at you, say, "It'll be alright, Spirit."

Sighing contentedly, she whispers, "I know," before resting her head on your shoulder as her purring resumes and she, once again, hugs you to her lovingly. It isn't long before you both fall into a calm, peaceful sleep; you glad to be with her, and she happily purring beside you, nuzzling against your neck and shoulder.

Have feedback on this story?→ Please feel free to contact me at davidr84@hotmail.com, chances are I'll be glad to hear it. Want to write a continuing part to this story?→ Please contact me at the above email address and we can discuss it. (It's not terribly likely that I will write another part to the story any time soon.)

Other contact info:

MSN messenger→ SlyFox (or the above address)

AIM→ FoxDragon5

My website is <http://starship-swordstream.bravepages.com> [owned and maintained by SlyFox and Sabre].

BIG THANK YOU TO MIKE REGAN FOR HELPING ME TO GET ALL THE ERRORS WORKED OUT OF IT!!! You are certainly a great help mike!