

A Flower's Tears

She knelt in the dewy grass that morning. The sun was raising its cloud streaked face over the far hills, its lowest edge ragged against the outline of the trees. Birds were singing in the graveyard, telling the spirits it was time to rest.

She saw a single flower pressed against the cold stone marker. Dew beaded along its petals, making it look as though it were crying, shedding tears for the loss of her beloved.

Nearby, a man was standing silently with his cub, calmly regarding another headstone. His son saw her, watched her, intent. The cheetah cub walked to her, ignoring the other graves he passed. His father watched, alert.

She did nothing when the boy sat next to her. He could see she was crying, but she made no sound. The mask of black fur around her eyes was glistening with her grief, her black and gray ringed tail lying under her, pressed between her legs to emerge from between her knees. She held its tip in her hands and squeezed it without realizing.

"You don't have to be sad," said the cheetah cub to the raccoon woman. His light, sure voice was filled with gentle confidence.

"I miss him terribly," she said, her words faintly trembling. "I loved him so much."

The cub thought about this for a moment. He looked up briefly, as though looking for approval.

"He's in heaven now. He's watching you, you know."

'So serious,' she thought of the cub. His softly spoken words gave her no comfort. The idea of her mate having left her for some fabled place of peace and beauty could not console her. "No," she said. She touched the ground by her knees. "He's here. Sleeping."

Again the cub considered her words. He glanced at his father, who watched without comment or intervention. "My sire says genemorphs have souls, just like humans. He says when they made us, they made another heaven. One just for genemorphs, like us."

"He does?" she said to have a response. It pained her to hear the cub's simple faith. She had none of her own, and struggled every day to see the light around her.

"Of course. He says they did it to say they were sorry for being mean to us all the time."

It was like a knife in her heart, hearing such words from a cub's mouth. She gasped at the unexpected pain that flickered through her. Her eyes squeezed shut. In that darkness she saw blood, flashing lights, a dozen angry faces around the broken body of her mate. Her throat closed off, choking back a small cry of distress. Her hand instinctively reached out and clutched at the cub's shoulder.

Alarmed, the father took two steps closer. He stopped when he saw her arm tremble, her fingers curl loosely through the fur of the cub's shoulder. He watched, waited.

Once the memory of her cherished mate's face had quicksilvered through her mind, tugging at her slowly mending heart, she looked at the cub sitting next to her. His fur was getting as matted as hers in the wet grass. She was astounded to see he looked like the pictures she'd seen of her mate when he was a cub. The same markings, the same tousled fur, the same glint of underlying compassion in his eyes. She glanced at the sire, who bore only a passing resemblance to his cub. He nodded solemnly.

Looking back to the cub, she had trouble speaking. She felt overwhelmed, as though she were being spoken to by the whole of the universe and could only grasp the simplest words.

"So he's in heaven now?" she managed to whisper, her ears wanting to lay back. The cub nodded, never taking his eyes from her face.

"And he's watching me? Right now?" Another nod.

"And he still loves you," said the child.

Silence. Her heart seemed to beat easier. She wondered what other things the cub might reveal.

"He does?"

The cheetah cub lightly touched her knee, barely ruffling the fur. "More than the morning sun or the falling rain."

A new warmth filled her. She pictured her mate, smiling as he often did. Her heart knew peace, if only for a time. She smiled at the cub.

"Thank you."

The cub smiled in return and walked back to his sire. As the two strolled away, the boy said, "She doesn't really believe yet."

The father nodded, flicking his tail. "She will," he told his child. "In time, she will."

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