

Chapter 19

Escaping the Cold

Alana wallowed in her bed and couldn't sleep. It had been three torturous hours. She just couldn't shut her mind off. She kept replaying the entire day in her head, over and over again. If she had to pay for a bag of peppermints or repack Surefoot's saddlebags again, she'd scream.

Even distracting herself hadn't helped. Alana had made it a third of the way through one of Sarah's mind numbing books on alchemy, had given up, and had tossed and turned for the past thirty minutes.

She was miserable, and she was lonesome. The former couldn't be helped, and the latter, well. . . Alana didn't want to think about the latter, but it also couldn't be helped. Or rather, it could, but Alana couldn't believe she'd let herself get used to sleeping with Ra'saaka in her arms. She hated being that dependent on someone she was in love with.

Except that she wasn't in love. Alana never said she was in love with Ra'saaka. She just . . . just liked having someone around who smiled when she looked at him, someone who needed-

No, thought Alana darkly, Ra'saaka didn't just need her, he was codependent to the point of being practically nonfunctional without her. The panicked, traumatized, and sobbing wreck of a Ra'saaka that Alana had to regularly comfort was just the cost of being friends with him.

The worst part was that he actually was a good friend otherwise. The emotional labor was a small price to pay.

Alana flopped over onto her back. No, the apologies were the worst part. Ra'saaka knew exactly how much of a burden he was in his worst moments, and he hated himself even more for being unable to do anything about it except for letting Alana carry him. It didn't matter that she was happy to do it, even despite how tiring it was at times. So he apologized, and cried, and apologized some more until Alana felt like an inhumane monster whose empathy was conditional on remaining in her good graces.

Admittedly, since she was being honest with herself for once, her empathy *had* been entirely conditional and usually absent for the past ten years. But not with Ra'saaka! Alana loved *him* unconditionally.

Alana sighed in frustration and flopped over again onto her stomach. Quit using that word! She wasn't in love! She just liked having Ra'saaka around was all. They hadn't done it intentionally, but they'd been more or less glued to each other's hip for the hundred or so days they'd traveled together since Fellcrest. Alana had gotten used to his constant company. It was funny how ten years of self enforced habitual solitude could have fallen away so quickly, but Sarah couldn't have-

Alana cursed into her pillow. Her mother absolutely knew; Sarah was quite literally a mind reader. Sarah very clearly wanted to see what her daughter was going to do about it. The game should have been obvious as soon as she gave Ra'saaka the room Alana usually stayed in.

Alana decided to ignore her mom's obvious attempt at matchmaking. She didn't have feelings for Ra'saaka, and she'd started developing them weeks before Sarah had even known that he existed.

Alana lay in her bed and fumed.

Her big bed.

Her big, empty bed.

Her big, empty bed without Ra'saaka in it.

It had been a mistake to let herself get used to sleeping on his shoulder by the campfire every night. His soft warmth and the quiet sounds he made during his watch shift were her brain's signal to fall asleep. It was uncomfortably silent in the guestroom that Sarah had let Alana borrow.

Alana had forgotten how to sleep alone.

As if sharing a blanket for warmth every night hadn't been bad enough, starting to cuddle Ra'saaka until she fell asleep had been an even bigger mistake. It was made worse by the fact that, despite Ra'saaka's obvious discomfort at even Alana touching him, he very clearly wanted to be held exactly as much as, if not more, than she wanted to hold him. If the purr wasn't a dead giveaway, the fact that for the past five nights he'd nudged his way into her arms before she could even finish asking for his consent definitely was.

Alana aggressively flipped her pillow over to the cool side. That didn't prove anything. It was late fall. Anyone would cuddle for warmth.

Ra'saaka was just Alana's friend, that she in no way cared about, and she needed to hold him while she slept. That was the routine, and there was no other reason. She could only fall asleep with a nose full of spearmint fur oil, a bushy tail curled around her waist, and a purr in her ears. It was pure habit, and a stupid one to break at that. If Alana tried, she'd have to deal with insomnia for her entire stay at her mom's while she got un-used to the routine, then insomnia again in the wilds until she learned it again. Going to Ra'saaka's room to spoon him was simply just the smartest, most efficient choice Alana could make as the de facto leader of their purely platonic traveling partnership.

Alana wished she were better at lying to herself.

She wracked her brain for a different excuse to go knock on Ra'saaka's door, one that couldn't possibly be misconstrued as her being in love with him, which she absolutely wasn't. It wasn't that she was in love with him. It wasn't that she craved being close to him. It was . . .

It was . . .

It was Ra'saaka's nightmares!

That was it! He had at least one every single night. Sometimes he had multiple. Almost every single one made him wake up into a full strength panic attack. He unquestionably did better when she was there to help him calm down, especially since he'd started letting her cud-

No. That wouldn't work.

Regardless of the context or extenuating circumstances, 'let me sleep in your bed so I can hold you when you're scared' sounded exactly like how Alana really felt about Ra'saaka. It was hard enough already to keep lying to herself. It would be impossible if she told him that. Hells, it was probably exactly what Sarah wanted her to say to him.

Alana flopped over dramatically and cocooned herself in a ball of blankets on the chilly side of the bed.

Alana was slightly cold.

Yeah. That could work, if she reworked it a bit.

Alana wasn't just comfortably cool, she was freezing. Practically dying!

There weren't enough logs on the fireplace in Alana's room. There absolutely wasn't a small pile of them by the hearth that she could easily rectify the problem with. No, she'd simply have to go ask Ra'saaka if she could share his bed. Drosarri had a higher internal body temperature than Arthmorrans, at around one hundred and three compared to her ninety-five. If she ever wanted to be warm again for the rest of her life, she needed to go curl up beside him right now.

What difference was there, really, between her holding him for warmth at a campsite and holding him in bed for the same reason? They already shared a bed whenever they stayed at an inn. Sharing a pillow was just the next logical step for two entirely platonic friends as the brutal Reachmarkian winter marched ever closer. It would be warmer, cozier, more intimate-

Except that it wouldn't be intimate. Alana didn't want to spoon Ra'saaka because she was lonely sleeping without the person she was in love with. No! Not at all. She was simply trying to prevent her own death. It was pure survival, nothing more. Asking Ra'saaka to let her move her stuff into his room for the rest of their visit with Sarah would be a medical necessity. Hypothermia was the silent killer after all, and Alana's room was in no way warm enough that she had spent the past three hours comfortably naked. She'd had to put on every single article of

clothing she owned just to even dream that she might stop shivering. In fact, she could practically hear the pitcher of water beside her bed flash freezing! There were zero romantic connotations whatsoever to trying to stave off her own mortality.

It was a terrible lie, but it was one Alana could live with. At least it meant she didn't have to be fully direct about what she wanted. She was more than certain that Ra'saaka also shared her nonexistent romantic attraction, and she didn't know what she'd do if he admitted it to her. As long as she kept lying to herself, she could keep putting off the hard conversation about whether or not she was ready for another partner.

She especially wasn't ready for the annoying conversation about her asexuality. Thankfully, Ra'saaka didn't seem to have an ego to bruise. The 'I don't find you sexually attractive but that doesn't mean I don't love you' conversation would probably be a lot easier to have with someone that hated himself as much as he did.

Alana tossed a few extra logs on the fire in case Ra'saaka said no, pulled on a pair of boyshorts and her sleeping blouse, and silently padded down the hallway to Ra'saaka's room. She quietly cracked the door and listened. He wasn't purring, obviously, but the slow, steady breathing told Alana that her best friend was fast asleep. She quietly tiptoed over to him and roughly shook him awake.

"You still up, Socky?" she asked innocently. She'd taken her hands off of him at the first snort.

"Whu?" He rolled over to face her. "Are you okay? What time is it?"

"Just after midnight."

Ra'saaka blinked at Alana as his eyes focused. "We do not have to take watch here, yes?"

"I know."

Ra'saaka's whiskers relaxed and his eyelids drooped. "Did you need something?"

"I'm cold," said Alana coquettishly.

Ra'saaka looked her up and down in the dim secondhand light from the oil lamps in the hallway. He pinned a single ear in confusion. "Have you tried buttoning your blouse the rest of the way? Perhaps putting on a pair of pants as well?"

Alana mentally facepalmed and tried again. "I need a blanket."

His eyes drifted shut again and he flinched as Alana poked him awake again. "What?" he mumbled. "I am awake."

In hindsight, Alana should have done this earlier. The trouble with catfolk was that they could fall asleep like, well, a cat.

“I said I need a blanket.”

Ra’saaka slowly blinked up at her in the dim light cast by the oil lamps in the hall. They were playing merry hells with Alana’s darkvision and she was sure they were doing the same to him.

Ra’saaka’s eyes finally focused. “I am quite sure that Mrs. Sarah would not mind you grabbing one from the parlor, yes? You did not have to wake me up to tell me.”

Alana stopped herself from sighing. It had been years and she was out of practice, but she knew how this was *supposed* to go. The art of painfully obvious seduction was like a tired stage play. She modified Ra’saaka’s line for him, since he clearly wasn’t going to say it himself. “I’d rather just share yours.”

He somehow still didn’t get the hint. “Okay, so take one. I have fur. I will manage.”

Alana couldn’t stop the sigh. This wasn’t getting her anywhere. Here she was, trying her best to be romantic. Here Ra’saaka was, being an utter idiot about it. The hints she’d just dropped were about as subtle as a brick in a sock. The whole point of the indirect approach was that the other person was supposed to be smart enough to take the obvious next step. Anyone else would have already either told her to get lost or dragged her into bed with him, and she would have already needed to explain that she just wanted to cuddle.

Ra’saaka was lucky that his cluelessness was so damned cute. It was time for the direct approach. The lie wasn’t working. “I’m sleeping in your bed,” Alana said flatly.

Ra’saaka pinned his ears as he opened his mouth, and Alana knew with mind numbing certainty that he was about to protest giving up his bed when Alana had a perfectly good one in her own room. She cut him off.

“And you’re sleeping in my arms. Yes or no, Socky.”

“Please do not call me that.”

“Give me an honest yes or no, Ra’saaka.”

He scooted over. “Yes.”

“Mind if I move my stuff in here too?”

“No? It is your room. I do not know why Mrs. Sarah put me here.”

Alana turned away before she smiled. “I’ll be right back.”

There was a dangerous moment during the second trip when Alana's tricorn almost fell off of the jumbled mess in her arms, threatening to send the entire bundle crashing to the ground when she tried to tilt at just the right angle to save it. Alana swore under her breath and caught the hat at the last moment with her chin. She just barely managed to right herself. Her second backup dagger teetered ominously as one of her saddlebags swung forward at exactly the wrong angle. She reached up and turned Ra'saaka's doorknob with her foot.

Someone cleared her throat.

Lucy grinned at Alana knowingly. The first trip with the gear and swords evidently hadn't been as quiet as she'd thought.

"Just friends, Aunt Alana?" Lucy asked with all the wicked interest of a well practiced gossip.

"Just friends," Alana replied flatly.

Lucy clearly didn't buy it. "I done knew you had it bad, but I'd've reckoned you'd've made it at least one night. Guess I'll be a-making Mamaw breakfast in bed tomorrow."

Alana had indeed been right about the separate rooms. She hadn't expected her mom to make a bet with Lucy about it, though.

"I'm quite sure I have no idea what you're talking about," she replied stiffly.

"Should I start calling you Mrs. Farajir now, or do you reckon I should wait for the wedding to make it official?"

Alana's face burned. She spoke rapidly, trying to cover for her own embarrassment. "One. We're both Tarsili. I want a Tarsili wedding. He'll be Ra'saaka Kiralana when we get married. I won't be Alana Farajir. Two. Even if we weren't Tarsili, I like my name as is. Alana Ní Mainistir rolls off the tongue better, er, not that I've thought about it. Three. There's not ever going to be a wedding because we're *just friends*!"

Alana realized the contradictions in what she'd said a moment too late. She tried to casually escape into Ra'saaka's room.

Lucy put her hand over her mouth in a failed attempt to stifle her snicker. "You sure you ain't in love with your pet cat?"

Alana rounded on her, making the dagger clatter to the floor. "He's not a pet," she jabbed, "he's a person! Don't you dare say that in front of him!"

Lucy put her hands up, clearly shocked at the sudden outburst. "Sorry. Just joking with you. Didn't mean nothing by it."

Alana sighed. Lucy wasn't a mind reader. Sarah refused to teach her, and she also kept other people's cards closer to her chest than her own.

"Look," Alana said diplomatically. She owed her niece an explanation. "Sorry I snapped at you. It's just that someone spent the last fifteen years beating Ra'saaka because fur hides bruises, and it didn't exactly help his self image."

"I didn't know," she said quietly.

"I didn't tell you."

"Well," Lucy vaguely waved her hand. "Least now he's done got someone who actually loves him."

Alana remembered to lie too late. "Yeah, I do. He's everything to me." She winced and added "as a friend, I mean."

Lucy grinned and recovered magnificently. "You might want to up your 'friend's' fish and milk. You done plucked a right scrawny one from the shelter."

"Lucy Anne," warned Alana, "*he's a godsdamned person*. I don't care if you are sixteen, I'll have Sarah tan your hide if you make another 'pet cat' joke."

"Just making an observation. You ain't much taller than him, and you've done got what, two stone on him?"

"Two and a quarter. It was three when we met." Alana let her shoulders slump, making the mess in her arms even more unstable. Lucy quickly helped her fix the bundle and poked the sheathed dagger under the brim of Alana's hat.

"You know," mused Lucy, stepping back, "never would've pegged you for no bleeding heart."

Alana sighed. "You don't remember me before I lost Kanjar. I used to be a better person."

Lucy snickered. "Have you ever dated another human?"

"No, and I'm not a human. I'm an Arthmorran. There's a difference. What's it like being a sikvari?"

"Point taken. I reckon I'm as much a dryad as you are a human."

Alana grinned at her, grateful for the subject change. "You'd figure the glowing eyes would have been a giveaway, but no."

“Ever dated any Arthmorrans then?”

Alana blushed. “Can we not talk about my love life? For Rijrafira’s sake, I’m twenty-six years older than you!”

Lucy giggled, clearly enjoying repeatedly poking the nerve. “Done got a thing for cats, do you?”

“Shut up, Lucy Anne. Please?”

Lucy put her hands on her hips disapprovingly. “Just so you know, Aggy Weaver’s done got two springers that might could be due any moment now. I don’t know when she’ll send someone a-calling. Reckon y’all can keep the moans down enough for me to sleep?”

Alana felt herself turn as red as the feathers on her hat. Her niece rolled her eyes facetiously and went back to her room. Alana retreated to the merciful privacy of Ra’saaka’s. She tried and failed to quietly dump the last of her things on the pile. She could sort it all in the morning. She took a deep, calming breath and composed herself again.

Alana smiled at Ra’saaka’s back, embarrassment forgotten, as she shut the door and gently slipped under the blankets next to him. He flinched as she accidentally brushed against his tail. He sighed angrily.

“Sorry, Socky.”

“No. It is fine,” he said flatly. “Are you still ‘cold?’”

It occurred to Alana that Ra’saaka might not be as clueless as she thought. He might just be genuinely awful at being coy. She decided to give him a taste of his own medicine.

“Only if you want me to be.”

He didn’t reply. Alana also wasn’t a mind reader, but she didn’t have to be. “What’s wrong?”

His voice was monotone. “Good night, Alana.”

“I’m serious, what’s-”

“Good. Night. Alana.”

“Good night, Socky?”

Ra’saaka sighed defeatedly and snuggled against her. With his back now softly pressed against her chest, Alana felt him partially untense. In the days since she’d started regularly holding him for extended periods of time, Alana had noticed that Ra’saaka only ever truly

relaxed in her arms, despite how uncomfortable physical contact made him. What she'd assumed to be his 'at ease' had turned out to just be a constant base level of worry and fear. Just like how he became a different person when talking about medicine, he became a third person in her arms. Even so . . .

Alana tested a theory. She reached down and grabbed his tail to drape it over her waist. Ra'saaka immediately flinched as soon as she touched him, which she had expected, and pinned his ears with an angry noise. Continuing to pull the string, Alana put his tail back. He flopped it back over her waist, which she'd also expected.

"What's bugging you, Ra'saaka?" she asked more forcefully, switching to Tarsillic in case he was just worried about Lucy or Sarah eavesdropping through the closed door.

"Nothing," he muttered, still in Markian.

"You just hissed when I touched you," Alana continued in Tarsillic. "There's obviously something wrong. You hurt?"

"I am fine, Alana." His voice was stilted and suspiciously level, but at least he'd switched to their native language as well. Alana took her small victories where she could when she had to wrestle him out of dark places.

"You're clearly not," she pressed.

He rolled over to look at her. "It is the flinching, okay?" he exclaimed. "I am sick of it. You will never harm me, yes? I know it. My body does not. It does not trust you. I cannot seem to make it understand that you are not going to hit me."

Alana watched his entire personality shift in an instant. Ra'saaka gave her a nervous look. "Y-you still will never hit me, yes? Th-that has not changed, yes?"

No, she never would, but Alana felt like he'd punched her. Even after all this time, a small part of him still didn't trust her. She kept her voice intentionally neutral. "I made you a promise, Ra'saaka."

He relaxed again. "Apologies. I just--"

She ignored the flinch and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I know. But I'm never going to hurt you. You can trust me. I'm your friend."

He opened his mouth to say something, closed it, and grabbed Alana's hand as he rolled over again, pulling her arm over him. He finally managed, "I just . . . I do not . . . Good night, Alana."

Alana wasn't going to drop it. "Whatever's really bugging you, you'll be alright, Socky."

Ra'saaka made a hopeless noise and winced at the nickname, but said nothing.

Alana told herself that she was just a friend that cared deeply. She didn't love him at all. She absolutely didn't wish she could just pull him into her arms to kiss and squish him until she made it all better and he forgot everything he'd ever been through and whatever was bothering him now. And her heart most certainly didn't break every single time his nightmares woke him.

Alana wished that she could believe her lies.

She squeezed his hand. "I'm serious. You'll be alright."

Ra'saaka was silent.

"Want a hug?"

Ra'saaka angrily muttered, "Go ahead. That is what pets are for, yes? Do you think that I should start wearing a collar with a little bell on it too?"

Alana winced. That was what this was about?

"How much did you hear?"

"Enough. I appreciate what you said, but your niece is right. I am nothing but 'a mongrel that blasphemously presumes to speak.'" Ra'saaka's voice shattered like glass. "The High Confessor made that painfully clear, in those exact words."

Alana used her most reassuring voice. "You're not a pet, Socky. You're a person. I lo- You're my friend."

Ra'saaka said nothing.

Alana gently rubbed his back directly where the worst of the scars lay hidden under the fur. For once, it didn't help. They lay in silence and she felt him quietly crying. He brushed off her attempts to get him to talk about it. Alana's heart climbed up her throat. She didn't know how to talk him through it this time.

When Ra'saaka finally spoke again, he sounded miserable and dejected. "That is all anyone in the Reachmark will ever see me as. I am not a person. I am not your friend. I will not be your partner. I will never be anything more than your pet cat."

"Socky, I-"

His voice broke. "And please quit calling me that," he pleaded. "It is bad enough that I was born an animal. You do not have to also treat me like one."

Alana had assumed that Ra'saaka hated his nickname because he was too tightly wound to handle a friendly joke about the fur on his paws. She hadn't even considered that 'Sucky' was also exactly the sort of name a pet would have. She'd spent weeks doing exactly what she'd just yelled at Lucy for.

Her heart shattered. "I'm sorry. I never even realized-"

"It makes me feel like you are about to start scratching my chin and brushing my fur, yes?"

Alana grasped for a reply. "I already do brush you, and you braid my hair. Does that make me *your* pet?"

"Do you have fur?"

There wasn't any arguing with him when he got this bad. Alana tried a different line of attack. "Ra'saaka, I don't shave. Anywhere. I can't believe you haven't noticed."

The attempt at humor almost worked. After a long pause, Ra'saaka said, "That is not the same thing and you know it."

Alana realized that she wasn't going to be able to talk him out of his dark place this time. She needed to do something extreme. It was time for some tough love, er, tough friendship. Alana shoved him away and tried to sound as angry as she could. "You know what?" she snapped. "Fine! If you say you're just a pet, then you're just my pet. Get out of my bed. You're sleeping on the floor. I've never let an animal sleep in my bed and I'm not starting now."

It seemed to work. Ra'saaka was too indignant to keep spiraling, at least. He flipped over to argue with her. She tried not to let the wet patches on his muzzle from the tears break her heart all over again.

"But this is my bed!" He exclaimed. "Go sleep in your own!"

"And I'm taking Aariska with me when I go back to Tarsil tomorrow," Alana continued, ignoring the outburst.

"But you gave her to me!"

"Shoulda thought of that before you decided you were just a pet," declared Alana with forced severity. "What kind of pet cat owns a horse? Since Aariska doesn't belong to a *person*, I may as well adopt her. She'd love to spend the rest of her life in her majesty's stables."

"But-"

Alana managed to keep a straight face. "Have your clothes and your things in her saddlebags as soon as you wake up."

Ra'saaka's eyes went wide. "Surely you would not," he whispered, panicstruck.

Alana ignored the flinch, grabbed him by the back of the head, and forced him to look her directly in the eyes as they touched foreheads. "Try me, Ra'saaka. Rijrafira help me, I'll buy you that godsdamned bell collar and a bowl with your name on it and everything. You said you're nothing but my pet cat. You're damn well going to start living like it."

The terrified look on his face was too much. It was all Alana could do not to burst out laughing. She couldn't believe that he thought she was serious. Alana's composure shattered like glass. She very nearly stifled a snicker and Ra'saaka gave her a hesitant, relieved half smile.

"You . . . were joking, yes? S-scare me into seeing sense, yes?"

Alana regained her composure. "Say the words, Ra'saaka."

"Okay, fine," he said quickly. "You win, as always."

Alana didn't just drop the mask, she threw it away and cracked a wide grin. Ra'saaka yelped and jerked with a massive flinch as she started tickling his ribs.

"Stop!" he begged breathlessly. "You have already made your point, yes?! I said quit!"

Alana giggled. "Not until you say the words, you melodramatic idiot."

"Okay!" Ra'saaka gasped. "I am a person! Please, for Caranno's sake, stop tickling me!"

She didn't.

"What else do you want from me?!" he begged.

"And what do you deserve?" Alana demanded.

"How should I know?!"

Alana started tickling his nearly nonexistent stomach too. "Wrong answer, Ra'saaka. It's 'to be happy.' Say it!"

He tried to shove her away. Alana overpowered him.

"You want me to say that I deserve to be happy?"

"Mean it!"

"I deserve to be happy!" he wheezed. "Stop! Please!"

Alana quit tickling him. "Damn right."

She pulled Ra'saaka into a hug. In spite of the flinch, he fully relaxed as soon as she wrapped her arms around him. Thanks to Ra'saaka, Alana finally understood exactly what the phrase 'melted in someone's arms' meant. Ra'saaka practically went limp every single time she hugged him.

"You good now?" Alana asked quietly. "Want me to let go of you?"

"Yes, I am." He nestled against her. "And no, I do not."

"I'm sorry for calling you 'Socky,'" Alana said carefully. "I genuinely never meant it as a pet name. Er, well, it is a pet name, but it's not a pet's name." Alana sighed. "You know what I mean. I only called you Socky because I love y-"

Alana panicked and hastily added, "-as a friend, I mean. You're my best friend."

She awkwardly let go of him.

Ra'saaka spoke hesitantly. "And you are . . . just my best friend too, yes?"

"Yes," said Alana stiltedly. "There's nothing else between us. Right?"

His expression was unreadable. "No. There is not."

She watched him grasping for anything else to talk about. An ear twitched. "My father and uncle both called me 'Socks,' yes?" he said with forced joviality. I suppose that if I had to pick, I prefer 'Socky.' I would rather be a pet than an article of clothing."

"Ra'saaka . . ." Alana warned, shifting her hands.

He shielded his ribs, not that it could stop her. She decided to wait for him to let his guard down. It would be more fun that way.

"I am just making a point, yes?" he said hastily.

"And that point is?" she demanded.

"I supposed that I could get used to Socky, if that is what you wish to call me."

His arms were still over his ribs. Alana bided her time. "So long as you're okay with it," she said.

"For now, I am."

"Just tell me if you want me to go back to Ra'saaka, deal?"

“Deal.” He relaxed. Alana leapt on top of him.

“Why?!” Ra’saaka laughed as she aggressively tickled him again. “What did I do?!”

“You called yourself a pet again. Say the words!”

“I am a person? I deserve to be happy?”

She resisted his attempt to shove her off of him. “Mean them!”

“I am a person!” he wheezed. “I deserve to be happy! Now stop!”

She did. “Just so we’re clear, next time, I won’t quit until I’m bored.”

“Could you not?” he managed.

Alana gave him an evil smile. “It’s too late. I’m not changing my mind.”

He returned it with a hesitant smile of his own. “Caranno above, you *are* stubborn.”

“It’s my best quality,” she said mischievously.

“I make no arguments. Please get off of me now.”

As Alana did, she took the chance to look at Ra’saaka critically, since he wasn’t wearing a shirt. Lucy was right. He had finally started to get a bit of body fat, but Alana could still count his ribs under the fur. He flinched as she poked his belly. “You need to eat more, Socky.”

“I am already eating more than you,” he grumbled, pinning his ears. “All you do is make me eat.”

“And it’s not enough,” she said sternly. “Tell Sarah to give you an extra helping of everything until we leave.”

Ra’saaka snickered at her. “Are you going to take me to the vet if I do not?”

Alana glared at him “You just said that so I’d tickle you again, didn’t you?”

“No!” he exclaimed.

He grinned conspiratorially. “Yes.”

She gave him her best attempt at a stern look. “Well now I’m not doing it. You took all the fun out of it.”

Ra'saaka snickered again.

"Oh come here," Alana said, drawing him into her embrace.

He melted again. His long ears tickled her chin, and Alana shivered as she felt his cold, wet nose nuzzle the hollow of her neck.

"You good now?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"You are here," he mumbled matter of factly.

Yes, she was. No matter how many times she had to be his grounding rod, he was worth it. He kept her human.

Ra'saaka started purring. His chest vibrated soothingly against Alana's breasts. She found it strange being the larger partner for once. Every man Alana had ever dated had been taller than her. Hells, Kanjar had been large, even for a farassir, at nearly eight and a half feet. Hugging him had been like snuggling a mountain of fur. Ra'saaka was practically diminutive by comparison, even if he was also large for a drosarri. Alana was a full five inches taller than him.

She found that she didn't mind it. She found that she actually quite enjoyed cuddling someone small enough for her to fully embrace. Ra'saaka's long, fluffy fur brushed against her exposed skin. He was like a warm, albeit malnourished, body pillow. She squished him tightly to her chest. He curled his tail around her waist. Alana twined her legs with his and scratched one of his paw pads with her toes. He giggled into her neck and burrowed as deep into her arms as he could go.

Alana shut her eyes happily. She couldn't believe she'd ever gotten used to sleeping any other way. There was something so comforting, so reassuring, about holding someone who was unequivocally hers. As long as Ra'saaka was in her arms, nobody could take him from her. She knew he'd still be there in the morning, alive and well and purring on her neck.

Alana buried her face in mane. He always smelled like spearmint.

"Good night, Socky," she whispered.

"Good night, Alana."

As she finally slipped away, Alana was grateful that she no longer had to worry about the cold.