As Lunsdie talked, Sbarrie's pointed ears raised higher and higher until he thought they might float from her head. "It *touched* your crotch?" she finally asked when the story was complete.

"Well, no," Lunsdie admitted. "But it came close." He shifted the grip on his span so that only ten centimeters stuck up above his paw, and he shook it in front of her to emphasize just how close the creature had come to his privates. "Way too close."

From her perch in the hayloft, she stared, wide-eyed with ears out in shock. "Whoa." She was so lovely, her pelt a uniform black that gleamed when freshly brushed. When the starshine caught her from behind, her fur glowed a rusty red. Then her expression softened, and her ears slowly lowered into a grin. "Maybe this thing … wants a taste…?" Sbarrie let her tongue loll, her jaws as wide as she could open them without showing her teeth. She held the end of her span in front of her mouth for a moment as if she were going to suck on the end of it.

Lunsdie's stomach lurched and if he had eaten any breakfast, he was certain it would have come right back up, then and there.

Sbarrie found this hilarious and barked high-pitched yips of laughter until she doubled over, clutching the penis surrogate to her stomach.

Lunsdie didn't find her vileness nearly so funny. He buried his muzzle into the crook of his elbow until the comforting sensation finally made his queasiness pass.

But when he opened his eyes, he found that she had returned to work, her ears blank as if she hadn't given the vulgar display a second thought. She was using her span to lever a hay bale up on edge before she kicked it over with her heel, sending it toppling to the dirt in front of Lunsdie.

He stared at the bale and the slowly settling cloud of dust that the impact had raised. He knew it was wrong to ask, but his curiosity ate at him, and Sbarrie's ridiculous attitude always made him feel like no topic was out-of-bounds for her. "Have you ever…? I mean," he said quietly. "Put Djebri … in your…?"

"In my mouth?" she shouted; her muzzle wrinkled in disgust. "You really do have a low opinion of me," she hrmphed.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he pleaded, holding his span horizontally, gripped evenly at shoulder width in supplication. "I don't know why I even…"

"No, it's all right," she sighed. "No, I've never done *that.* Djebri can find his own pleasure. He doesn't need my help. And if he did, well … he certainly wouldn't get it like that."

Lunsdie sat on the edge of his cart and rolled his span back and forth against his legs, gently bumping the tops of his kneecaps. "It's just…" he sighed, "sometimes I wonder if I should have given up on dating."

The top of Sbarrie's head peered over the edge of the loft for a moment, ears up. "You never struck me as the parental type. And the heavens know you could never afford to raise one," she said with a grunt as she rearranged the hay bales. "Why do you want a pup now?"

"I'm not. I don't. I mean … I don't think I do," he sighed. "I just feel so lonely all the time."

His best friend grunted, and the sound did not come from exertion. "Taking a mate is no cure for loneliness," she said. "That would be like choosing to live in an alleyway because life was too boring."

Lunsdie chuckled, and his pointed snout drew a breath of the dusty air. The farm stunk of animal dung, but there were pleasant scents to enjoy here as well; drying grain and growing plants, curing meat and air that had never been dirtied by city life, freshly cut boards and a nearby stream. "At least *you* have someone. You have no idea—"

"I have someone to help keep the farm running," she corrected him. "I have someone to help raise the crops, feed the stock, mend the fences, to *try* and make this damned place profitable. And yes, I would dearly love to raise a pup or two, that would be the greatest experience ever … *for me.* But that won't ever happen unless we can get to a point where I could take a few months off. And trust me, we're nowhere close to that point now."

She reappeared at the edge of the loft, taking a moment to wipe the sweat out of her eyes with the back of her wrist. Then she leaned against her span and studied him with serious eyes. "And if we can *somehow* get to that point *someday,* then—and only then—will I let Djebri try out the 'business' he keeps in his 'case' as your new alien buddy so adorably put it."

Lunsdie opened his muzzle to say something, but Sbarrie talked right over him. "And even if we do get to that point, he knows we're gonna scour that thing down with every bit of antiseptic soap I can lay my paws on. It's *not* gonna be particularly fun for anyone, so if you're letting hormones cloud your judgement, then you really need to take a step back and rethink your priorities."

Lunsdie hung his head low, sulking for a long while as his friend returned to her work. "At least you have someone to talk to," he muttered.

"What are you crying about?" shouted Sbarrie. "You get to talk to more people than anyone I know! *And* you have *me* to talk to! Sheesh. If it weren't for you, I'd *only* have Djebri for company."

She peeked over the edge of the loft once more, her ears wide in the grin that always made Lunsdie feel a little better. "I'd go stark-raving mad."

At long last, Lunsdie managed a slight smile.