Issue Forty-Five

YARF!

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THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS



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YARF!

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Adventures in Fine Dining
Cover by Rich Hernandez

Flaming Hairballs 2
Yarf! Staff

Not Freefall 2
Mark Stanley

Envelope Art 2
Amy Pronovost

A Silly Meaningless Thread 4
Grant Preston

***Robert and Katrina:* Fashion Statement** 5
Kris Kreutzman

Patten's Pontifications 6
Fred Patten

***Ralph the Wonder Hamster:* Floating Debris** 9
Jim Alves • Roy D. Pounds II

Catnip Overdrive 14
Jason Gaffney

Stereotypes 15
Jason Gaffney

Treetop Views 16
Bernard Doove

Sabrina: Skunk Sorceress Supreme 17
Bernard Doove

Dreamtime Shaman 18
Amy Pronovost

The Scout 19
Amy Pronovost

Foreplay 20
Grant Preston

Orientations 21
Tal Greywolf

***Kettjara:* Status Quo** 29
Summer Jackson

Sliders 44
Bryon Havranek

Ivory Trade 45
Dave Schneberger

Family Outing 53
Bill Fitts

Private Performance 54
Terrie Smith

Strictly 'Taur-Room 55
Terry Knight

The Bandits 56
Brock Hoagland • Steve Corbett

***MP:* Waterbed Warehouse** 60
Hollie Domiano

Thaddeus 60
Joe Ekaitis

The Answer at Last! (Maybe) 61
Todd Smith

Happy Howlidays
Back Cover by Kris Kreutzman

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FLAMING HAIRBALLS

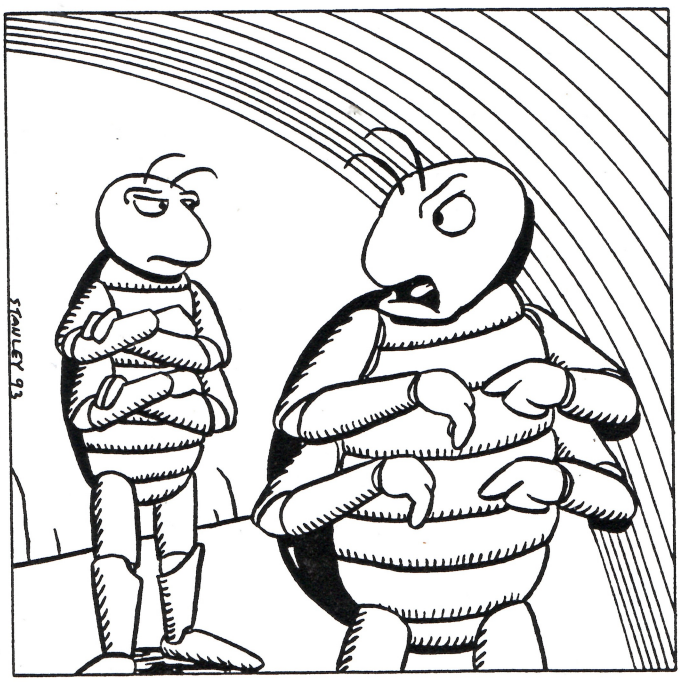
Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from you to us and from us to you.

The *Yarf!* Media Watch marches on with yet more items of interest. Matt McCullar tells us that Brock Hoagland's story "The Apprentice Mage", which originally appeared in *Yarf!* issue thirty-eight, has been published in illustrated form in Shanda Fantasy Arts' *New Horizons*. Congratulations, Brock!

The British fanzine *Erg Quarterly* issue 135 contains a catalog-style paragraph on the new edition of *An Anthropomorphic Bibliography*. Thanks to Terry Jeeves for giving us the plug. For those who may be interested in obtaining this fine publication, we would like to point out that plenty of copies are still available.

The October 1996 issue of *Animation World* magazine contains a special feature on "Axis animation of World War II: Germany, Holland, and Japan" — three illustrated articles on little-known theatrical animated cartoons made during the war years in those countries. All were funny-animal cartoons, and while the subject matter and characters may be a trifle off-putting to modern audiences, the fact remains that this is an important piece of "furry history" brought to light.

Joe Strike of New York discovered an interesting sidelight in the 27 October 1996 issue of *The New York Times* — a small article on furry-costume enthusiasts, focusing primarily on James Firmiss of Madison, WI. Though riddled with inaccuracies, as is typical of the general news media when examining offbeat subcultures, the item is reasonably positive in tone.



"I am not fat! I'm just big carapaced!"

And last but not least, the Media Watch focuses on the recent combined animation/live-action theatrical release *Space Jam*. There's been a fair amount of debate over this film's merits in the community — not all of it on-target, we feel.

First off, it's probably best to regard *Space Jam* as a basketball movie featuring Michael Jordan and the Looney Tunes rather than as a true cartoon. Secondly, while we all regret the passing of Mel Blanc, whose brilliant talent forever defined the voices of the Looney Tunes, it is somewhat unfair to give short shrift to the efforts of his successors in continuing the traditions he began. Last, but certainly not least, is Lola Bunny. Perhaps we could have seen more of her, and perhaps what we did see might not have been to everyone's liking, but it is refreshing to see a new character, even so.

The *Yarf!* staff gives *Space Jam* a conditional thumb's-up; it may not be *Roger Rabbit* — but it exhibits no pretention to being such. And remember, if we, the viewing public, don't support such efforts by the studios, they won't make any more.



Found on the Internet by Richard Chandler and presented without comment. . . .

"Weasel Help" Defined

Example A — Loading the Dishwasher:

1. Open the dishwasher.
2. Take the weasel out.
3. Put away clean dishes.
4. Take the other weasel out.
5. Rinse pots and place in bottom rack.
6. Reach *waaaaay* in, pluck the first weasel out of the standing water in back.
7. Load the plates.
8. Take both weasels out.
9. Load the glasses.
10. Swear a lot, reach in, pluck *both* weasels out of the standing water in back.
11. Load the bowls.
12. Take the first weasel out.
13. Load the soap dish.
14. Stop the second weasel from eating the soap.
15. Close the dishwasher and latch it.
16. Count the weasels.
17. Open the dishwasher, take out the first weasel.
18. Close the dishwasher and latch it again.
19. Count the weasels.
20. All weasels accounted for. Start the dishwasher.

Example B — Making the Bed:

1. Get laundry basket containing fresh sheets.
2. Evict weasels from nest therein.
3. Spread out bottom sheet.
4. Extract first weasel from under sheet.
5. Smooth out first sheet, tuck it in.
6. Pull toes away from playful weasel teeth uner bed.
7. Evict second weasel from laundry basket.
8. Spread out top sheet.
9. Remove first weasel from under top sheet.
10. Pry second weasel loose from ankle.
11. Obtain blanket.
12. Shake out weasel.

. . . et cetera until bed is made or psychosis sets in. . . .

Deadlines (Aren't you excited?)

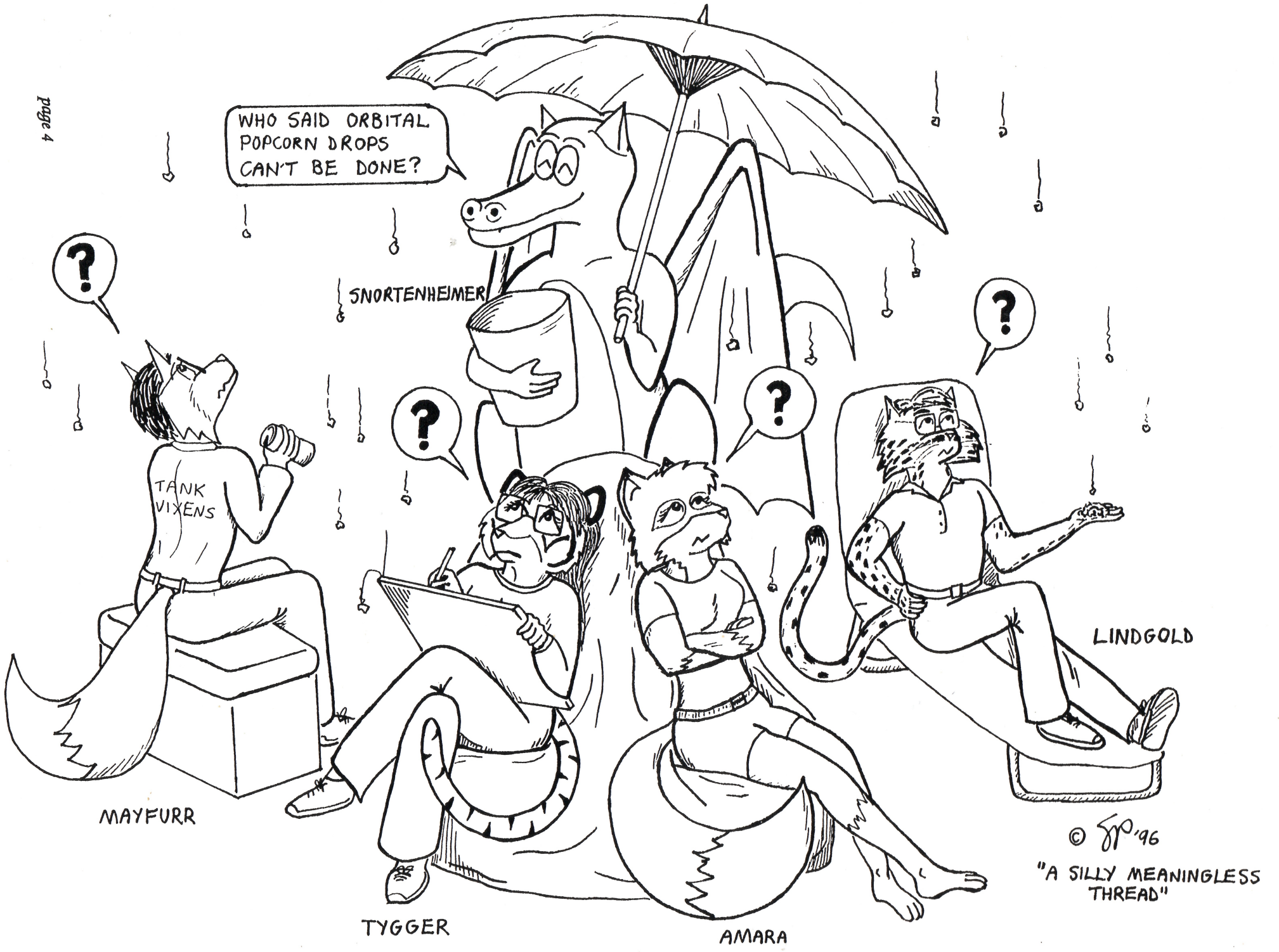
Please remember that the deadlines below are *not* written in stone, and are subject to change without notice. A good rule of thumb to remember is that deadlines are the last day of every even-numbered month.

#47: 28 February 1997
#48: 30 April 1997
#49: 30 June 1997
#50: 31 August 1997





Posters from Confurence East: left, for Mitch Beiro's "Midnight Over Minerva" program (by Mitch Beiro); right, for Chuck Davies' and Robin Leyden's room party (by Chuck Davies).


WHO SAID ORBITAL POPCORN DROPS CAN'T BE DONE?
SNORTENHEIMER
TANK VIXENS
MAYFURR
TYGGER
AMARA
LINDGOLD
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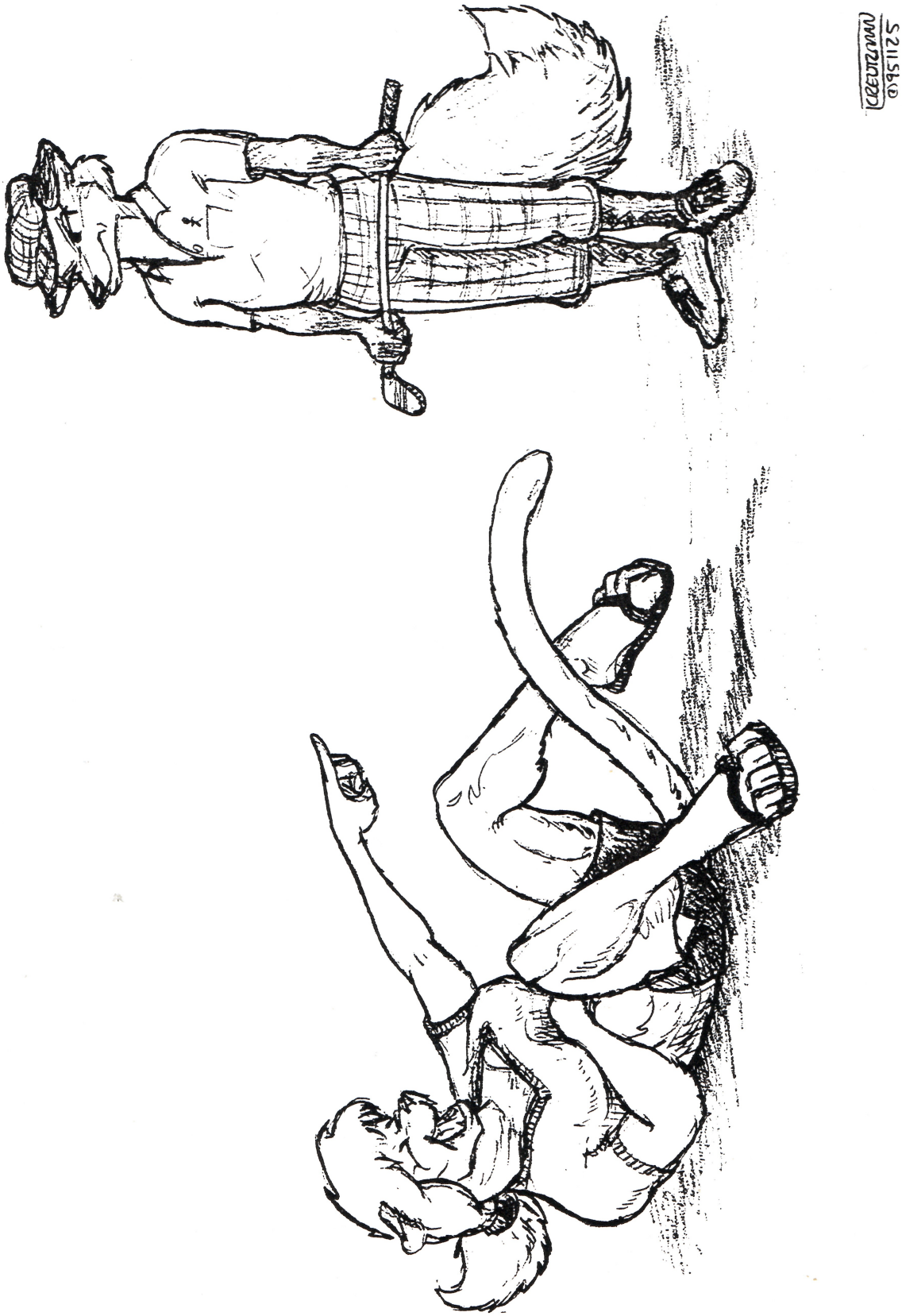
"A SILLY MEANINGLESS THREAD"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Patten's Pontifications

by Fred Patten

***Cowkind*, by Ray Petersen. New York City, A Wyatt Book for St. Martin's Press, June 1996, viii + 195 pages, $21.95; ISBN: 0-312-14302-8.**

Cows are an unusual cast for serious fiction. But *Cowkind* is an unusual novel. Its topic is rural America in a time of transition at the end of the 1960s, from the viewpoints of both the farmers and the livestock.

Cowkind is told in twelve chapters, each focusing on a different character at Bob Scott's dairy farm in upstate New York. The first seven chapters relate the viewpoints of five of Farmer Bob's milk cows and their calves, White John, the stud bull, and King, the border collie. The remaining five chapters switch the focus to the humans: Farmer Bob, his wife, son, and daughter, with a final shift back to the cows in the next-to-last chapter.

Petersen develops the overall scene slowly in a convoluted, jigsaw manner. The novel not only moves from character to character, but jumps around in time, from the present (1971) back to 1968 and working forward again, with flashbacks in each chapter to still earlier events.

The daily farm routine is all that the characters have known from "time immemorial". Farmer Bob inherited the farm from his father and expects to leave it to his teenage son Gerry. The pattern of life to Bob is growing up on the farm as a boy, undergoing a rite of manhood by fighting for America as a teen (his father in World War I, himself in World War II), then returning to the farm to work it until old age and death. The dairy herd have their similar life, the Order — the same from day to day, comfortably familiar.

The opening establishes that the characters are nervous and uneasy without knowing why. Changes are coming that bewilder them. The cows are distraught that Bob and Gerry and their part-time helper, Bob's brother Merle, have replaced traditional hand-milking with milking machines. Bossy, Daisy, and the others do not understand why the human men who used to give them such personal, caring attention have abandoned them to be hooked up to cold machines. Pet has heard the men saying something about the milk going into "tanks", and they have also overheard "tanks" talked about on the farm TV's newscasts about the Vietnam War, so the cattle wonder whether they have somehow become involved in this war to which Gerry is so opposed.

Bob himself is no more comfortable with the changing world. He only realizes that his farm is losing money, that it is becoming increasingly old-fashioned, and that to stay out of bankruptcy he must invest in lots of modern technology he does not really trust. He also does not know how the government can take away part of his farm for things like power-line right-of-ways. He reacts by concentrating on the one thing that he feels he *can* understand and control: his family. *He was just as traditional about how the house should be run. Men worked outside and women worked inside, except when the men needed help. Inside, men were waited on, served their three square meals — breakfast, dinner, and supper.* (pg. 5) But this Biblically patriarchial way of life is as old-fashioned as his farming methods.

To anthropomorphic fans, the best part of *Cowkind* is the first two-thirds of the novel. It starts by establishing the cattle as individuals with distinct personalities and their own small society. This Order, and the cows' religion, the Gathering, are gradually revealed as the cows discuss the changes that are taking place and what they will mean. These changes are first glimpsed in a distorted manner from the cows' viewpoints. (Petersen shows a thorough knowledge of farm routine and the actual sociology of dairy cattle.) The reader will later translate them into human terms and realize what is really happening. There are also parallels between the tensions and problems introduced with the cattle and what is later seen happening in Farmer Bob's family.

It is technically unfortunate from our standpoint that the cows' society gradually fades into the background as the story increasingly focuses upon the Scotts and their problems. But Petersen is a good enough writer that the reader will remain engrossed until the end. This is good, because there is an anthropomorphic surprise in the last chapter. The social situation among the cows, and the relationship between King and the neighboring farm's dog, Scout, make *Cowkind* worth reading even if they do not fill the book. Most intriguing is Aretha, the mystical cow, a Cassandra whose nightmarish visions of where the trends in modern farming are leading are mocked by her stablemates:

Aretha was lost in a vision of the future, delirious. She saw calves stillborn, aborted spontaneously, born as monsters with two heads, no legs, calves destroyed by the ruin of the air and the land. She saw all the elders slaughtered, no cows allowed to grow old, none ever let outside to graze or to feel sunshine, cows alive only to give milk or their flesh for humans to eat. Each vision was more frightening than the previous one. Supercows — the product of chemicals and growth hormones, until humans were afraid of milk, cheese, and butter from real cows. Then vats of bacteria digesting grain and grass, oozing out milk that had never touched a cow's stomach. Finally extinction, humans completely cut off from the rest of creation, and doing their best to accelerate the process. (pg. 147)

Animorphs: The Invasion, by K. A. Applegate. Front. New York, Scholastic Inc./Apple Paperback, June 1996, 184 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-590-62977-8.

Animorphs: The Visitor, by K. A. Applegate. Front. New York, Scholastic Inc./Apple Paperback, June 1996, 175 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-590-62978-6.

Animorphs: The Encounter, by K. A. Applegate. Front. New York, Scholastic Inc./Apple Paperbacks, August 1996, 154 pages [pgs. 155-157 are adv'ts], $3.99; ISBN: 0-590-62979-4.

Animorphs: The Message, by K. A. Applegate. Front. New York, Scholastic Inc./Apple Paperbacks, October 1996, 151 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-590-62980-8.

Animorphs: The Predator, by K. A. Applegate. Front. New York, Scholastic Inc./Apple Paperbacks, December 1996, 152 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-590-62981-6.

This series is a new entry in the juvenile/adolescent horror series paperback market. Instead of featuring independent weird fantasies like R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* best-sellers, it is a super-hero serial that should be read in order for best effect. Each novel presents a complete adventure, but while the first three stand on their own nicely, there is enough back story by the fourth to make it inadvisable to start reading that far into the series.

A good "high concept" summary of *Animorphs* would be "Marvel Comics' *Power Pack* juvenile super-heroes tumble into Robert Heinlein's *Puppet Masters* world." Jake, Rachel, Tobias, Marco, and Cassie are five junior-high-school good buddies (a P.C. gender/ethnic mix), returning to their homes from hanging out at the mall one evening. They are cutting across an abandoned construction project when a battle-battered flying saucer crash-lands almost on top of them. Its vaguely deer-centauroid pilot, a mortally wounded heroic Andalite, reveals that his planet is fighting the evil Yeerks who are trying to conquer the galaxy. The Yeerks (*"...a gray-green, slimy thing like a snail without its shell, only bigger, the size of a rat, maybe." The Invasion*, pg. 17) have recently discovered Earth. They are establishing their beachhead in the kids' home town by crawling into people's ears and taking over their bodies. The city government, the police force, their teachers, anybody could be a Yeerk puppet by now. The dying Andalite prince has sent a galactic radio message to his distant planet to come to Earth's aid, but Earth may be totally enslaved before their armada can get here. Only the five teens can save Earth, by delaying the spread of the Yeerks until the Andalites arrive!

The Andalite's last act is to give the buddies his species' super-scientific power to morph into any kind of animal. As dogs or cats, they can spy unnoticed and discover which of their neighbors are now Yeerk thralls. As birds, they can observe from great heights. They can sneak into Yeerk control centers as mice, then turn into elephants and trample irreplaceable equipment. And so forth.

The writing generates a reasonable degree of suspense, if you don't mind the super-hero/horror-movie level of science or logic. (The Yeerks' takeover method postulates some cavernlike gap inside human skulls, where the evil slugs can sit upon and control people's brains. The young heroes' super-scientific ability to "acquire an animal's DNA" and rearrange their mass into its duplicate begs the question of how an average junior-high student can expand into a five-ton elephant, or contract into a tiny flea.) The Yeerks' leader, Visser Three, is convincingly in the Darth Vader mold — absolutely ruthless and nobody's fool. The teens are no enthusiastic Superboys and Wonder Girls; they are scared kids, very aware of the impossible odds against them. They know that their animal abilities are no real match for ray guns and other deadly sci-fi weapons. They must figure out how best to use their powers in commando-style hit-and-run raids. Tobias gets frozen in hawk form at the end of the first novel, raising the fear in the others that they may also become permanently exiled from humanity.

Animorphs is not about anthropomorphic characters in the talking-animal sense. It is about how way-cool it would be to become whatever real animal you wanted to, just long enough to try it out. The stories are also "educational" in describing how animals presumably really think and how they are controlled by instinct, without any romantic anthropomorphization. *"It wasn't easy, that first time. Being a dog is so completely amazing. For one thing, there's nothing halfway about it. You're never* sort of *happy. You're HAPPY. You're never sort of bummed. You're totally, completely bummed. And boy, when you get hungry in dog form, you are nuts on the subject of food."* (*The Invaders*, pg. 65-66.) *"It was definitely a tom's scent. A tomcat had marked this pole by peeing on it. He was a dominant cat. Very dominant. His smell made me nervous. Not afraid, just a little less arrogant than I had been. If this cat appeared, I would have to submit. I would have to make myself smaller and less threatening and accept his dominance."* (*The Visitor*, pg. 85.) *"One of those alpha males was Jake. The other was an actual wolf. Jake had human intelligence on his side. But if it came to a fight, the other wolf had more experience. He hadn't gotten to be the head wolf in his pack by losing fights."* (*The Encounter*, pg. 57.)

There are five teens, and the first five novels are narrated by Jake, Rachel, Tobias, Cassie, and Marco, respectively. The first three present variations on the basic plot. *The Message* introduces Ax, an Andalite adolescent marooned on Earth, whom they rescue from Visser Three. *The Predator* integrates Ax into the team, and increases the tension as the Yeerks begin to suspect that they have active opponents among the humans. At least two more in the series are advertised. Since these are Apple Paperbacks, the name K. A. Applegate sounds suspiciously pseudonymous, although their copyright is in the corroborative name of Katherine Applegate.

This is a different take on anthropomorphics, one that emphasizes the *sensations* of *you* galloping on four hooves, of feeling razor-sharp claws sliding out from *your* paws, of *you* soaring in the air almost a mile up and then diving toward a tiny target at sixty miles an hour. Fortunately, these scenes are more convincing than those with the comic-book physics and melodrama.

***The Pearls of Lutra: A Tale of Redwall*, by Brian Jacques. Illus. by Allan Curless. London, Hutchinson Children's Books, July 1996, 406 pages, £12.99; ISBN: 0-09-176536-6.**

Jacques' ninth *Redwall* novel is more of the same. Once again a horde of dastardly vermin (piratical rats, stoats, ferrets, and similar predators) threaten the peace-loving squirrels, moles, and other woodland animals of Redwall Abbey. There are multiple interlocked stories, poetry in the form of both songs and riddles, deadly backstabbing treachery among the villains, and plenty of luscious feasting among the Redwallers.

Ublaz Mad Eyes, a pine marten who is the most cunning and vicious of the pirates of the tropical isle of Sampetra, has proclaimed himself emperor. He orders his corsair fleet to steal six fabulous pearls, the Tears of All Oceans, from the otter Holt of Lutra. The otters are slain, with one exception, but the pearls (through a series of misadventures) end up hidden inside Redwall Abbey. Ublaz sends his most loyal pirates to get the pearls from Redwall, which they attempt by kidnapping elderly Abbot Durral (mouse) and young Viola (a tomboyish bankvole) and demanding the pearls as ransom.

The Abbey's defenders, led by Martin the Warriormouse (grandson of the Martin of the original *Redwall*), go on a quest to rescue their friends. Meanwhile, the greedy pirates have tired of Ublaz's cruelties (he sadistically murders his own supporters when he runs out of innocent victims) and mutiny to seize his throne and loot — ineffectively, since they are also busy doublecrossing each other. Grath Longfletch, the sole survivor of Holt Lutra, is waging her own lone-otter war of vengeance. And Tansy hedgehog, Recorder Rollo bankvole, and their friends back at the Abbey try to decipher the cryptic puzzles that tell where the six pearls are hidden. The adventure switches back and forth from one tale to another, merging and separating, until all threads converge at the climax.

If this plot is familiar, its elements have become honed and polished rather than stale. The poetry is more catchy and sprightly, the riddles (one for each pearl) are more varied, the villains are more intelligently sinister, the Redwall banquets are more mouth-watering, the adorable Abbey orphans have grown so impishly cute that you want to wring their necks. And there are some touches of originality, notably Ublaz's personal guard of carnivorous monitor lizards, a cold-blooded (naturally) gang of assassins. *The Pearls of Lutra* is a distillation of all the best elements of the *Redwall* series.

***Catfantastic IV*, edited by Andre Norton & Martin H. Greenberg. New York, DAW Books, August 1996, 314 pages, $5.99; ISBN: 0-88677-711-9.**

Here is another "more of the same". After a two-and-a-half-year wait since *Catfantastic III*, this fourth anthology of brand-new stories contains eighteen tales featuring cats.

The stories are "weird", using the late nineteenth-century popular meaning of that word. Mercedes Lackey's "SCat", about two telepathic cats on a spaceship who help their human partner track down galactic smugglers, is clearly science-fiction. P. M. Griffin's "The Neighbor", about a sorcerer, his young apprentice, and their two cat familiars who track down a murderer in their medieval European neighborhood, is clearly fantasy. What about Janet Pack's "One With Jazz", in which a jazz fan trying to get a job as a talent scout for a record company finds that his otherwise apparently normal pet cat has an uncanny talent for picking hot new bands? Twelve of these eighteen stories are clear-cut fantasies, four are SF, and two are "normal" except for the cat's metaphorically winking at the reader.

The statistics get fuzzier broken down by types of cat. There is one story with an intelligent felinoid alien, and one with bioengineered intelligent cats. Five have cats that pretend to be normal, but talk secretly (by sign language, telepathy, or speech) with their human companions. In three, it is revealed that all cats have human-level intelligence but are hiding it. Two are fantasies with divine cats, and in one of those, Bast gives speech to all cats. Two are about loveable but obviously "dumb" cats in SF or magical situations. Most of the rest leave the reader guessing as to just how intelligent their cats really are.

For readers of the previous *Catfantastic* anthologies, there are six sequels continuing the adventures of cats previously introduced: P. M. Griffin's "The Neighbor" (with Master Trouble), Mercedes Lackey's "SCat" (with SKitty and SCat), Lyn McConchie's "Deathsong" (with Many Kills), Andre Norton's "Noble Warrior, Teller of Fortunes" (with Thragun Neklop), Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's "Born Again" (with Mu Mao the Magnificent), and Mary H. Schaub's "The Cat, the Sorcerer, and the Magic Mirror" (with Drop, the cat previously turned into a boy apprentice, who is a cat again).

All of these stories are strongly pro-cat. It would be nice to say that all are pro-animal, but the atmosphere is more *katzen über alles* than pan-animalistic, and there are a couple of definitely snide comments about dogs. It is an open secret that most SF authors are cat people; in fact, one of the panels at the 1996 World Science Fiction Convention was, "Are There Too Many Cats in Science Fiction?" Obviously, not in the opinion of the authors of *Catfantastic IV*.


WHAT A ROTTEN, REVOLTING, STINKIN' DEVELOPMENT....
OH-NOW YOU HUSH- AND HAND ME THAT MAP-
CREAK!
HMMMMM!
NREEE!
VRRNN!
KLIK!
WUBBA-
WUBBA-
WUBBA!
BIP-
BIP-
BIP-
BIP!
SCREEEE!
MAPS
WELL, HAVE WE MADE THE "UP-ABOVE" STATION?
OOOH! PRETTY LITES!
PULL
A FEW MOMENTS PLEASE-THANKS
PLEASE.
HMMM-
HMM-HMM-
POKE
POKE
UGH - 2 TRANSIT TRIPS- MY FUR AIN'T EVER GONNA BE THE SAME-
SLAM!
OW!
DO BE CAREFUL-
WHICH WAYS "OUT" ON THIS CRAZY MAP?
LETSEE - UM - LEFT TURN AT ALBUQUERQUE? OR WAS IT CIMARRON?
FOR RENT


MEANWHILE:
roof
THANKS, HARRY- GOOD OF YOU TO TAKE MY LUGGAGE UPSTAIRS...
HEXIPED HIDEAWAY
HEAVE!
OOF!
GASP!
GRUNT
POP
CREEAAK
HURGH
SK*ZZZZZ
Strainnn!!
JUST PUT IT OVER THERE
Ralph the Wonder Hamster IN: FLOATING DEBRIS PART X
-O.K...
WHEEZE
GASP
STAGGER!
© JAMES W. ALVES 1996
SHEILA DE MARAFFEY & T.B. FROM H-
© SCOTT THOMAS
WHOT DUH?
STUMBLE!
KER-A-SH!
RUMBLE TUMBLE
OW!
IZZAT YOU, SHEICA?
HIC!
WADDUH 3@☆#!!? THIS AIN'T A ☆!2※#" STORE -N-STEAL" YA STOOPED @1※#!
BELCH!
OOOOPS!


LOOK YOU LITTIE!10 @☆# HEAD WHATS THE BIG IDEA STIFFEN' ME FER 2
AN' GIVIN' ME THE *9!#?!! RUNAROUND AN' THEN TRYIN' TA SUBLET
PLACE FOR A BUNCH'O ‡(☆£8)! AN' WEARIN' NICE THAT MU
OST AN' ARM AN' A LEG YA LITTLE PEICE O' @#7☆! TO DR
A LOAD OF JUNK ON MY HEAD YOU DIRTY ⚽≡*6 AN'
FURTHERMORE-
BURRAAP!
BUT-BUT-BUT-BUT-...
WHAT I GOTTA DO FOR A 5 CREDIT TIP- JEEZ!
IF'N I DON'T GET SOME @! #5☆*! MONEY TOMORROW- I'M LOCKIN' YER ☆4#π÷! FURRY BUTT OUT!- HIC
PPPFFT
BREEEP
SLURP-
-OH YEAH-THERE'S A COUPLA ☆@3#!! CREEPS 'TA SEE YOUSE- I'LL #‡☆2! SEND 'EM UP-CIAO-
PROP. OF COL. G. THYNE
BELCH!
STOMP- STOMP- STOMP!


OFF THE ROCK FURRY!
ED HIDEAWAY
WELL, I GUESS- STICK IT OVER THERE - FOR NOW - WATCH YOUR HEAD!
SKEE!
BEEP
UM-HI SHEILA- THIS IS STAN- THEY'RE CRACKIN' DOWN ON FURRIES- NOW THAT THE PONG- CONVENTION IS OVER — CLICK
BEEP
-UM, BY THE WAY- YOU'RE FIRED.
BEEP
UH, UMM... AH... WELL- UM CAN WE STILL BE FRIENDS?
BEEEEEEEEEEEP
HOPE THAT'S ENOUGH- SORRY FOR THE TROUBLE-
SIGH....
BLARN FARGLE RIPPIN' TREES! NOGOOD FRAPPIN' SL- OW!
SLAM
WATCH YOUR HEAD-
OH DEAR....
BETTER CHECK MY MESSAGES
WELL, THERE GOES THAT JOB
AND HE WASN'T VERY NICE... SNIFF
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
OH - NOW WHAT?
Rather a Nasty little Land Lady, wasn't she? Considering the Locale- Sadly, Par for the Cour-
CREEK
Doops!
OFF THE ROCK FURR
YES?


Excuse us - but we're rather pressed for time — Ahem — This will only take a moment —
I'll SET UP OVER HERE —
WOOSH!
HEY! THAT'S NOT NICE! LET GO!
OW!
SLAM!
HISS!
BAZORP!
Over there
GET YOUR HANDS OFF
SLAP!
Not this one —
No?
This one.
CLICK
BUZZZZ-BUZZZ-BU
OH MY!
OH MY!
CLATTER
CLATTER
ZIP-ZORP-Z
ZIP-ZORP-ZIP
THUMPITY-THUMP!
CRASH!
CRUNCH!
Careful there —
THUMPITY-THUMP!
BZZZZ BZZZ
CAN'T FIGURE OUT THIS DEFENSE PLAN - HUH ...
WHAT'S GOING ON UPSTAIRS - NOW?
BOOP
BIP
BIP
SCRATCH! SCRATCH!
THAT FELINE MORF MUST BE DOING SOMETHING RUDE WITH THAT LLAMA AND A HUMANOID ...
THUMP!
CHEEZ IT — MAMMALS.
W.E.D. ON ICE?
HEY! WHAT DUH *#16?
I'VE LOST MY SOAP!
BUZZZZ!
BLIP! BLIP!
Is she coming?
NOPE - YOU'D BETTER CLEAN IT UP —
OFF THE ROCK FURRT!
SHEILA DE NAHAFFEY
TO BE CONTINED. WE HOPE!

CATNIP OVERDRIVE

by Jason Gaffney

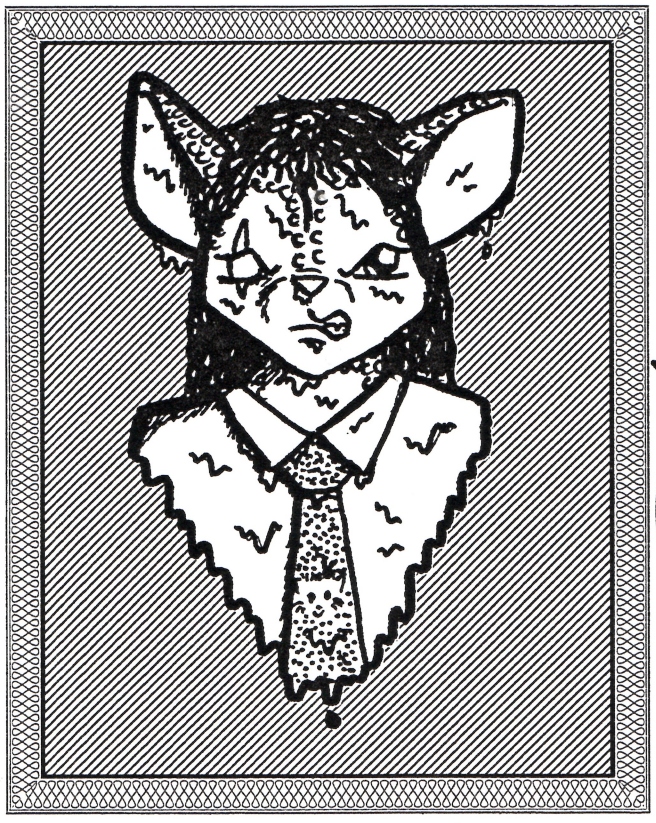
Chapter 12

Only the stench of sodden wet fur overpowered the cold clamminess Brett felt as he trudged unabated through the sheet like rain. He knew it would rain; he knew he would get wet. The scent of impending downpour yelled at him to get indoors. So why didn't he?

Stupid bloody door-to-door selling. That's why.

The only thing he knew that wasn't wet was the merchandise. The company, in all its sweet sickening heart, had supplied him with a waterproof carry bag. Of course the sales staff were meant to look their tiptop best in their suits and ties. And of course, just like the post office, they were expected to work rain, hail, or shine. At least the post office gave you raincoats.

A bus stop overhang finally presented itself in the teaming downpour, a presence which Brett graciously accepted. Now there was the thrumming of rain on corrugated iron rather than the splattering of rain on his matted hair. A small consolation but not much.



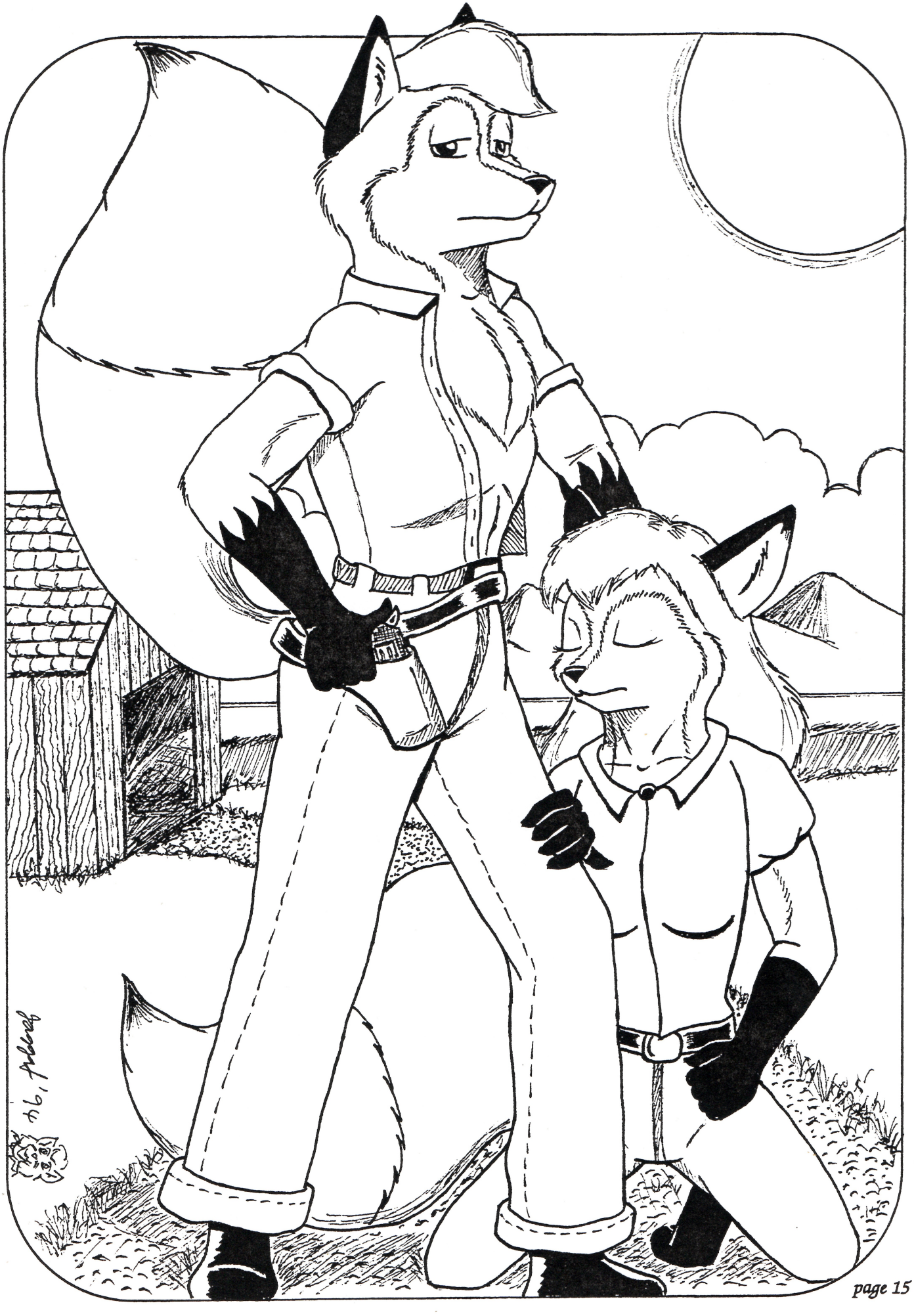
In this brief period of shelter Brett opened his carry bag and once more stared at the item which would live on in his mind. A human doll, probably female but only because it wore a dress. Hadn't these mythical beings come out of fashion yet? As a morning cartoon he avoided it constantly, mainly because he had enough sugar on his cereal and didn't need another saccharine induced rush. But now the doll didn't represent the sick twisted minds of some warped company. All it represented now was money; money to pay the rent, the electricity, the phone, the ...

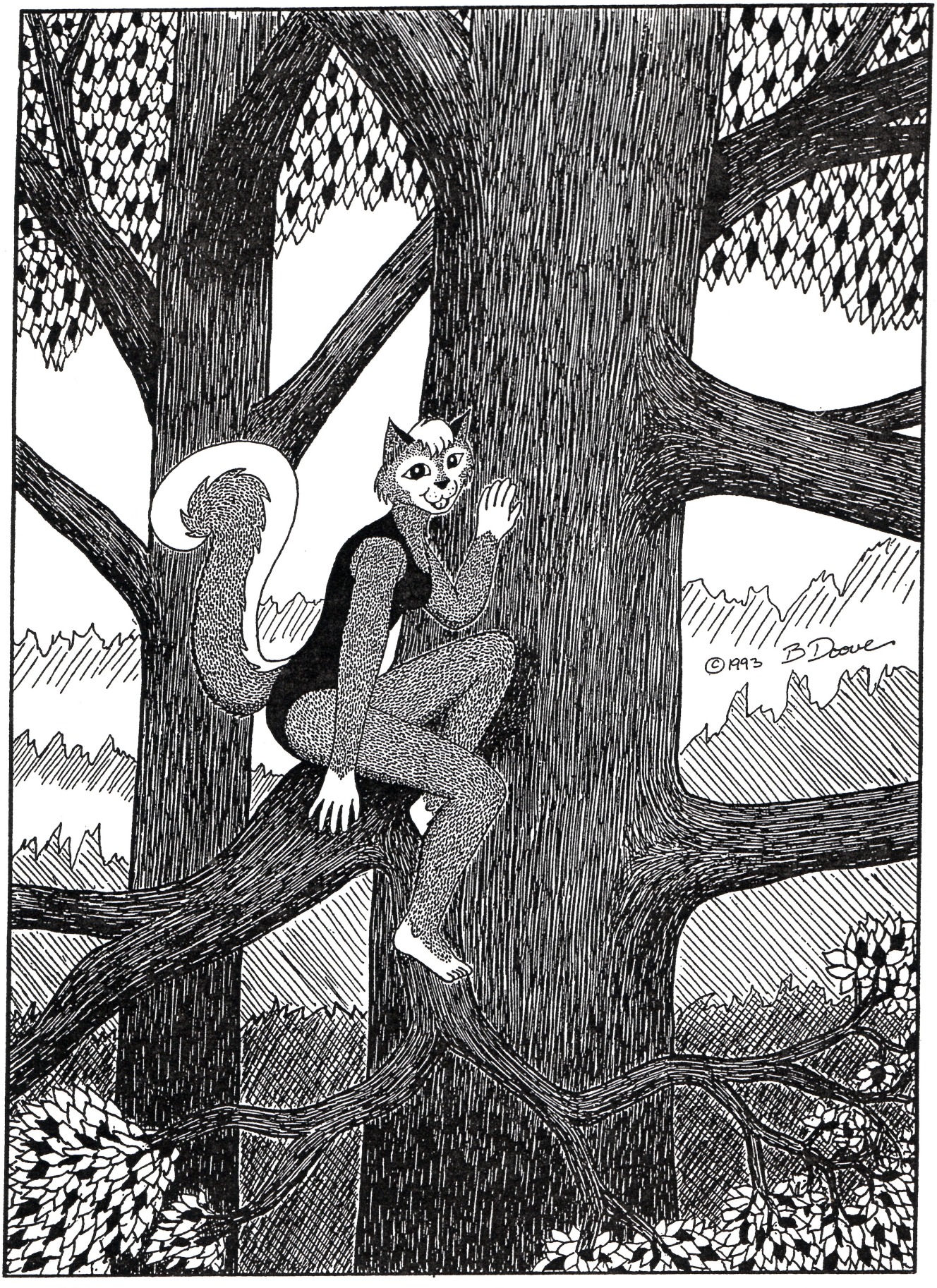
The unemployment. Fond memories flooded back (or was it the rain in his ears) of sleeping to twelve, eating left over curry from last night, and watching bad talk shows through the afternoon. That and it paid better too.

"Hell, I'm not going to take any of this shit any more," yelled Brett, unaware that he was acting like a bad, over-cliched movie. "I'm going to give up this path of coolness and take up the righteous path of slovenliness." Brett, however, was even more unaware that he was sounding remarkably like a certain sci-fi show and if he didn't want to get the pants sued out from under his tail he was going to have to stop this line of thought immediately. Brett thought this statement over.

"Okay, how about I say stuff this job and I get back to collecting unemployment."

As there were no complaints it was agreed upon that Brett would quit his job and, by default, end this story arc which seems to be getting rather tedious and, quite frankly, brings back too many bad memories. Of course this doesn't seem to stop Brett from making rash accusations and buggering up this text with his speech bubbles which does nothing for the layout of this story. Hey, you might as well look at the other pages in this book because there doesn't seem to be much happening any more in this one.





"TREETOP VIEWS"



SABRINA : SKUNK SORCERESS SUPREME


-A·PRO'96-


-A-PRO'96-



"FOREPLAY"

• ORIENTATIONS •

• A UNIVERSITY DAYS STORY BY TAL GREYWOLF •

"Have you seen the new guy?"

"Which one?"

"There's only one that came in last night. Someone named Jared, or Jaren . . . something like that."

"Figures you'd know the name. Did you see him?"

"No. The shuttle arrived late last night, after I went to bed."

"You mean after you went to see Tomas, you mean."

"Now wait one damn minute. . . ."

I ignored the conversation next to me. Once more, the rumor patrol was running at full steam. All they'd be able to talk about today was the new arrival. If it wasn't someone new, it would have been who was sleeping with whom, or who'd broken up recently. And that bit of news was something I wasn't interested in hearing about.

I went back to eating my breakfast. Class was in twenty minutes, and I didn't want to be late. Besides, by working on my meal, maybe I could tune out the twitterings from those next to me.

A shadow crossed my plate, and I looked up to see Fariss taking the seat across from me. I sighed and stopped eating.

"So, kit, have you heard about the new arrival?" He looked at me expectantly.

I tilted my head to the group behind me. "That's all they can talk about. Only thing is that no one has seen him yet."

"I'm not surprised. He arrived at 0200. The Mardara shuttle was running very late last night."

I nodded absently at his comment. "Well, more than likely we'll see him around later on." I started eating again, but Fariss' next comment made me stop.

"I also heard you broke up with Wyn, dear."

"Yeah." I put my fork down, and looked at him. "She didn't exactly want to keep the relationship going."

"And was it worth continuing?" He waited patiently as I thought for a moment.

"No. I got tired of the bullshit after a while. She was good for me when I needed it. But now?" I shrugged my shoulders, my tail twitching behind me. "I don't need her any more."

"So what are you going to do now?"

I sighed. "Right now, I need time to myself. Get my own life back in order, then decide what sort of relationship I want."

He nodded in understanding. "I'm glad you can see that, Shara. If you want to talk, you know where to find me." He rose from his chair, and I watched him quickly head out the door. For a moment I wondered why he was so concerned about me, then realized the reasons. He was one of my first friends here, as well as being a group counselor. He'd have reasons to worry about me, and not all of them professional. It made me feel a little better.

I looked at the chrono on the wall, then back at my breakfast. During the talk with Fariss, it had gotten cold. Sighing, I went over to the recycler, dumped it and headed out the door to class.

• • •

Everyone was waiting for Professor Salis to enter. He was running rather late, which was highly unusual for him. Promptness was his middle name, some students claimed. Most of the conversations were about his tardiness, with the general view that something must have happened to him. Finally he entered the classroom with someone behind him.

"Students, I would like you to meet our new arrival. His name is Jarin Hadrison, and he's just transferred from the university on Mardara."

I took a good look at him. He was Mardaran, a wolf recom, which was a bit unusual to begin with. Physically, he was striking, standing nearly two meters tall. His fur was a dark brown with some black coloration mixed in. What struck me was not his physical form, though, but his emotions. For some reason, he gave the impression of being quite embarrassed by all the attention. Quietly he took a seat in the far right row near the door. Professor Salis, ignoring the obvious questions on everyone's minds, sailed to his podium and began lecturing.

I halfway listened to the lecture, my mind being more on Jarin. There was something elusive about him, something that fascinated me. He was trying to concentrate on what the professor was speaking on and the lesson instead of everyone else in class. At one point, he glanced around

the room and our eyes locked. A look of startlement crossed his face, as if he had seen something he didn't expect. I was rather startled by his reaction as well, my natural curiosity wondering what it was that he saw in me.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of the lesson, I quickly grabbed my books and looked to where Jarin had been sitting. Instead of him getting together, I found myself looking at an empty chair. He had slipped out of the room the moment class was dismissed.

Jarin was in three of my other classes that day. From what I could tell, he had a fairly heavy load for someone new. I never got the chance to talk to him during any of the classes, and during lunch I found out that no one else had been able to talk to him. Finally, classes were over for the day and we had about an hour before dinner. Since that was a communal function, I figured that would be the best time to try and meet him.

I had just finished taking a shower and was trying to get my fur dry when someone knocked on the door.

"Shara? It's Mirana. You decent?"

"Not really, but come on in."

The door quickly opened and Mirana slipped inside. "Sorry, dear, but I wanted a chance to talk to you. Did you see the new student?"

"He's in four of my classes."

Mirana gave a low whistle. "Lucky you. He is a looker, isn't he?"

"Actually, his appearance didn't make that much impression on me." I continued trying to dry off, since I hated wet fur. Mirana watched for a moment, then grabbed the towel and started working on my tail.

"Are you trying to tell me that you aren't interested in him at all?" she asked softly.

"Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. What's it to you all of a sudden?"

She gave a sympathetic smile. "I heard about the breakup between you and Wyn."

I threw my hands up in despair. "Gods! Can't anyone have any privacy around here?"

Mirana grinned as she finished drying my tail. "Not in this cage, dear." Her expression quickly sobered. "You still haven't answered me. You do find something about him interesting."

I nodded. "He seems so different from anyone else around here. He's very quiet and reserved, almost shy. It's almost like he's afraid of saying anything at all."

"That's what I heard from others. I've also heard that he has the room at the end of hallway three . . . with two vacant rooms between him and everyone else."

That startled me. "I thought that when new students arrived they went into the next room that was open."

"Normally, yes. That's what is supposed to happen. But not this time. He has the end room. And everyone is trying to guess why."

"There's probably a good reason." I looked at the clock on my desk. "Listen, I hate to say this but I have got to finish drying off and get ready for dinner."

"Thanks for reminding me." Mirana handed me the towel and gave me a quick hug. "Listen, if you find out anything about him let me know ok?"

"I will. If I find out anything. And if I think you should know."

"Good enough." She quickly left the room, and I was left alone to get ready for the evening. For some reason I decided to go a little more formal than usual. Going to the closet, I rummaged around until I found a dress I liked. It was a light blue one that shimmered slightly. Moderately cut, it would do nicely for what I had planned.

Heading down to the dining hall, I ran back into Mirana and Fariss arm in arm. "New pairing tonight?" I asked.

Fariss grinned at my comment. "You could say that." Mirana just smiled at me and I knew that she had something planned for the night. I returned the smile and told them to enjoy themselves — which they probably would. I watched them head into the dining hall before starting that way myself. Suddenly I caught sight of Wyn further up the hall with someone new on her arm. I felt sick almost immediately, remembering last night. But I forced myself past them, not letting it get to me. All I wanted was to get something to eat and to try and meet Jarin.

For once the dining hall was quite crowded. There were nearly two hundred students on the satellite, and it seemed as if every single one decided to have dinner at once. I went quickly through the line, picking something that would keep me sated for the evening, and looked around.

He was sitting at a far table, alone. I couldn't tell what he was eating, but he picked at it like he wasn't certain of its edibility. Sometimes I wondered about the food myself, but it was him that I was more interested in.

I started walking toward his table. A few heads turned to watch me, waiting to see if I would succeed in sitting with him. He noticed my approach, waiting for me to get closer. Seeing no expression of refusal or anger on his face, I hesitated, wondering if I was making a mistake. Taking a deep breath, I decided to do it anyways.

"Hi." My voice, normally controlled, cracked slightly. "My name's Shara. Mind if I sit here?"

He stared at me for a long moment, then an odd smile appeared on his face. He flipped his paw towards the empty chair.

"No, m'lady, I don't mind." His voice was a deep baritone and extremely lush. "In fact, I'd like your company."

I took the offered seat, causing surprised expressions on others watching nearby. He gave another odd smile and explained. "A few others expressed a wish to sit with me. I didn't quite feel comfortable with them and made it plain that I don't want their company right now."

For some reason that comment made me smile. "But you wish me to sit with you?"

"Yes. Strange as it might sound." He gave me a lopsided grin. "I also know that you're the one who's been watching me closely in class."

That made me blush slightly. "Sorry if I've been a little blunt about it. I'll try not to stare so hard next time."

He laughed at my comment, a soft, warm sound. "No, don't worry about that. It's a little refreshing to see some honesty in a person." Without warning, he moved a bit closer to me, pitching his voice low.

"Would you mind helping me get settled with the classwork? I'm a little confused on a few things, and since you've been here a while, well . . ." His comment trailed off as I thought about it.

"Sure." My sudden agreement took him by surprise. I was a little surprised myself, but tried not to show it. "When and where would you like me to show up?"

He cocked his head slightly, looking at me measuringly. "How about a half hour after dinner in my room? Room 3-10. I would suggest dressing more casually." He nodded to the dress I was wearing. "Granted, that looks lovely on you, but I doubt it would be comfortable on the floor." He grinned and added, "I tend to do my work on the floor. It's more comfortable for me than sitting at a desk."

I blushed at his comment. He was asking me for help, not company — although the way he phrased it made me wonder until I saw the amusement in his eyes. Smiling in return, I replied, "Half an hour sounds fine to me."

"Good. I'll see you then." He got up, took his tray to the recycler and headed out of the dining hall. Once Jarin was out of sight the conversations picked up around me with a vengeance. I tried to go back to eating dinner, but Fariss and Mirana came over to sit at the table.

"Congrats." Mirana looked pleased. "You've done the impossible."

"What? Sit with Jarin?"

Fariss chuckled. "More than that, kit. Six others tried to sit with him before you did, Lythera included."

"Lythera's only interested in bedding him." There was a sharp tone to my words I had never heard before. Both Fariss and Mirana looked shocked at my words.

"It's true, and you know it," I continued on, not realizing how much emotion I was putting behind my words. "The only thing she's interested in is trying to get him into her bed and top him. That's it."

Fariss touched my arm, cooling my anger. "Shara, take it easy. Calm down. We're not arguing with you."

Mirana quickly added her thoughts. "We're just amazed at the fact that of all the people here, you are the only one he's willing to talk to, and the only one he's willing to allow close to him. Doesn't that say anything to you?"

I thought about her comment, and realized that it was rather strange. "I don't know," I said slowly. "All I want to do is get to know him. He seems so quiet."

Mirana nodded. "That's part of it. There's also the fact that he's keeping a lot of distance between himself and everyone else. Physical distance, not emotional distance. Most Mardarans generally enjoy being around people, but he doesn't seem to."

Fariss added another thought. "You're the only one he's allowed to get close to him. Don't lose that advantage."

I shook my head. "I'm interested in finding out about him, not trying to talk him into bed with me. He seems so fascinating to me."

"And maybe he finds you just as fascinating." Mirana rose from the table. "Just be careful, dear. I have a hunch that there's more about him than any of us realize."

I finished my dinner and quickly left the dining hall, heading for my room to change. Jarin recommended comfortable, which meant to me what I wear after school hours: a T-shirt, short jeans, and sandals. Most of the time I would have shunned even this much, since I rarely went outside my room at night and would have just sat around studying in my fur. Grabbing my books, I left my room and headed down the hall for the lift.

A few minutes later, I arrived in front of his door. I began having second thoughts about all of this. What if there was another reason why I wanted to see him? What if he had something else in mind? A few dozen possibilities danced in my mind. But before I could decide if I should knock or leave, the door opened and he was standing there in a cloth vest and short pants.

"Come in." He ushered me into the room. I was surprised at what met my eyes. Several pieces of artwork hung on one wall and two freestanding lights created an ambience that made the room more comfortable. Several large

throw pillows were piled in a corner and his desk was on the opposite side. The door to his room was closed, which piqued my curiosity.

He stood silently, looking again at me with that odd stare. I smiled at him, and he relaxed.

"It's nice. The room, that is."

"I was told that students had some options in making the rooms more livable. I decided to use the option."

"That you did." I wondered what he would think of my room, with what little I had in it.

Waving his hand, he indicated a spot on the floor where I could sit down. "If you feel more comfortable, the chairs are available. I'm going to take the floor for my own comfort." Grabbing a few pillows, he made himself comfortable near some books and a portable screen. I recognized it as a Magna Systems TermLink, which shocked me. They were some of the most expensive portable computers around. My shock showed, and he chuckled very softly.

"This was one of my mother's ideas. She wanted me to have the best equipment possible." He gave that odd smile again, and added, "She's also the one who decided on what the room would look like."

"She's here now?" I wondered if this was why he was being so cautious.

"No, not anymore." The look on his face was one of relief. "She left with the shuttle this afternoon, after 'discussing' some things with the regents. I had a talk with them afterwards, asking them to kindly forget whatever she said or demanded."

I laughed despite myself. "Sounds like you two don't quite get along with each other."

"To be honest? I don't. She doesn't understand that I don't want to be coddled and pampered for the rest of my life. So when the opening for here came, I took the chance and applied. Mostly to get away from her."

He looked off toward the middle distance, something I occasionally do when I'm being reflective. I ventured, "I can understand why, I think."

He smiled at me, and nodded toward the books. "Do you want something to drink before we get started here?"

"You wouldn't have anything alcoholic, would you?"

He grinned. "As a matter of fact, I have a bottle or two of wine, if that'll do."

"Anything will be fine."

He stood up and went to the cabinet to take out two glasses. Reaching underneath, he pulled out a bottle of wine and quickly poured some into each glass. He walked back to where I sat and handed it to me. I thanked him, took a sip, and was pleased at the taste. "Mmmmm. I haven't had anything good like this in about a year."

He took a sip of his wine, and nodded in agreement. "It is good, I'll admit. So, where do you want to start?"

We began working on the lessons, him trying to figure out where we were in classes, me trying to discover what he knew and didn't know. His learning, while fairly comprehensive, was spotty in a few places. We kept discussing topics and schoolwork until both of us forgot the time. Finally, after three hours he turned off the link.

"Whoosh. I didn't realize you got that deep into social dynamics." He took another sip of his wine, his second of the night.

"It's different from the ground universities. Here, we're an example of group dynamics, so we're both class and lab at the same time." I looked at my glass, now empty. I was feeling quite warm from the alcohol, as well as from the comfortable feeling that was coming from Jarin. He chuckled, and noted the glass. "Another refill?"

"No, I don't think I should." Actually I would have taken it, but other thoughts were on my mind.

"OK." He rolled over onto his back, and looked up at me. His eyes were slightly out of focus. "So." He made it sound like a question. "What do you want to know?"

"About what?" I sprawled across the chair, placing the glass on a nearby table.

"About me. You want to know how I can know about what you or anyone else is thinking. And why I'm keeping my distance from people."

I nodded, slightly surprised at his guess.

He sighed, and looked forlorn. "I'm a natural telepath." He said it like it was a disease. "Grade four."

That shocked me. The telepathic grading system had been around for about a century. There were five grades, from basic telepaths who needed to touch a person to hear thoughts to ones that could communicate across light years. And he was a grade four?

I looked at him with real concern. If it were true, then his mental shields must have been under considerable stress, although not as badly as they probably were at the university. He caught my concern, and answered it.

"No, they aren't quite that bad off. I have a small device that helps shield me from stray thoughts. I carry it with me to class as well as using it here in the room. But sometimes it isn't enough if someone is projecting strongly. Especially emotions."

"And considering what normally goes on around here . . ." I let the comment go unfinished, and he nodded in silent

agreement. "And yet you came here anyway?" I wondered what could make him decide to come here, knowing what he must face.

"Mostly to escape my mother, like I said. And to face my own personal problems. Here, no one else knows about me, knows what I can do, or about the problems I've had in the past. Maybe here I can learn to deal with my problems without resorting to other methods."

I knew the other methods he was speaking of. Some telepaths couldn't deal with their abilities, and needed drugs or worse to stay stable. A few couldn't even handle that, and went insane after a few years. I gave him a sympathetic smile, which he returned.

"Jarin, answer me this question. Why me? Why are you willing to let me be around you?"

He sighed, and looked away for a moment. When he turned back to answer, there was an odd look on his face. "Shara, I know more about you than you realize. I can't help that fact. I know about your breakup with your last lover, and that you're trying to get back on your feet. I also know that you find me fascinating, enticing almost.

"There's one other reason, though." He hesitated, then went on. "You're a telepath yourself. Not an active one, but passive, strongly passive. You have enough ability to throw up some very good shields. And while I don't want to use you, I would like to have you around me. To help me when I can't deal with the pressure."

Hearing those statements from him stunned me. That he knew about me I could have guessed, but my having a telepathic gift and him wanting me to be around to help made me feel helpless. I tried to answer and couldn't. I didn't know what to do.

He got up from the floor and sat near me. "Shara, I am not asking you to do anything against your will. If you want to help me, then it's your choice. I'd like your help, though." He stared straight into my eyes, and I could see the look in his eyes. He was opening himself up to me without reservations. It made me feel close to him, closer than I would have thought possible.

I tentatively reached out to touch his arm. Inside, I knew that he was telling the truth. Smiling warmly at him, I tried to project my feelings.

"Jarin, I believe you. And I'll try to help, really. But I don't know what to do."

"Just be yourself, that's all. You already shield yourself well enough, and it'll cover me as long as I'm nearby." He was still worried about my reactions, and I wanted to reassure him. I took his paw, giving it a squeeze. He looked down at my hand, and back to my face.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"Jarin, I'm willing to help. I want to help."

He reached around and hugged me. I responded by hugging him tightly, the feel of him against me warming me inside. For several moments we stayed that way, then broke off.

"It's getting late, and I suppose you had better be going back to your room." He sounded sad at the idea. "Otherwise, others might wonder what we're up to."

"Let them. I couldn't care less what they think." At that moment I realized that I really didn't care about what others might think about us. All I wanted was to be with him.

He hesitated, worried and confused. He was trying to decide if I should stay, and I continued speaking, hoping to change his mind. "Jarin, I want to stay with you. Nothing is going to happen between us. I know that. Besides, I'd feel more comfortable here than in my room."

"Oh." He actually looked like he was blushing. "If you really want to, Shara. . . ."

"Remember what you said? My decision."

"Guess I did." He looked sheepish, and sighed. "Well . . ."

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and gave him a kiss. He relaxed against me, sighing softly. Without a word, we both walked into his bedroom, and closed the door.

The room looked exactly the opposite of the living room. Things were strewn in several corners, things that hadn't had a chance to be placed in storage. Several pieces of luggage were stacked up against one wall, and his closet looked about as bad as mine.

There was an embarrassed blush on his muzzle. "Sorry for the disaster area appearance. I haven't had time to get this part straight."

I glanced around, trying to find some place to sit. The only spot that wasn't already occupied was the bed, which was larger than normal. I tested it and found that it was quite soft and comfortable.

Jarin was trying to get some of the clutter straightened up. I went over to him, and lightly touched his shoulder.

"Jarin, please don't bother. There'll be plenty of time to straighten up everything tomorrow. My room's looked worse."

He smiled at the comment. "I really didn't want you to see this. I'm glad to know that I'm not the only bad housekeeper around here."

"Believe me, you're not. Mirana is worse than me. You need a marked trail to get through her room."

We both laughed. Then all the doubts came back inside him. "Shara ..."

I laid a finger on his muzzle to hush him. "Jarin, I said no excuses. Now come on to bed."

He blushed again, but didn't argue. I quickly stripped, and slid into the bed. Turning around, I saw him standing naked nearby, still uncertain about the idea.

"Jarin, please." I indicated the vacant spot next to me, and he crawled into the bed slowly.

For a while we just lay next to each other, barely touching. He had a musky scent that attracted me, but I didn't want to do anything that might cause him to react badly.

"Shara, I'm not used to having someone else in bed with me." Seeing my disbelief, he stammered. "I — I'm not joking. I've never spent the night with another person, or shared my bed with anyone."

I looked at him with wide eyes. Still a virgin? I couldn't believe it.

He spoke in a low voice. "It's true. I've never gone to bed with anyone. I know about sex, and I've experienced it through the thoughts of others, but I've never done it myself."

I felt uncomfortably hot from his words. The thought that I might be pushing him into something that he didn't want crossed my mind. "Jarin, do you really want me to stay? If this is going to cause a problem, I can leave."

Confusion filled his eyes, as he fought with himself. I could see that he was trying to find a way to tell me to leave, to stay with him. Finally, he slowly said, "Shara, I think I would like you to stay with me. I don't know what will happen, but I promise that unless you want something to happen, it won't."

I lightly licked him on the muzzle. "I know, Jarin. I trust you in that."

He hugged me, and commanded the lights to dim. We snuggled down to sleep, lightly holding onto each other. For a long time we stayed that way, our bodies relaxing against each other.

I remember him starting to doze off. He had turned around in the bed so that we were back to back, our tails brushing against each other. The feeling of him against me was so comfortable that I drifted off to sleep.

A slight shuddering brought me to wakefulness. I tried to figure out what woke me, when I heard a soft whine. I turned around to see Jarin curled up, crying softly in his sleep. I reached out to gently wake him, hoping that it didn't shock him.

His eyes flew open, but they were unfocused. Another whine came out of his throat, a sound of pain that hurt me. Instinctively, I reached around him, holding his body next to mine.

"Shhh. It's OK, Jarin. I'm here." I started rocking him back and forth slightly, trying to bring him back from wherever he was.

A shudder ran through him, and he twisted around in my arms. He shivered against me, then looked up into my eyes.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Shara. Sometimes I can't block everything, and it affects me badly. It almost hurts." His voice was rough, and he was finding it hard to speak.

"What almost hurts?"

"What she was doing to him." He scowled for a second until he could come up with a name. "Mirana."

I sighed deeply. Mirana was into BDSM play, and had probably coaxed Fariss into a play session. I continued to hold onto Jarin, trying to warm him.

"I should have warned you about that. She does get rather involved in her play."

Jarin shuddered again, and managed to speak once more. "I wouldn't call it involved so much as excited." He looked down at the sheets, and I touched his shoulder.

"Is there something I can do?"

"Just hold me." The pain was evident in his voice. I pressed myself against him, arms wrapped around his waist. With anyone else I would probably be aroused from the touch, but my fears about what he was going through drove everything else from my mind. He closed his eyes, and slowly started to breathe. Watching, I made sure he was calm, then closed my eyes as well to drift back to sleep.

Shara.

My eyes opened in shock. He still had his eyes closed, slowly relaxing. I know he spoke, though. I closed my eyes again, willing myself to relax.

Shara. Don't be afraid.

Jarin?

Yes.

My heart jumped at that. I hadn't expected him to mind-speak with me. I cautiously asked him why.

I thought it might help. He mentally sighed, which amused me. *Maybe by touching your mind it would help me.*

I don't mind, even though I didn't expect it.

I should have asked if you would allow it.

Don't. His thoughts were clear to me, and I could sense more than that. He was finding himself attracted to me, and didn't yet know how to handle it. I moved enough to kiss him, keeping the rapport between us going. I felt his emotions change from fear to worry to pleasure, and he began relaxing against me.

Maybe we should do that some more. He chuckled, and I snuggled back against him.

Maybe later. I knew what he was feeling, and my own feelings were clear to him. *We need to get used to this first.*

He sighed again. *You're right. And I did promise.*

I know you did. Believe me, I'm tempted. But I'm just too tired to do anything other than sleep.

Dath hai. Total truth.

We both snuggled up to one another, keeping the rapport between us. The feelings we shared helped us to relax so that we both were asleep in minutes. The rest of the night was peaceful, more peaceful than I could ever remember.

Morning came sooner than expected. I sighed, realizing I was still in bed with Jarin. He was still asleep, his head resting on my shoulders, one arm draped across me. I nuzzled him slightly, and felt him stir.

Morning, dear.

Morning, t'chena. We hugged each other, kissing and licking the other's muzzles. *Did you sleep well?*

The best sleep I've had in years. I looked at him, and saw that his eyes were bright. There was no pain in his eyes, but a look of love and tenderness for me that was clearly visible, and I echoed his emotions.

You look absolutely wonderful.

And you look beautiful yourself. But we had better get dressed for class. I gave him a playful punch, which led to us tussling a bit in the bed. It ended with him holding me close against his body, kissing me with passion.

Mmmmm. But it's getting late, and people will start wondering.

D'hai, lover. So let's get ready to scandalize everyone.

It took us a few minutes to get dressed. I slipped back on the clothes I wore the night before, then we wandered down to my room to get something more acceptable for the day. We walked out of my room arm in arm and headed to the cafeteria. Once there, we received a few surprised glances, but no one spoke to us until we sat down. Almost as if they teleported in, Mirana and Fariss sat down at the same table.

"Mind if we join you?" Fariss looked like warmed-over death, and I wondered how Jarin was going to react. To my amazement, he simply nodded and indicated the chairs.

"No problem. You two are good friends of Shara's, and that's good enough for me."

I giggled at his comment, which brought looks of puzzlement to both Fariss and Mirana. Mirana took advantage of the good mood.

"You spent the night together, didn't you?"

I answered before Jarin could. "Yes. And before you ask your other question, no. We didn't do anything other than sleep."

Fariss shook his head. "That wasn't on my mind. What I want to know is how you are doing."

Jarin looked at Fariss, and smiled. "Considering what you went through last night, I'm doing quite nicely." He grinned at his shocked expression. "Yes, I know what happened between you and Mirana. Everything."

Mirana blurted out, "Telepath?"

I nodded. "He's a telepath, yes. Just don't tell everyone, OK?"

"I wouldn't even think about it." Mirana suddenly sobered when she realized exactly what Jarin "overheard." "Uh, Jarin . . . I'm sorry about last night."

"Don't worry about it. I've experienced worse. Just give me a few minutes warning next time, OK?"

His comment brought chuckles around the table. It also brought Jarin out of his shell. We chatted for a while, then had to leave for class. As we walked out the cafeteria, Jarin mentally asked me a question.

You like them, don't you?

Fariss is majoring in group psychology, so he's our unofficial counselor. Mirana is a medical student here. They're good friends, and I can talk to them about problems.

That's good, love. We're both going to need someone to talk to.

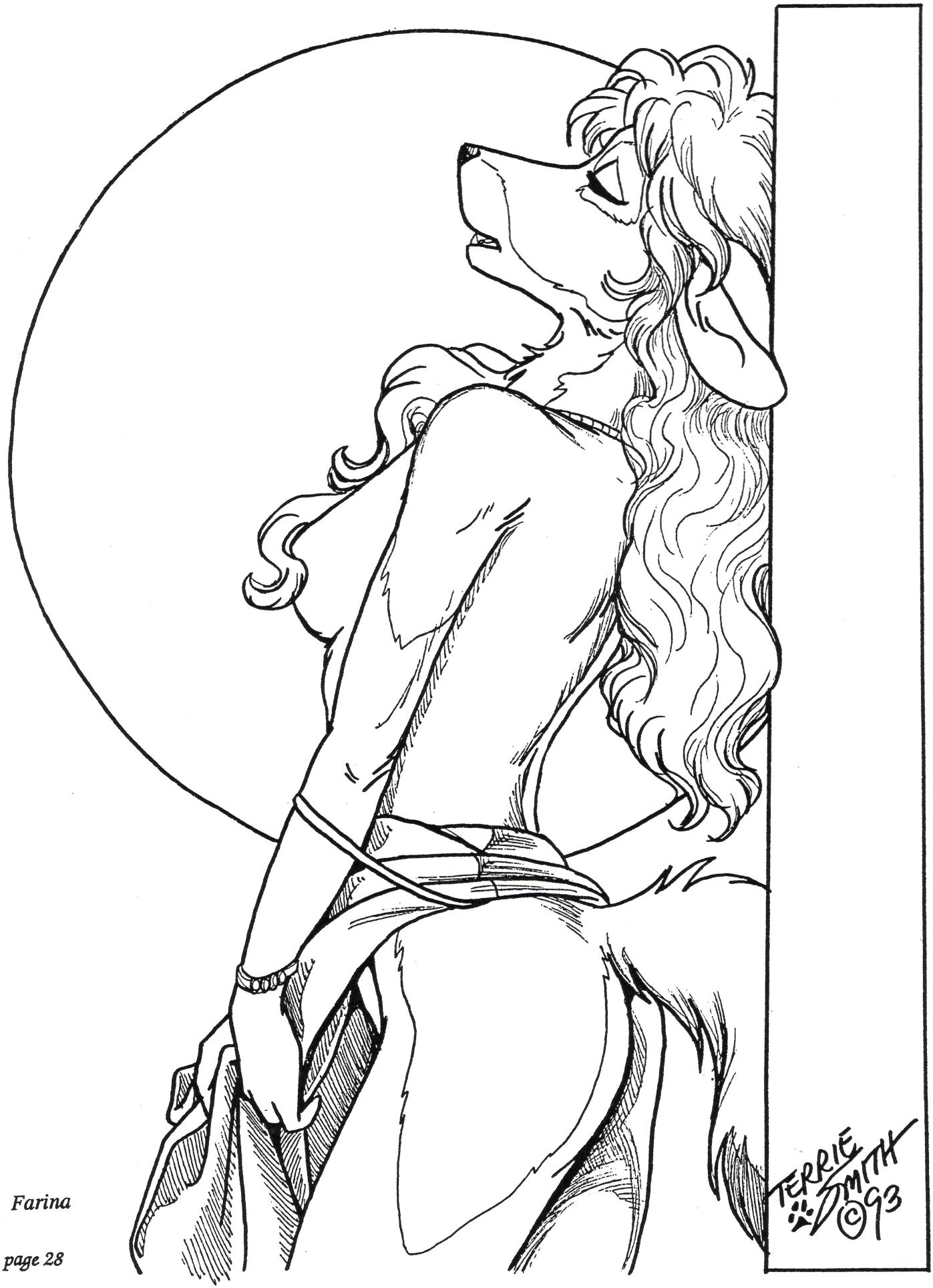
About us?

Among other things. Like the fact that I'd like you to move in with me. He added hastily, *If you want to.*

I kissed him in the hall, which made him stop. *I'd like that.*

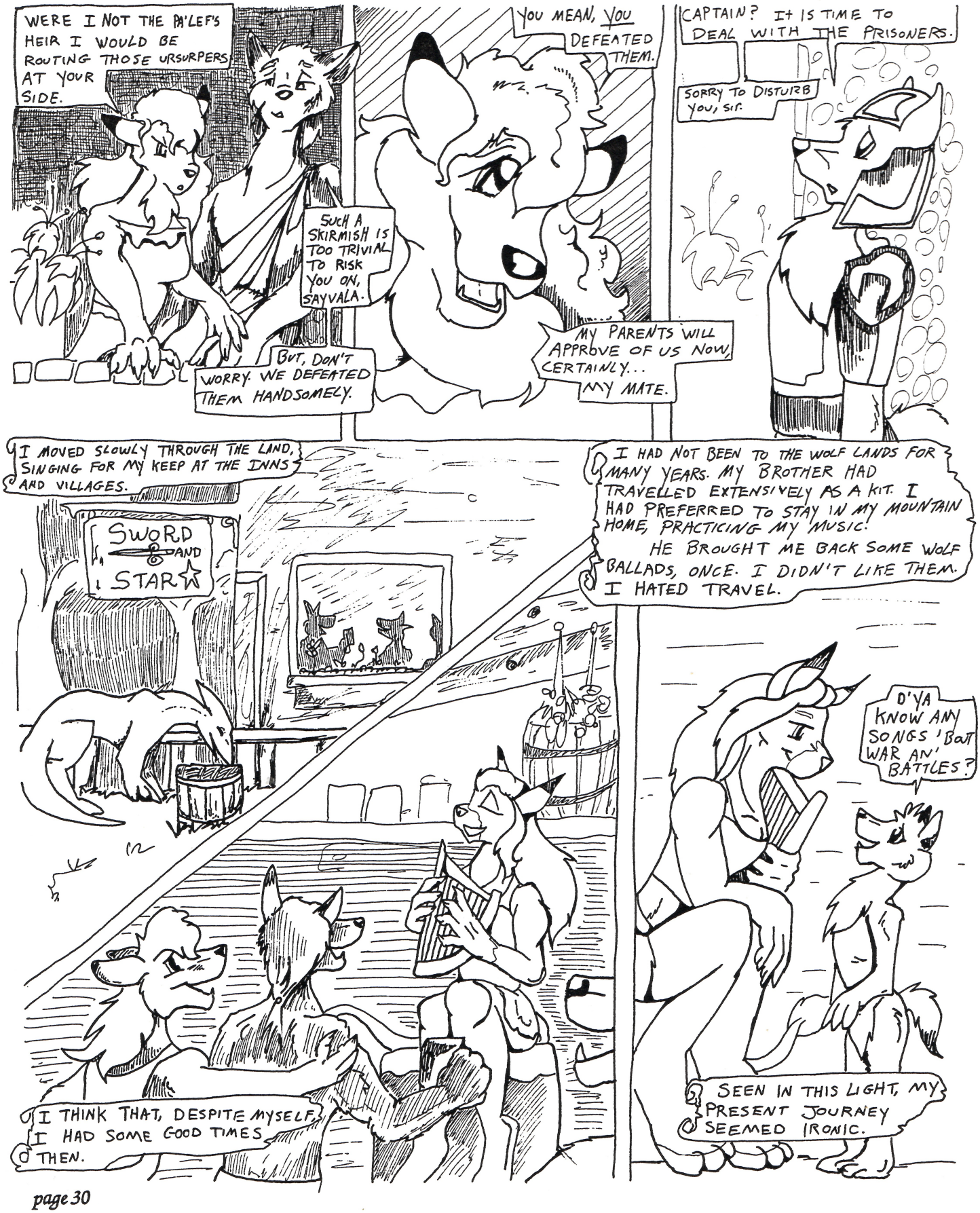
Well, considering you've made yourself a permanent place in my bed. . . .

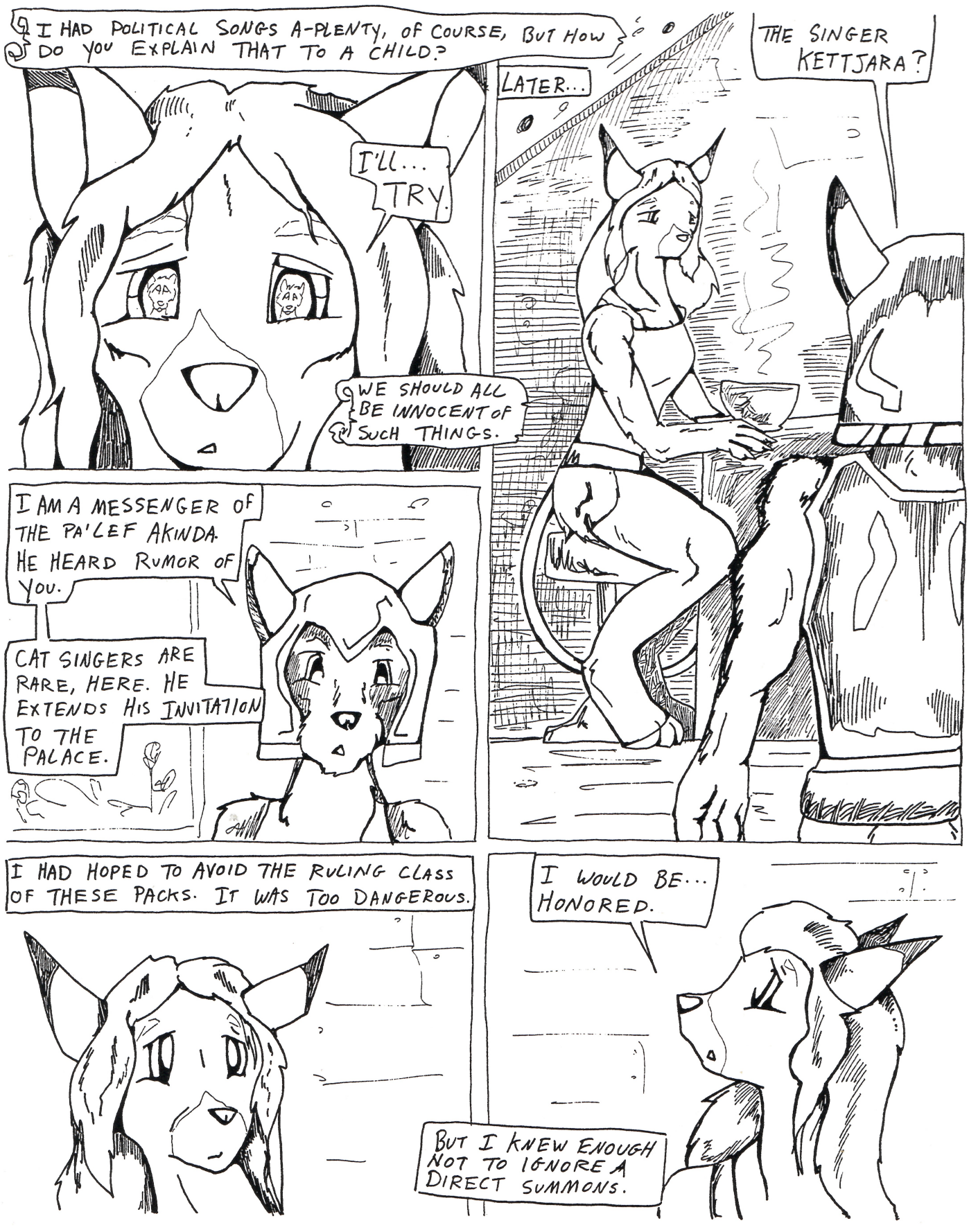
The laughter filled the hall as we headed to class.

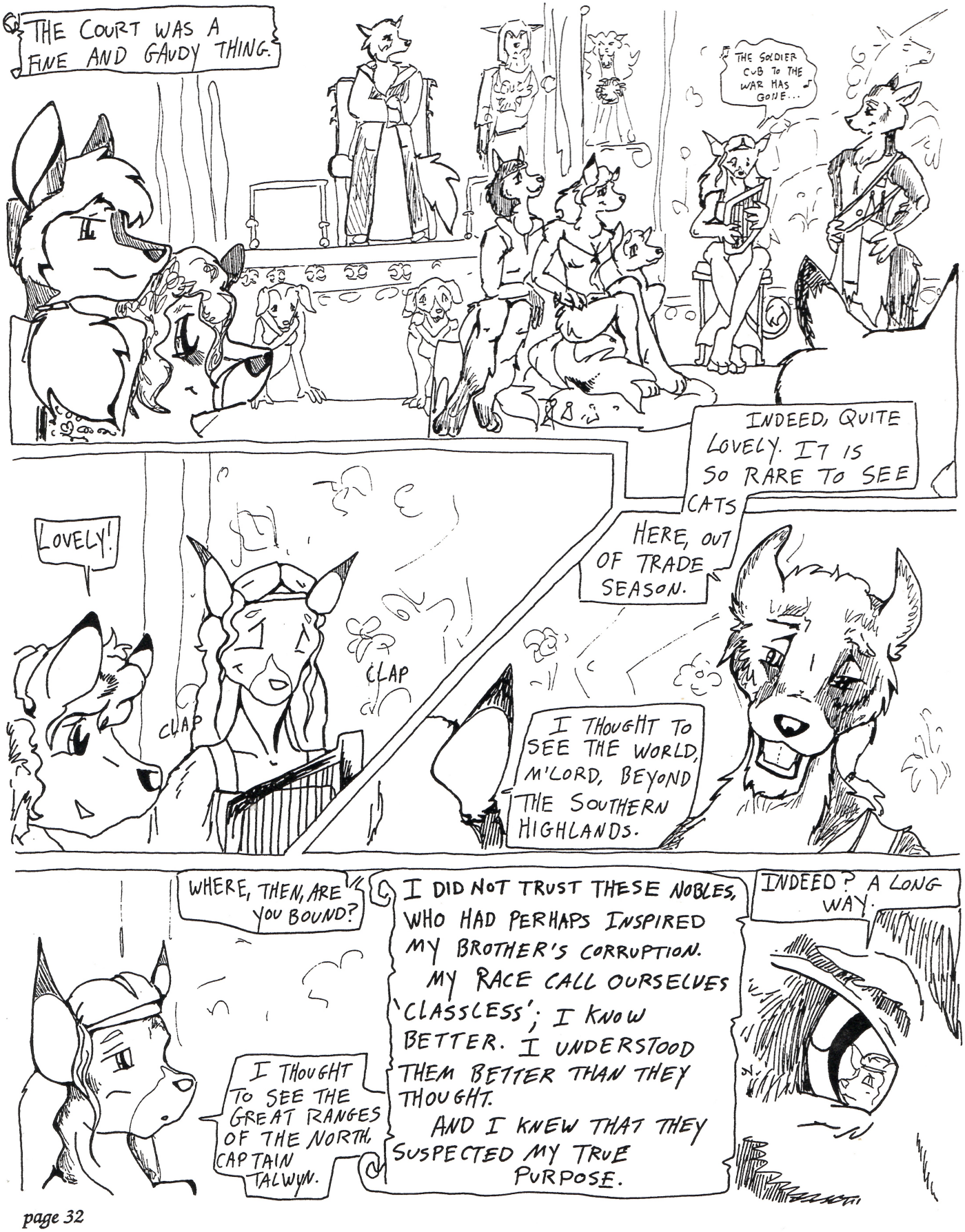


Farina

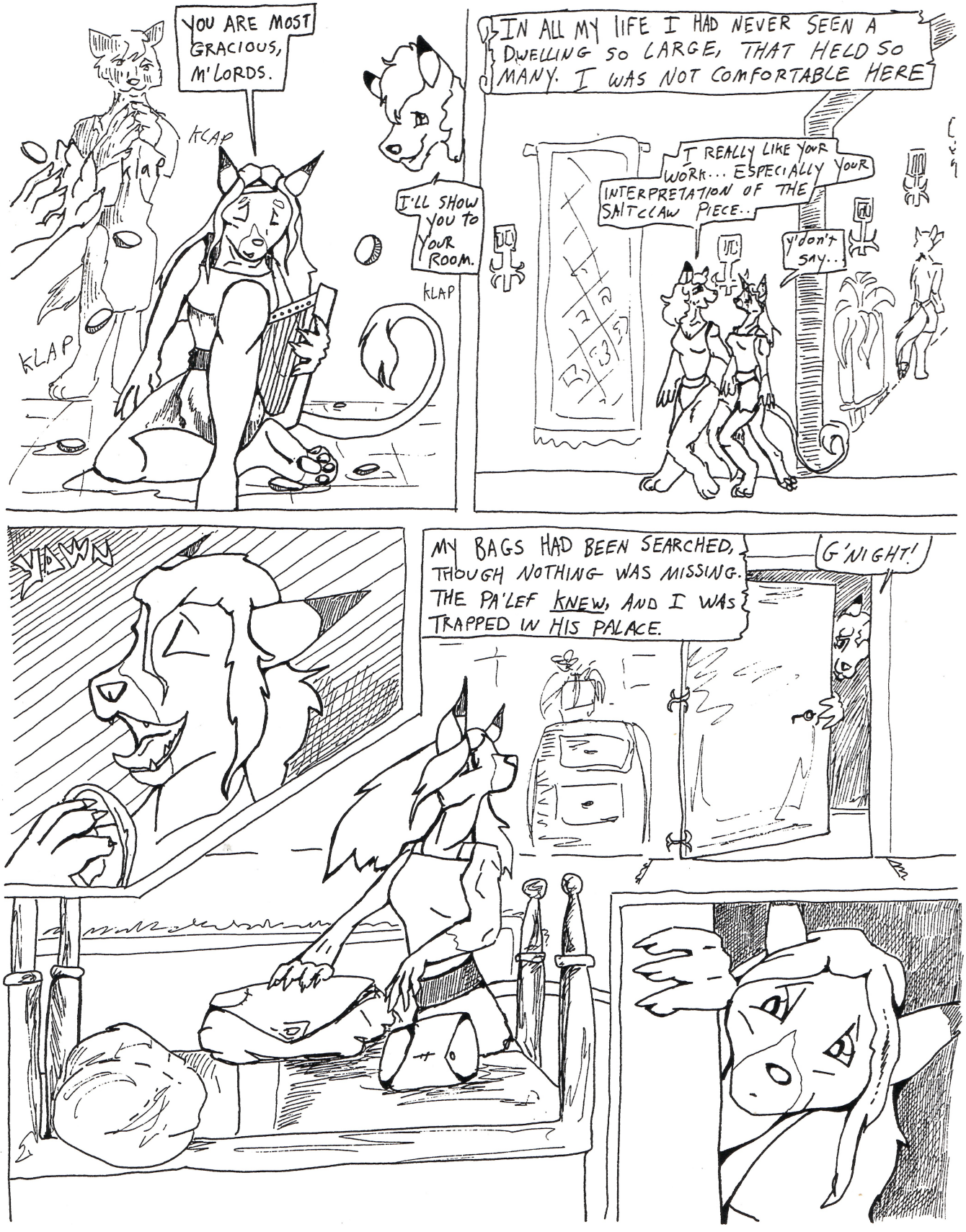

STATUS QUO
TALWYN?
M'love?
OH, TALWYN! I WAS AFRAID... BUT YOU'RE WOUNDED!
It IS ONLY MINOR, MY DEAR SAYVALA.
YOU KNOW THAT SINCE I WAS PROMOTED
I NEVER SEE ANY REAL ACTION!


WERE I NOT THE PA'LEF'S HEIR I WOULD BE ROUTING THOSE URSURPERS AT YOUR SIDE.
SUCH A SKIRMISH IS TOO TRIVIAL TO RISK YOU ON, SAYVALA.
BUT, DON'T WORRY. WE DEFEATED THEM HANDSOMELY.
YOU MEAN, YOU DEFEATED THEM.
MY PARENTS WILL APPROVE OF US NOW, CERTAINLY... MY MATE.
CAPTAIN? IT IS TIME TO DEAL WITH THE PRISONERS.
SORRY TO DISTURB YOU, SIR.
I MOVED SLOWLY THROUGH THE LAND, SINGING FOR MY KEEP AT THE INNS AND VILLAGES.
SWORD AND STAR
I HAD NOT BEEN TO THE WOLF LANDS FOR MANY YEARS. MY BROTHER HAD TRAVELLED EXTENSIVELY AS A KIT. I HAD PREFERRED TO STAY IN MY MOUNTAIN HOME, PRACTICING MY MUSIC.
HE BROUGHT ME BACK SOME WOLF BALLADS, ONCE. I DIDN'T LIKE THEM. I HATED TRAVEL.
D'YA KNOW ANY SONGS 'BOUT WAR AN' BATTLES?
I THINK THAT, DESPITE MYSELF, I HAD SOME GOOD TIMES THEN.
SEEN IN THIS LIGHT, MY PRESENT JOURNEY SEEMED IRONIC.

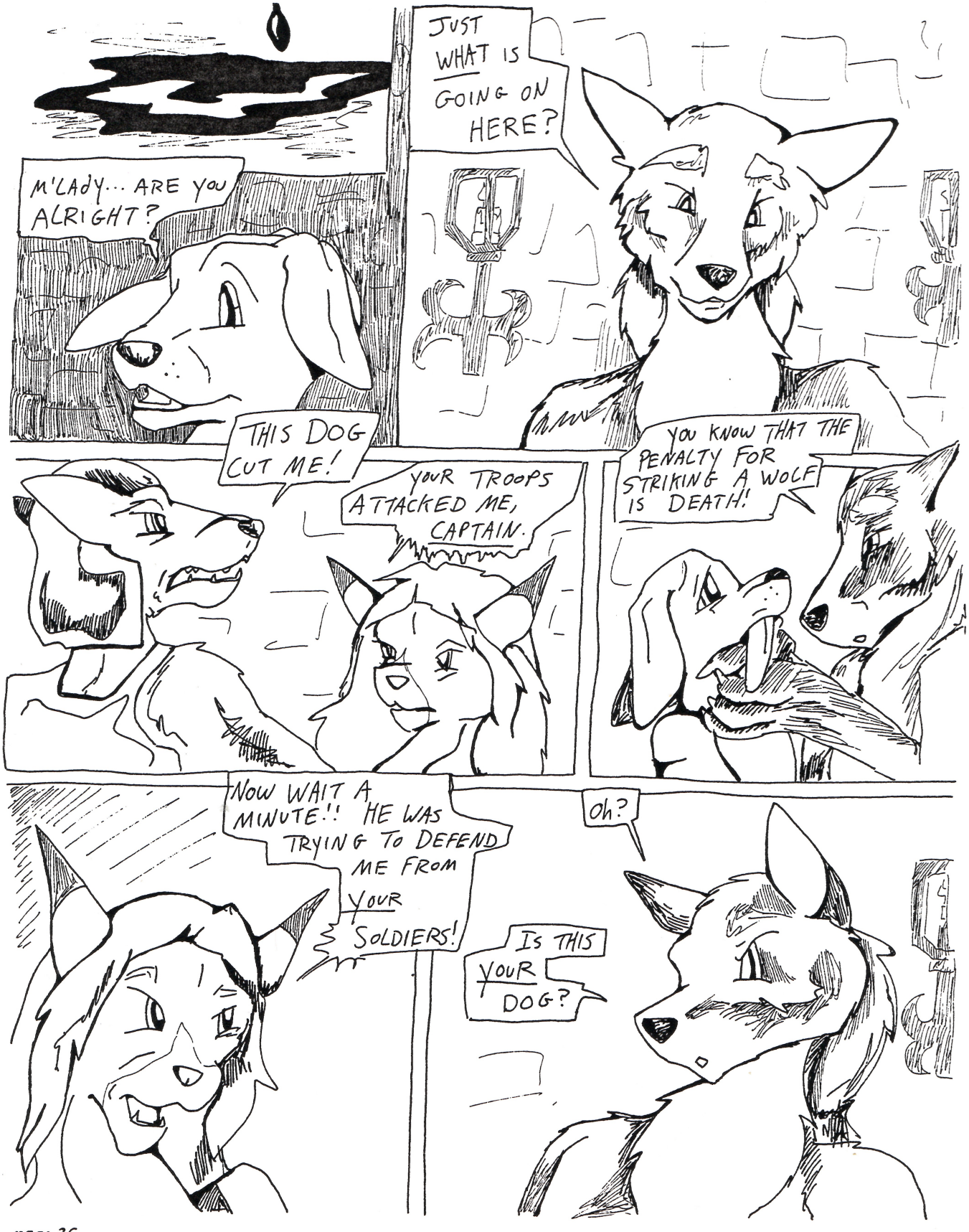

I HAD POLITICAL SONGS A-PLENTY, OF COURSE, BUT HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THAT TO A CHILD?
I'LL... TRY.
WE SHOULD ALL BE INNOCENT OF SUCH THINGS.
LATER...
THE SINGER KETTJARA?
I AM A MESSENGER OF THE PA'LEF AKINDA. HE HEARD RUMOR OF YOU.
CAT SINGERS ARE RARE, HERE. HE EXTENDS HIS INVITATION TO THE PALACE.
I HAD HOPED TO AVOID THE RULING CLASS OF THESE PACKS. IT WAS TOO DANGEROUS.
I WOULD BE... HONORED.
BUT I KNEW ENOUGH NOT TO IGNORE A DIRECT SUMMONS.


THE COURT WAS A FINE AND GAUDY THING.
THE SOLDIER CUB TO THE WAR HAS GONE...
INDEED, QUITE LOVELY. IT IS SO RARE TO SEE CATS HERE, OUT OF TRADE SEASON.
LOVELY!
CLAP
CLAP
I THOUGHT TO SEE THE WORLD, M'LORD, BEYOND THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS.
WHERE, THEN, ARE YOU BOUND?
I THOUGHT TO SEE THE GREAT RANGES OF THE NORTH, CAPTAIN TALWYN.
I DID NOT TRUST THESE NOBLES, WHO HAD PERHAPS INSPIRED MY BROTHER'S CORRUPTION.
MY RACE CALL OURSELVES 'CLASSLESS'; I KNOW BETTER. I UNDERSTOOD THEM BETTER THAN THEY THOUGHT.
AND I KNEW THAT THEY SUSPECTED MY TRUE PURPOSE.
INDEED? A LONG WAY.

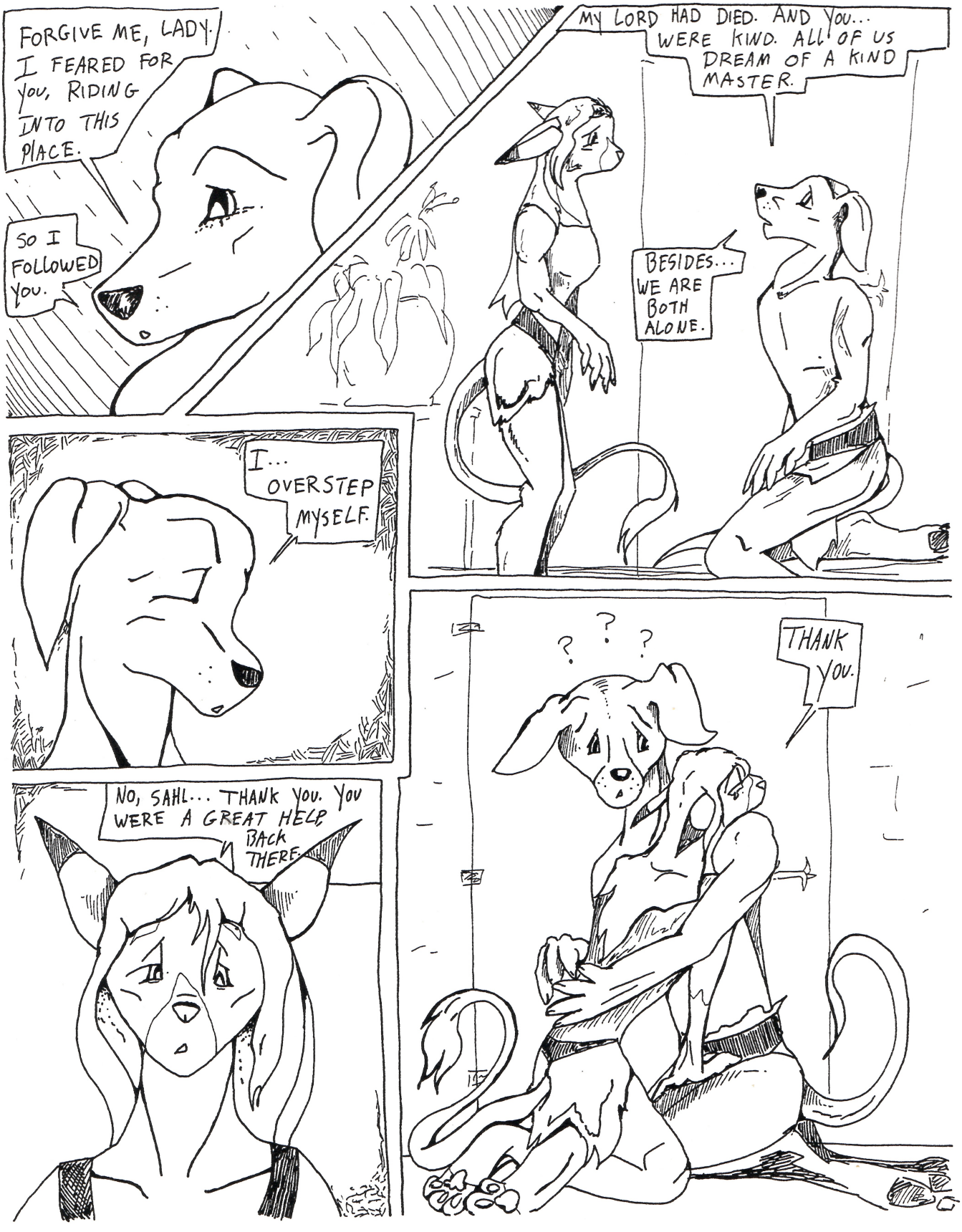

M'LORD?
WHAT DID SHE TELL YOU?
IT IS AS YOU SAID... SHE TRAVELS NORTH. I THINK THAT SHE IS ONLY A COMMON SINGER.
OH, TERRIBLY — COMMON, — CAPTAIN.
(WOULD HER SINGING WAS GOOD AS SHE IS RARE.)
SHE WAS EXILED BY HER BROTHER, A CAT-LORD NOT FAR FROM OUR BORDERS.
HE DIDN'T LIKE HER SONGS.
COMMON INDEED.
I THOUGHT THE CATS WERE...
...CLASSLESS, YES.
I WANT HER SEARCHED TONIGHT. THOUROUGHLY. FIND THE SMALL CARVING SHE CARRIES.
M'LORD.
DO WELL AND PERHAPS I SHALL CONSIDER YOUR SUIT FOR SAYVALA.

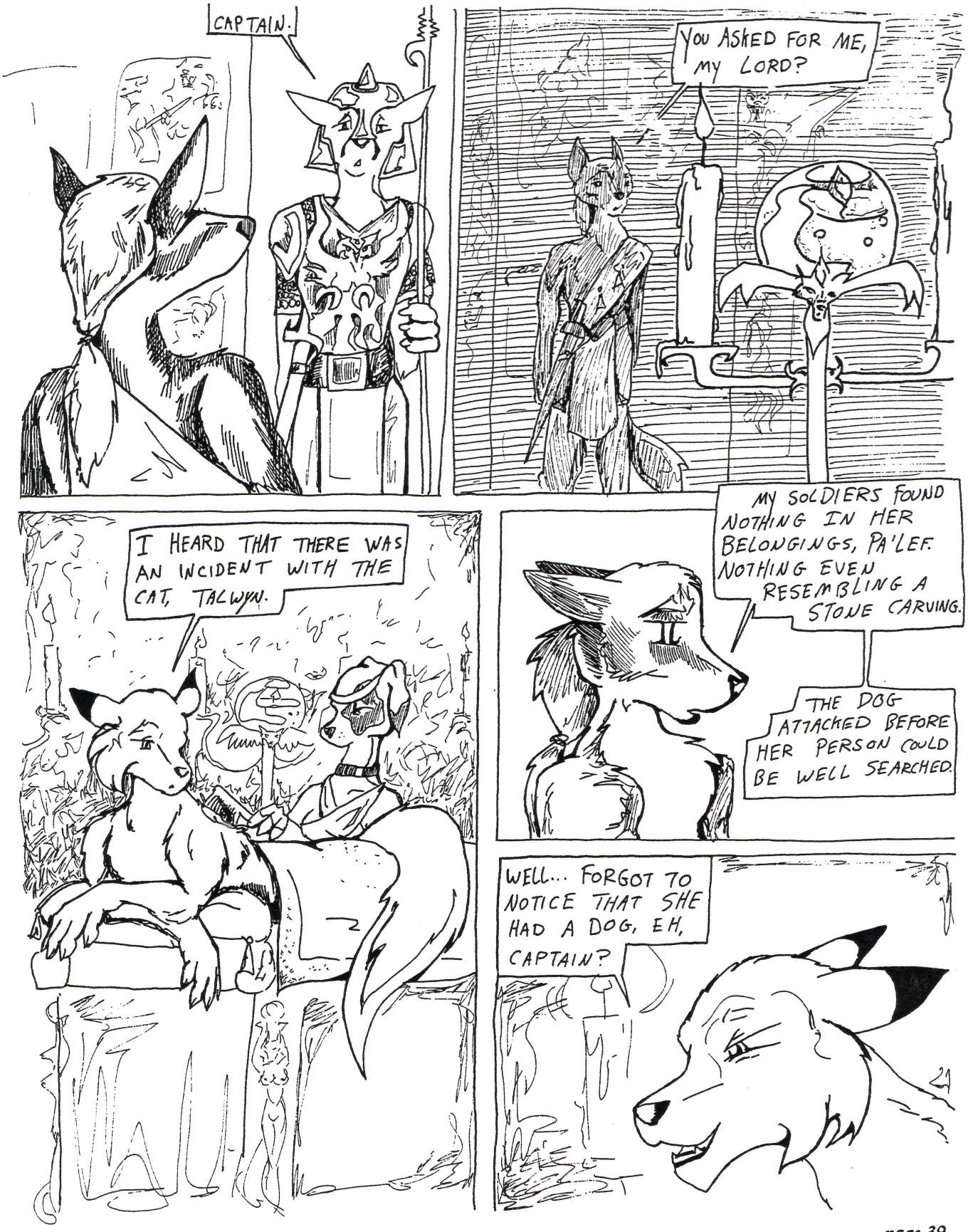

YOU ARE MOST GRACIOUS, M'LORDS.
KLAP
klap
KLAP
I'LL SHOW YOU TO YOUR ROOM.
KLAP
IN ALL MY LIFE I HAD NEVER SEEN A DWELLING SO LARGE, THAT HELD SO MANY. I WAS NOT COMFORTABLE HERE
I REALLY LIKE YOUR WORK... ESPECIALLY YOUR INTERPRETATION OF THE SAITCLAW PIECE..
Y'don't say..
YAWN
MY BAGS HAD BEEN SEARCHED, THOUGH NOTHING WAS MISSING. THE PA'LEF KNEW, AND I WAS TRAPPED IN HIS PALACE.
G'NIGHT!


WHAT?!
HUSH, YOU.
I'LL SEARCH HER.
mrrf..
LET HER GO!!!
!
LET HER ALONE!
Huh?
RAWR!

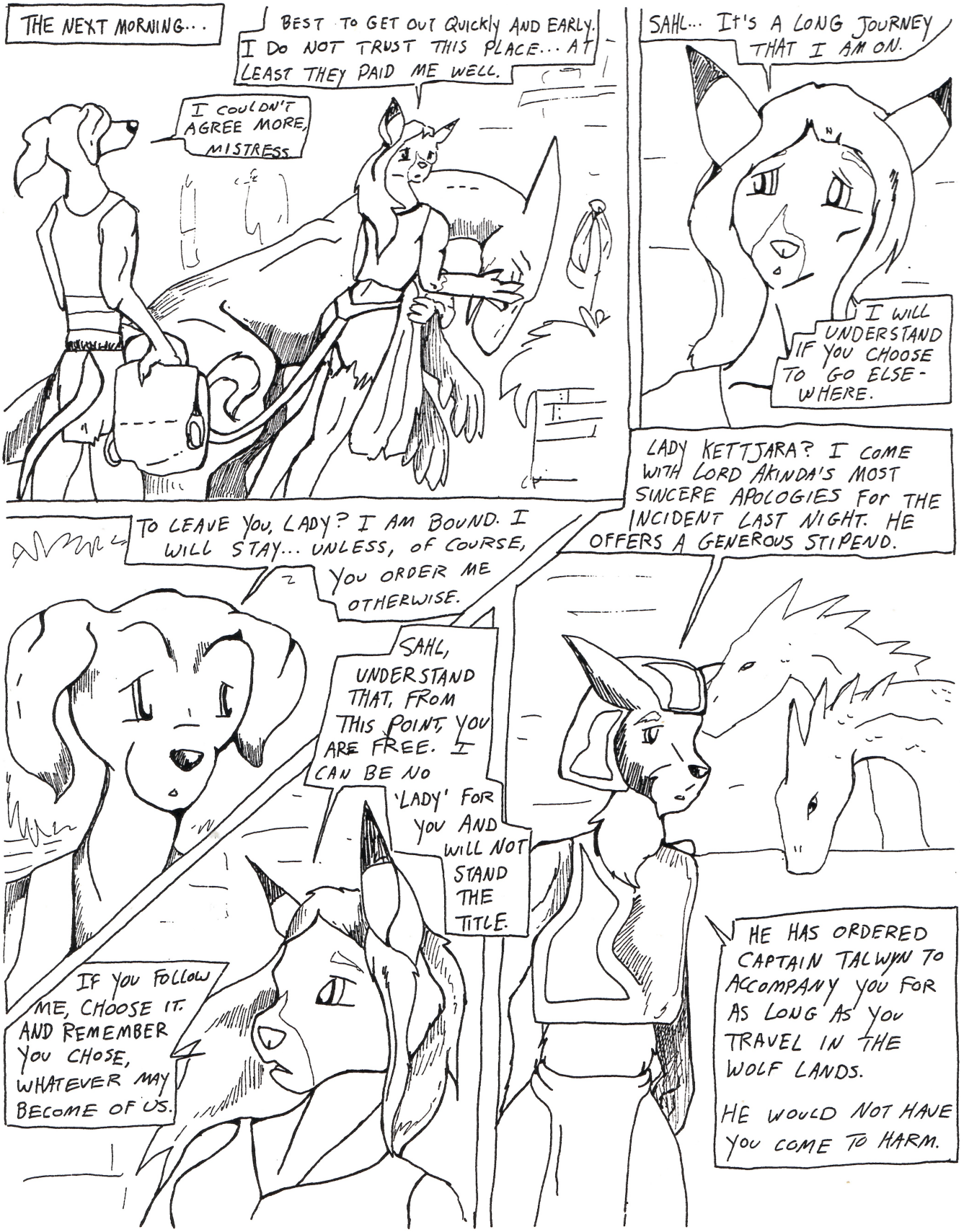

M'LADY... ARE YOU ALRIGHT?
JUST WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?
THIS DOG CUT ME!
YOUR TROOPS ATTACKED ME, CAPTAIN.
YOU KNOW THAT THE PENALTY FOR STRIKING A WOLF IS DEATH!
NOW WAIT A MINUTE!! HE WAS TRYING TO DEFEND ME FROM YOUR SOLDIERS!
Oh?
IS THIS YOUR DOG?

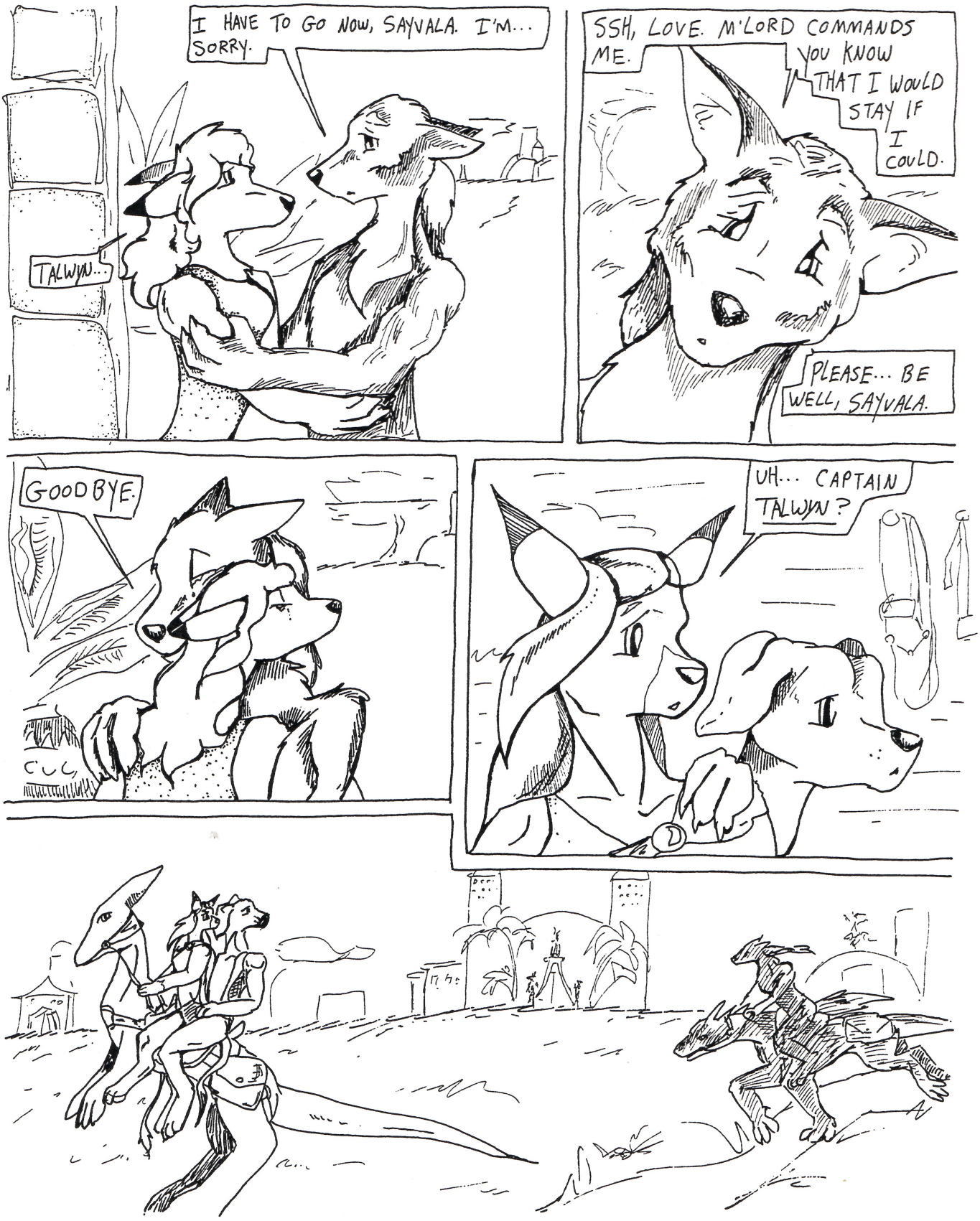

uh...
.. YES, ACTUALLY. HE IS MY DOG. AND AT THE MOMENT HE'S MORE LAWFUL THAN YOUR WOLVES...
WELL, THEN. I AM TERRIBLY SORRY FOR THE MISBEHAVIOR OF MY TROOPS. THEY WILL BE DICIPLINED.
I WILL POST A GAURD TONIGHT. YOU WON'T BE BOTHERED.
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. WE'LL LEAVE IN THE MORNING.
SAHL?
JUST WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!
SLAM!

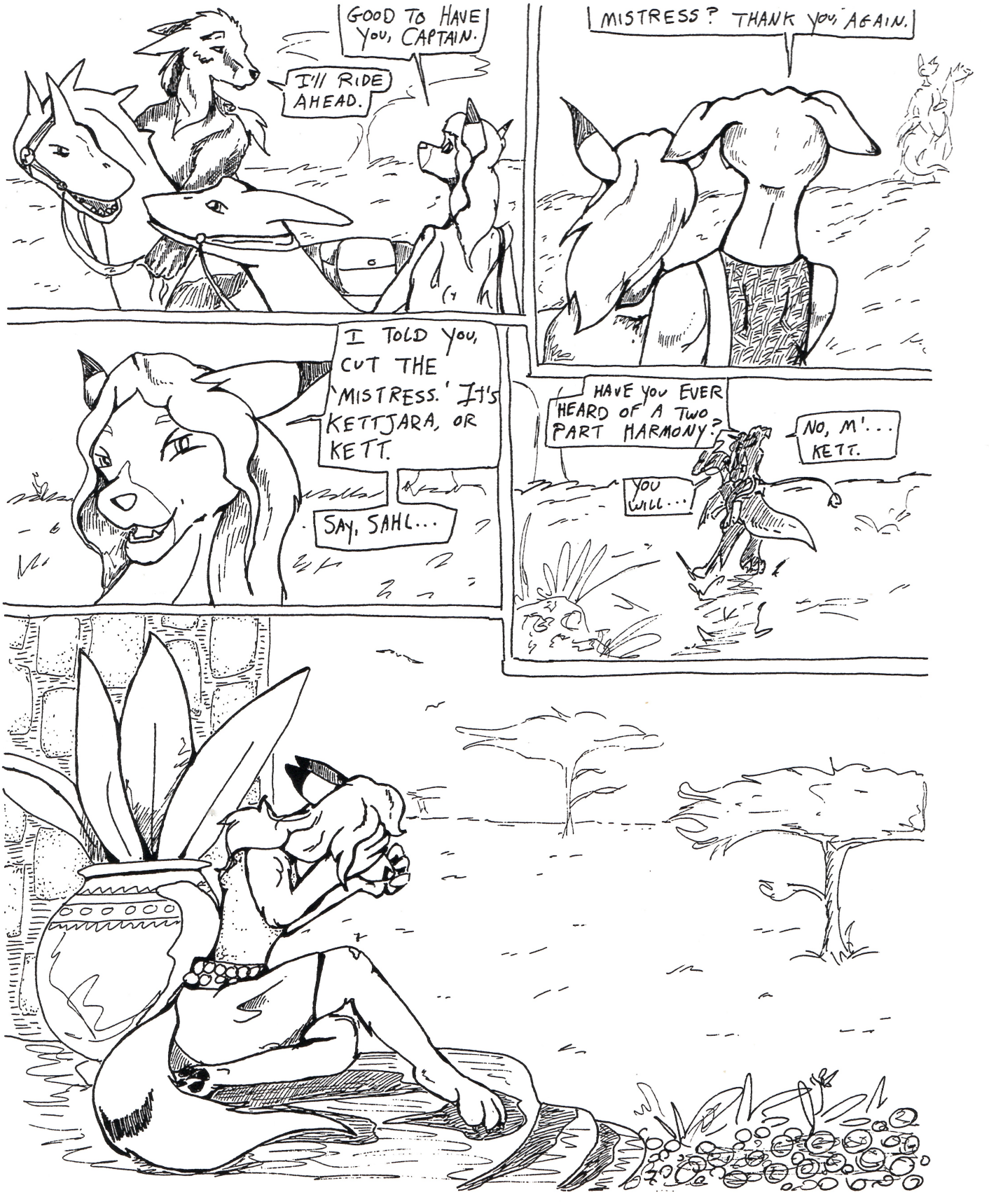

FORGIVE ME, LADY. I FEARED FOR YOU, RIDING INTO THIS PLACE.
SO I FOLLOWED YOU.
MY LORD HAD DIED. AND YOU... WERE KIND. ALL OF US DREAM OF A KIND MASTER.
BESIDES... WE ARE BOTH ALONE.
I... OVERSTEP MYSELF.
NO, SAHL... THANK YOU. YOU WERE A GREAT HELP BACK THERE.
? ? ?
THANK YOU.

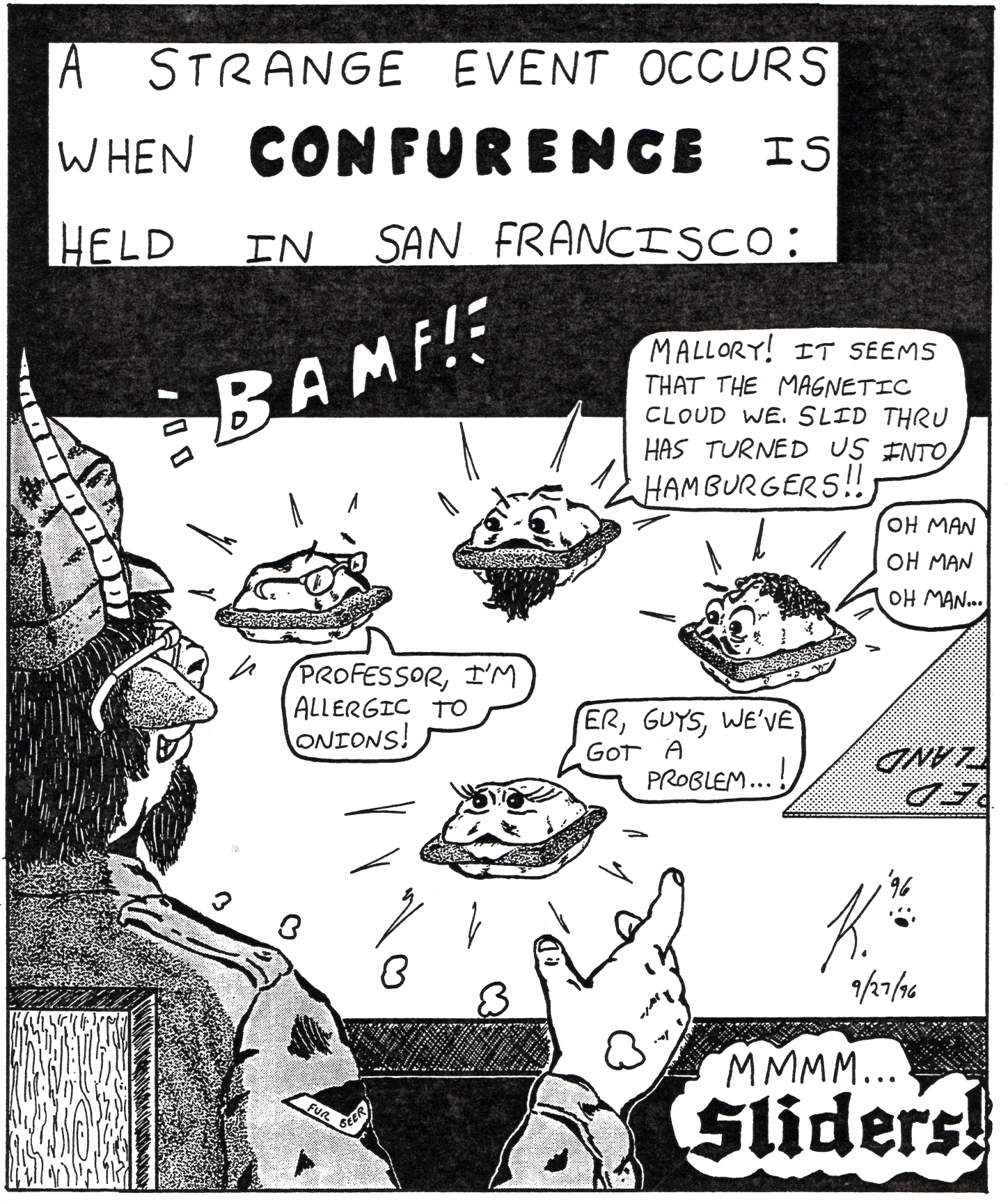

CAPTAIN.
YOU ASKED FOR ME, my LORD?
I HEARD THAT THERE WAS AN INCIDENT WITH THE CAT, TALWYN.
MY SOLDIERS FOUND NOTHING IN HER BELONGINGS, PA'LEF. NOTHING EVEN RESEMBLING A STONE CARVING.
THE DOG ATTACKED BEFORE HER PERSON COULD BE WELL SEARCHED.
WELL... FORGOT TO NOTICE THAT SHE HAD A DOG, EH, CAPTAIN?


SHE'S PROBABLY WHAT SHE SAYS SHE IS, A KITTEN OUT ON HER LUCK FOR CATERWAULING THE WRONG THING ABOUT HER LORD.
BUT THE COINCIDENCE... AND THE WAY SHE BEAT THREE SOLDIERS TO GET THAT DOG...
SHE CAN STILL BE EASILY TAKEN AND SEARCHED, PA'LEF.
NO... LET HER BE. I'M FEELING CHARITABLE. BESIDES, WE DON'T WANT TO ANNOY ANY CAT-LORD THAT MAY STILL KEEP A FANCY ON HER.
BUT I'VE GOT A LITTLE MISSION FOR YOU, TALWYN.
TALWYN? WHAT'S WRONG?


THE NEXT MORNING...
BEST TO GET OUT QUICKLY AND EARLY. I DO NOT TRUST THIS PLACE... AT LEAST THEY PAID ME WELL.
I COULDN'T AGREE MORE, MISTRESS.
SAHL... IT'S A LONG JOURNEY THAT I AM ON.
I WILL UNDERSTAND IF YOU CHOOSE TO GO ELSE-WHERE.
LADY KETTJARA? I COME WITH LORD AKINDA'S MOST SINCERE APOLOGIES FOR THE INCIDENT LAST NIGHT. HE OFFERS A GENEROUS STIPEND.
TO LEAVE YOU, LADY? I AM BOUND. I WILL STAY... UNLESS, OF COURSE, YOU ORDER ME OTHERWISE.
SAHL, UNDERSTAND THAT, FROM THIS POINT, YOU ARE FREE. I CAN BE NO 'LADY' FOR YOU AND WILL NOT STAND THE TITLE.
IF YOU FOLLOW ME, CHOOSE IT. AND REMEMBER YOU CHOSE, WHATEVER MAY BECOME OF US.
HE HAS ORDERED CAPTAIN TALWYN TO ACCOMPANY YOU FOR AS LONG AS YOU TRAVEL IN THE WOLF LANDS.
HE WOULD NOT HAVE YOU COME TO HARM.


I HAVE TO GO NOW, SAYVALA. I'M... SORRY.
TALWYN...
SSH, LOVE. M'LORD COMMANDS ME.
YOU KNOW THAT I WOULD STAY IF I COULD.
PLEASE... BE WELL, SAYVALA.
GOODBYE.
UH... CAPTAIN TALWYN?


GOOD TO HAVE YOU, CAPTAIN.
I'll RIDE AHEAD.
MISTRESS? THANK YOU, AGAIN.
I TOLD YOU, CUT THE 'MISTRESS.' It's KETTJARA, OR KETT.
SAY, SAHL...
HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF A TWO PART HARMONY?
NO, M'... KETT.
YOU WILL...


A STRANGE EVENT OCCURS WHEN CONFURENCE IS HELD IN SAN FRANCISCO:
-BAM!!-
MALLORY! IT SEEMS THAT THE MAGNETIC CLOUD WE SLID THRU HAS TURNED US INTO HAMBURGERS!!
OH MAN OH MAN OH MAN...
PROFESSOR, I'M ALLERGIC TO ONIONS!
ER, GUYS, WE'VE GOT A PROBLEM...!
'96
9/27/96
FUR BEER
MMMM... Sliders!

Ivory Trade

by David Schneberger

The hyena's stone dagger slashed through the air where Kana had stood a second before. Turning around moments later, she brought her staff up and into the hyena's neck, being rewarded for her effort by a dull crack as its body crumpled to the dusty ground. Not bothering to view her handiwork, she waded into the next set of hyenas with a bellow from her trunk. Getting a quick glimpse at her mate, she saw that he was now trying to hold off three hyenas himself and appeared to be succeeding. He had been the first attacked, being over by the bushes collecting leaves, when the savages had ambushed them. Worried for his safety, she tried fighting a way through her opponents so she could help him, but before she got even a foot closer she was attacked by two other spotted bodies who jumped at her. Kana dodged the first, but the other managed to connect and throw her off balance. She tried to bring either her trunk or her staff around to dislodge the clinging body, but the effort brought her crashing to the ground. One blow did manage to hit another of the attackers, sending him reeling back as he shook his head and tried to regain his spear.

Looking once again to her side, she saw her mate Anara throw off the second of his attackers. When he saw her lying on the ground he bellowed angrily and started to close the distance separating the two of them. The last of his attackers hung back, though, and picked up a spear from the ground.

Kana tried to warn him, but the hyena on her back thrust its dagger into her side. The warning was turned into a trumpeting scream of pain, which only increased her mate's efforts to get to her and blinded him to the hyena. The hyena took full advantage of the distraction, thrusting his spear through the elephant's back, bringing him down some fifteen feet from Kana.

More hyenas quickly appeared and started to slash at Anara with daggers and spears. They hit him again and again, as if never quite sure they had done enough damage, and that somehow the wounded elephant would miraculously get back to his feet if they let up their attack. Kana trumpeted in rage and tried to get up once more, but found herself held down by the rest of the raiding party. It took at least four hyenas to do so.

When they had apparently sated their bloodlust, the other hyenas dragged Anara over a little closer to Kana. She tried to call to him, to try to wake him, but his eyes remained closed. The hyenas laughed at her attempts, infuriating her more and more. She tried again to dislodge her captors but only managed to grab the one sitting on her neck. Wrapping her trunk around his leg, she pulled with enough force to send him flying, his muzzle crashing into the ground. Another, this one a female by her scent, came between her and her mate as she felt others reposition themselves to hold her. The one she had thrown slowly picked himself up, spitting out a mixture of blood and teeth.

"You have something for this one?" the female, a little larger than the rest, asked between chuckles, finding some amusement at all that had happened. Kana swung at her with her trunk and missed.

"He's my mate!" she shouted trying to hit the hyena with her trunk a second time. The hyena dodged just out of range. She had no desire to take a blow like her packmate had.

"Was your mate," she replied with some apparent joy, kicking Anara's body.

Kana didn't answer; she just looked at Anara. Her vision blurred. The hyena came a little closer, but she didn't try to swing at her this time. She hadn't the strength left.

"Your mate will be of great help to my village." she almost whispered in Kana's ear. "Localass is in need of a sacrifice. Your mate will have the great privilege of having his soul consumed and added to the power of the Great One, and you'll be able to join him there soon."

Regaining her anger, Kana tried to swing at her, but the hyena was prepared for it this time and jumped away. The hyenas bearing down on her renewed their efforts and kept her limbs firmly pinned to the ground as two hyenas began to hack off Anara's tusks. Kana tried once more to go to her mate, but the hyenas wouldn't let her. There were just too many of them on her and her strength was fading fast.

The stone axes bit into the ivory of her mate's tusks again and again, thwack after dull thwack, as if they were

cutting down a tree. The hyenas were careful not to mark where Anara's name sign was carved in the white ivory. She knew that they would need it intact for the ritual. All elephants knew that. It was the stuff that mothers used to scare the young with. "Never leave the village and the herd," they said, "For if you do the hyenas will take your soul."

From off in the distance a trumpet sounded, but Kana didn't listen to it. Her eyes were glued to the hyenas and their axes as they brought them down on the tusks. Mercifully, the world went dark.

• • •

"Anara!" she shouted out, her eyes opening wide and her hands and trunk flailing out. A hand touched her head, but she swatted it out of the way and continued to shout. Strong hands grabbed her from behind and something held her feet down. Kana had to fight them. She had to save him before they took him away from her forever!

Through the panic, Kana heard a voice call her, piercing the upper layers of madness that covered her mind.

"Kana! Don't fight, Kana. You're safe, Kana. You're back in town."

In a second, Kana recognized the face in front of her as that of another elephant and stopped fighting. As fear gave way to exhaustion, she recognized the face as belonging to her friend Fenia.

"Fenia! Anara? . . ." she asked feverishly, her eyes growing wild again.

"Is all right. Just lie down and let Darnial help you. He can't do anything if you keep fighting him," Fenia said soothingly, her trunk slowly massaging Kana's forehead.

Kana stopped struggling before collapsing on the pallet. She smiled a little before losing consciousness once more, happy that it was just a dream. It had seemed so real to her.

Darnial brought a damp cloth over and placed it on Kana's head. Slowly he looked up at Fenia. "Why didn't you tell her?"

"What good would it have done? She needs to recover now. That's what's important."

"But what do you intend to tell her when she gets better?" the aged elephant said with a sideways glance.

"When she's better, I'll tell her the truth — that Anara died fighting the hyenas that attacked them," she replied, her patience beginning to wear.

"And. . ." Darnial began again.

"And that his funeral was held while she was recovering. Now if I can go. . . ."

"But his tusks were taken! How can we free his soul from them if they're gone?" Darnial nearly shouted at her.

Slowly Fenia turned from the door, her expression anything but pleasant.

"Tell me," she said, as if asking a small child, "do you think it would be better to tell her that her mate is waiting for her in the Celestial Herd or . . ." she paused. She wanted to make sure the doddering old physician wouldn't be asking her any more questions. ". . . or do we tell her that his soul has been devoured by Localass? Which do you think is going to hurt her more? You should be able to understand this, Darnial. Isn't it your job to ease pain?" she countered. "Now, if I may go?"

Darnial nodded and went back to attending Kana's wounds.

Fenia left the house and walked over to the wall that surrounded the town. Leaning against the hard stone that protected the town from raiders, she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She wasn't used to being up this late.

"Oh, Kana," she said to herself, shaking her head and looking up to the sky. "What do I do? Oh, Matriarch, what do I do?"

She had to lie to Kana. Fenia knew how Kana would take it if she knew the truth. She'd try to take it into her hands somehow, either that or do something stupid. Fenia had her hands and trunk full when Kana's mother had died four years ago. If Kana were normal, or if her mate had been the same, there wouldn't have been nearly as much trouble. Curse Anara for staying around and not going off exploring or trading like most of the males did. Now that he was gone she had to clean up the mess he'd caused. It was going to be worse on Kana this time than with her mother. She wouldn't even be able to look in the Book. . . .

Oh, Goddess! She had completely forgotten about the Book! Kana would want to see it after Fenia told her of Anara's death. There would be no hiding that, and it would make things a hundred times worse for her. It was one thing to be separated for the rest of her life, but for eternity. . . .

She would have to see the elders about this. Maybe if she made a good enough case they would let his name be put in the book. Until she arranged a meeting, though, she would have to keep Kana away from the Temple.

Why couldn't the guards have arrived earlier? None of this would have happened if they had been able to save both of them.

"Oh, Goddess, what have I gotten myself into?" she said quietly to the wall.

Fenia was there to help Kana when she woke up two days later. She hadn't even cried when Fenia told her about Anara, but had just sat in silence. It did nothing to reassure Fenia, though — in fact, it made her worry all the more.

Somehow Kana had known it, in spite of what had been told her the night the guards had rescued her and brought her back. She even seemed to know it after recovering and regaining consciousness, though many of the things that occurred during the attack had been mercifully clouded over in her mind. Since waking it had been like she was dreaming or in a daze. Things didn't quite seem to connect with her or around her, and she was nearly incapable of carrying on a conversation. She stayed at home now nearly all the time, coverings pulled over windows, and the door closed. Fenia even paid a visit to the shop where Kana worked and had talked the proprietress into giving Kana the time off, as she was in no shape to do anything right now. Since such attacks were rare these days it hadn't been too hard to convince her.

Fenia was worried about Kana. While she hadn't done anything foolish in the last few days, the problem was that she didn't do anything at all. Most of her day was spent staring at the floor, or at the few murals that decorated her small house.

Fenia had to change that, and that afternoon she had her chance, finally getting Kana out of the house and into the street to go shopping for the week's groceries.

The streets were awash in noises, smells, and sights of all sorts that day. Every couple of weeks the town received a number of visitors from other communities, mostly male traders and tourists. It was a common occurrence in most villages, and true to past months there were visitors from all over. There were those from the east with their smaller ears and larger foreheads, those from the south with trunks painted with patterns as intricate as the soul patterns of a person's tusks. Fenia even thought she saw a visitor or two from the north, with their shaggy coats of fur to protect them from the cold. This was usually a festive time in the village, and many were enjoying themselves to the fullest. Fenia was usually one of those that in the middle of things, but Kana's nearly catatonic behavior was her concern today.

As they looked through the wares of a trader selling a variety of fruits and spices from the south, Fenia tried to interest Kana in some of the more exotic fare.

"Oh, Kana, have you smelled this one? They say its from the herds of the southern island. C'mon, take a whiff," she said, grabbing Kana's trunk with her own and yanking it towards the small container. Struggling against the grip, Kana pulled free, giving Fenia a small smack in the head with her trunk as it came free. Her glare was lost on Kana's blank stare at the trader's other wares.

Checking her anger, Fenia looked for a while at her friend and then at what she had bought for herself. Kana had picked up nothing but the basics: some grains, a couple of grasses, and little else. The thought of such food made her want to gag. Not a single thing to improve the taste of any of them. No spices, no fruits, nothing but the essentials to survive.

Leading Kana to the next table, Fenia tried to interest her in a few fruits. Again Kana displayed the apathy she had shown everything and everybody.

"Come on, Kana. You told me just two weeks ago that this is your favorite. Look, they finally have some more for sale. Tell you what, I'll pick up a couple for the two of us and we'll share them tonight." Fenia tried again to grab Kana's trunk in an attempt to catch her attention. Again Kana yanked it free without a word or even a look.

Fenia could feel herself getting angry. She had tried to be nice to Kana for the last five days, only to have her act like she was now, little more than a slab of meat with a trunk, which did nothing but give Fenia the occasional whap on the head for her trouble.

"Do you want to join me in this world for a second?" she asked angrily. "I was hoping that perhaps we could pick out some food together."

Kana turned from looking out absently into the street when she heard the edge in Fenia's voice. The only time she got that edge was when she was really annoyed with something or someone. She'd put a lot of elders in their place with that tone, and it penetrated some of the numbness around Kana now.

"Yes," she said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

"I know you feel lost without him, but you have to get on with your own life."

"What life?" Kana replied under her breath, though not low enough to make it hard for Fenia to hear.

"The life you're living, dammit! Look, Anara died, not you! Whether you wish you were with him or not, I'd like to remind you that there are a few of us around here that are glad you're still alive and around for us to love! Not that you'd care!" Fenia shouted. She was sick and tired of the endless self-pity.

The person in charge of the shop, as well as a few in the street, turned to see what caused such an outburst. Fenia gave them an angry wave of her trunk, signalling them to go about their business. This was none of their concern.

"Kana," she said, more softly this time. "Kana, you have got to snap out of this. You can't feel guilty because you're alive and he isn't. You can mourn him as much as you want, Kana. That's fine by me. But you're destroying yourself in the process. I can't let you do that. Kana, I'm your friend. I won't let you do that to yourself."

Kana nodded gently, the tears beginning to streak down her grey skin. Taking her behind one of the small stands and out of the sight of the casual passerby, Fenia sat her down and hugged her close, rocking slightly.

"You can't bring him back, Kana. You can wish as long as you want for him to return, but you can't make him come back, no matter what."

"I . . . I . . . love him so much. . . . He stayed for me. . . ." she replied though sobs as she hugged Fenia even tighter to her with her hands, her trunk wrapping itself around Fenia's.

Fenia nodded quietly and held her friend. That had been the problem. Anara had stayed around. It wasn't often a male stayed around all the time, but he had. Most times those that actually called themselves "mates" probably saw each other a couple of times a year. But Anara had stayed around all year. Never left once. Sure it was odd, but Kana had loved him all the more for it. Perhaps he had been the best thing for her in a way. Fenia knew Kana was the sort that loved completely. Fenia doubted her friend could have had a relationship with a male who was gone most of the time.

"Just let go" she said softly over and over to Kana as they hugged. "He'll be waiting for you in the Celestial Herd."

That seemed to work much better, and Kana actually raised her head and nodded.

"You're right . . . I . . . I . . . I think I want to go see him."

Fenia tensed, suddenly regretting her words. She knew what that meant. Kana wanted to see the Book where Anara's name was supposedly inscribed. The Book contained the names of those who had passed into the ranks of the Celestial Herd. Without Anara's tusks, the priests couldn't free his soul from the earth, and it was now likely to be consumed by the hyenas' god, Localass. She still had to talk to the village matriarch about this.

"No, Kana, you're not ready yet. Give yourself some time to recover, then we'll go together. Just give it some time first, and then let me know if you feel ready."

• • •

Fenia felt her stomach sink when her final plea was refused. There simply wasn't any bending of religious law on this aspect. If his soul had not been freed, then his spirit would not join the Celestial Herd. That was a fact. The Book was an accurate list of all those who had passed over and were waiting for their relatives in the hereafter. Making one exception would corrupt the validity of the entire Book. There was no debating it. It was law. Anara's name would not be added to the list because he would not be there in the Herd. In essence, Fenia had asked to take the lie she had given to Kana one step further, but there was no further she could go with it.

There would also be no attempt to get them back from the hyenas. Elephants didn't start wars. They would finish them, but never start them. To the village, Anara was already dead, and his soul gone.

Now what did she do? Kana was showing the first signs of improvement, but they hinged on the belief that eventually she would be reunited with her mate. Now that could never be, and Fenia knew that would destroy Kana.

She sighed. About the only thing she could do was to postpone the time when Kana went to see the Book. The longer she had to get over the pain, the better the chance Kana had of surviving the blow.

• • •

Kana woke up from another fitful sleep. Confused images of the attack had been playing themselves out night after night in a show she wished she could stop watching. Sometimes things turned out for the best, and both of them were rescued, while other times she saw images of Anara's tusks being hacked off his lifeless body by cackling hyenas. She could barely remember the specifics of that day, and the dreams only made things harder to piece together. All she got was more confused.

Without Fenia around, Kana didn't know what she would have done. Yesterday she had, for the first time since that terrible day, actually felt a little better.

Looking around the room of her simple home, seeing how open and quiet it was, she couldn't restrain the pangs of grief. She was alone again. There was no changing that, but she had to live with it now. No amount of protest or grief would change that. She would see Anara again. It would be many years from now, but she knew him. The time wouldn't make any difference between them.

Still, she needed something now. Something to reassure her. Something to hold firmly in her mind. Kana had been told to wait before going to see the Book, but she had to. It would make her feel better. For some reason Fenia didn't think it would help, but Kana knew it would settle things a little in her mind. It wouldn't be easy, but it would help her. She knew it would.

Putting on a simple outfit so she at least looked decent, she made her way to the Temple where the Book was kept, passing by the travelers' quarter. Many called it the male quarter because nearly all those that ventured out were male, although there wasn't really any restriction against females doing so. Most males didn't like staying put for too long; that was what had made her Anara different.

Reaching the door to the Temple, she gave a low nod and partial wave of her trunk to the guards posted on either side of the door as she went in. She came into the room where services were held, lit by the faint evening sunlight entering an opening above the door. The light illuminated the altar and the statue that dominated it. The statue itself was much bigger than the biggest of her people, made of silver with inlaid gems, depicting the Great Matriarch looking out onto her followers on earth. To either side of the statue were doors. The one Kana took led into the room containing the Book.

This room was lit by candles that cast a flickering light over the walls and off the beautiful white pillars that were the Book. On each pillar was carved the names of those from the village who had come and gone and who

were now part of the Celestial Herd in the hereafter. Each pillar was made of the finest white stone and was expertly carved with the name patterns of those who had passed on, from the earliest days of the village to the present. The stone made it look almost as if the names were carved on ivory, as they would have looked on the people's tusks when they were still alive.

Going to the newest of the revolving pillars, Kana slowly turned it with her trunk, as was tradition. Using her hands would be a desecration of the record, and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

As she approached the present she saw the name of Toros, a male that had died about a month ago when fighting off hyenas that had threatened a caravan heading towards the village. His name sign, a series of swirls that supported what looked like twin mountain peaks, was carved clearly, not yet worn from the passage of time or those that would come and run their trunks over it in remembrance.

Turning it a little farther, Kana mentally prepared herself to see Anara's sign next, that of a river bordered by palms, a reminder of where he came from, and like the river, of his dependability in nurturing. Not always the strongest of signs for a male, but the elder who'd given him the sign at his coming of age must have known what she was doing.

Turning the pillar, though, revealed no further signs. Panicked, Kana turned it again, and again, and again, faster and faster, going over the same piece of vacant stone surface. Touching it with her trunk, she felt it over and over, as if somehow the inscription were there but too faint for her eyes, but she never found any marking to hold on to, just cold, slippery stone, as her head dipped to the ground. She couldn't even form tears; there was nothing left.

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It was fairly light out that evening as Fenia made her way to Kana's house. The full moon in the clear evening sky illuminated the moist dirt roads of the village almost as if it were still day. Fenia mused that perhaps it would do Kana some good to see the fields that ringed the village. With the rains of the last few months, the large expanses of green were a beautiful sight, especially with the dew from the last rain still clinging to the leaves. With the light tonight, it would look like they were growing silver, not grain. That was, if she could get Kana out of the house tonight to see it. However, after the last day she had a good feeling about her chances.

Coming to the door, Fenia paused as she heard a commotion inside. Smiling to herself, she looked up and silently thanked the Great Matriarch. Kana appeared to be coming around. It sounded like she was cleaning up the house. Good thing, too. Over the last week her house had become quite disordered.

Entering the small house, she found nothing of the sort — in fact, the house looked at least ten times worse then yesterday. Pots were broken, their shards littering the floor along with various overturned tables and chairs. Since there was no reason for anyone to destroy the house, and Kana was not rich, Fenia assumed that things had somehow taken a turn for the worse.

Moving cautiously to the bedroom, Fenia took a step back as a figure whirled on her, illuminated by the dim light provided by the candle on the bedside table. Normally she would have breathed a sigh of relief on finding out that it was just Kana, but something in the eyes of her friend told her to remain on her guard. She was also carrying a staff, and while it was forbidden for elephants to attack their own kind, Fenia didn't want to trust in just the law right now.

"Kana?" she asked quietly, a note of fear entering her voice in spite of the confidence she tried to project.

Kana glared back. She was furious, and there was little doubt in Fenia's mind why. She must have seen the Book, despite Fenia's warning.

"I . . . I . . . I can explain. I thought you would do some. . . ."

"You liar! How could you?" Kana shouted back at her, raising her trunk as if ready to strike. Fenia took a step back, toward the door she'd just come through.

"I was afraid you might never recover. . . ."

"So you told me Anara was waiting for me in the hereafter! My . . . my last hope . . . that . . . we . . . could. . . ." she trailed off, some of the anger leaving her.

"I was afraid you might not live through it, Kana. I just wanted to help you," Fenia said, sensing her advantage but still taking a step closer to the door. She was thankful there appeared to be enough grief left to sap Kana's will to do anything violent. Kana suddenly went past her, though, into the kitchen. Confused, Fenia followed, but positioned herself as close as she could to the door, just in case.

Grabbing a small sack, Kana filled it with a good portion of the food she had bought the other day, and when finished, slung it across her back. "The hyenas take a long time to use our tusks — at least that's what those we've captured have said. If I go now I still might make it in time. . . ."

"Make it in time?" Fenia said, still bewildered by what Kana was up to. A second later, though, it made sense. She wasn't defeated yet. She was going after the tusks.

"Wait! Kana! Are you crazy? We don't travel into hyena territory. It's just asking for trouble! Even heavily guarded caravans don't go close to there! All you'd do is get captured, killed, and your tusks added to Anara's on the alter for Localass. Then you'd be gone forever too!"

"Then so be it," Kana replied, with the sort of quiet acceptance that had been in her voice for the past days. "I can't leave him. He never left me. . . ."

"I won't let you do this! Kana, please . . . just allow yourself time to think this out. . . ." Fenia began as she took another step towards the door. If she could get out, she could summon the guards, and perhaps stop Kana from doing something stupid. However, Kana was quicker, taking her staff and rapping Fenia on the head. Her friend fell to the ground unconscious as Kana made her way to the wall. Turning for a second, she looked back to her house. Walking back, she looked at what she'd done to poor Fenia. Softly she touched her trunk to her friend's head. She'd just been trying to help Kana. If only she understood. . . .

Running back into the street, Kana made once again for the wall. A little talking with those watching the fields would be all she needed to get close enough to jump over and be on her way, she figured. They were concerned with keeping things out, not people escaping.

It was more overcast the next night, but the moon was still strong enough to cast a pale light over the land. Kana had been moving all day, and when she came within sight of the first village of the hyenas, she was quite tired. She did not let herself lie down. There was a good chance she'd fall asleep if she did, and she had to strike as soon as possible. She had little idea of how long it would be before Anara's tusks would be dedicated to the hyenas' god, but with every minute her chances of getting them back dropped.

Kana had been lucky, not running into any hunting parties. She thanked the Matriarch for guiding her here so quietly. Not that she couldn't defend herself. Her larger size gave her an advantage, but hyenas were always found in groups. She was no match for their numbers.

The village, now some distance away from her, looked fairly quiet, but she'd have to be cautious. They would be stupid not to post any guards, and even though they weren't as advanced as her own people, she knew they were not stupid.

This was the village that had taken Anara's tusks, she was sure. Hyenas were opportunists; they wouldn't travel over long distances if they didn't have to. As this seemed to be the closest village to her own, chances were the tusks were here.

Ducking quickly, Kana avoided the gaze of one of the guards she had anticipated would be patrolling the village. Fortunately the wind blew her scent away from him and he failed to realize she was there. Taking a deep breath, she scanned the village for what might be a temple. The tusks were for religious rituals, so that was probably where they would be. She shook her head once to clear it. She'd have to be more careful if she were going to succeed. She should have scented the guard long before he had become a threat. She couldn't afford to make mistakes now.

Toward the east side of the village stood a hut built of logs, compared to the others, which were made mostly of grasses. It was a safe guess that this was the temple. Having little in the way of a plan, Kana prayed to the Matriarch once again and made a quick run for the closest hut. Making it there safely, she looked to either side. Two hyenas strolled down what passed for streets here to either side of her, both in her direction.

Looking for an escape, Kana peeked through the wall of the hut beside her. There appeared to be two hyenas, possibly mates, sleeping beside each other on a grasswork mat by the far wall. A fire that had been lit inside, and which released its smoke through the hole in the roof, had burned down to embers now and barely lit the place. Taking a chance, Kana ducked inside.

The place still smelled strongly of smoke, and possibly something else that hovered on the edge of Kana's comprehension. A fragranced smoke? Special herbs? It was possible. Her own people used them in some religious rites, but they seemed to be a little more widespread here. That assumed the hyenas here weren't higher-ranking ones.

In his sleep, the male rolled over slightly, yipping quietly, his back paw working as if he were being chased or were trying to scratch something. Kana paid it little attention as she watched the two pedestrians outside pass each other. They gave a funny sort of greeting to each other, bending over somewhat and sniffing at each other, but saying nothing.

Trying to raise more courage from a reserve that seemed near depletion, Kana made a quick dash to the temple, ducking inside with her staff at the ready. Much as she wanted to turn these horrid creatures to pulp, it was forbidden, unless they attacked her first — something she was sure they'd be happy to do.

This temple was much like the one her people used, except that the statue of their god was made of crude stone, and before it were offerings that ranged from grains and hunks of meat to what looked to be the head of some canine creature, but bigger, with a thick pelt of purest white. Sacrifices apparently. Barbaric! Her people never did anything that crude.

Behind the statue she saw a curtained doorway and from beyond it she heard a low, rhythmic drumming. Like a heart beating, the drumbeat never wavered and never changed. Stepping cautiously to the opening, she peered through the side of the curtain into the room from which the sound came. What she saw horrified her.

The room was filled with trophies of past hunts, animals captured, killed, and brought here. They all appeared to be large specimens of their kind, from what Kana could tell by looking at their heads. Even more chilling, many

of the heads were those of her own people. She had to look away — it was just too gruesome. Not only had they deprived them of their souls, but they mocked them even in death. Kana felt sick.

But she had seen something else. There had been three hyenas, their fur painted with different colours and symbols, facing towards a small altar. On that altar she was sure she had seen a white object. Pulling herself together, she turned to look once more and bumped heads with a priest who had looked around the corner back out at her.

Panicked, Kana grabbed her staff all the harder, stepping back before taking three steps toward the creature, menacing it. Bringing up the staff, she made as if to strike the priest that had run into her and who was now scrambling back, fear etched firmly into his face. His compatriates, though, were less hampered and reached for stone daggers, one of which came at Kana, imbedding itself in the floor from a weak throw. She had them off balance, and now that they'd made an attempt to hurt her. . . .

The hyena she'd run into was the first to feel her staff on his ribs. The blow left him gasping for air as his lungs were forcibly compressed. His companion, the one who had been beating the drums, swung at her midsection with his knife, encountering a forceful parry that sent him reeling, holding his paw and yowling in pain from the blow. Kana dodged the third priest before silencing the injured hyena with a rap to the side of his muzzled face, just below his left ear.

The final priest was less eager than the others to engage her again. Even after scoring a small gash across Kana's left arm with his ritual dagger, he pulled back from her, trying to force her to attack him.

"So you have come to take our trophy? Come on then! Take me too! Can you do that? A weak little hyena you must think me. Not too weak to fell a elephant, you'll find out!"

Kana's anger rose to the point that she couldn't contain it. A glance to her side revealed that the altar did indeed have two tusks lying on it, wrapped in plants and decorated with paints. She could still easily make out the name symbols of her mate. The revelation doused the anger in her mind like a bucket of cold water. Her first swing at the priest was clumsy as she regained her calm, and he easily dodged out of the way. Now, so close to her goal, the priest became nothing more than a minor annoyance to Kana. He was just something that needed to be taken care of so she could move on. The next three blows she showered on him left little doubt that he would not be performing any rituals soon, if ever again.

She wished she could be more reverential with her own mate's tusks, but there was no time. Grabbing them up in her arms, she ran for the door. Stealth was out of the question now. That damned yelping priest had probably alerted someone. She had to run now, and run as long and as hard as she could.

Once again she thanked the Matriarch in her mind as she cleared the edge of the village and made for the forest, clutching the tusks to her body in a loving embrace. They were together again. She ran all the rest of that night, not daring to stop. It was only when she was in dense jungle that she stopped to rest a minute or two. They were together, but neither of them was safe yet.

Her aching legs pleaded with her to stop, but she got up once more and kept on running. The pain would subside later, one way or the other, but what she tried to save could not be healed or replaced.

It was early the next morning when Kana's wearied mind realized she had been cut off. All the time she had been running she had heard the yelps of her pursuers behind and sometimes to the sides of her. Now she knew what they had done. The hyenas had slowly headed her away from any possible river crossing and toward where the river met the cliffs. They had trapped her, and soon they would close that same trap.

She had failed. Worse still, she had failed Anara. There was no way she could return his tusks to the village. She had consigned his soul, and most likely her own, to oblivion.

No.

Calmly she got down on her knees and took Anara's tusks from beneath her arm, placing them gently on the ground. Grabbing her staff, she slowly drew a circle in the dirt with it. Once it was complete, she drew symbols around the inside edge. She had seen them enough to remember the order. At the top of the circle was the symbol of the Great Matriarch, followed on either side by signs of homage and subservience to her Celestial Herd. At the bottom were the symbols of the earth and the sky.

Kana was interrupted by a louder call from a hyena in the distance. Looking up, she tried to keep her nerve and not try to run or speed up what she was doing. She could not rush. The figures had to be drawn correctly.

The hunting pack was closing in on her.

Between the two sets of figures, she inscribed Anara's name-sign. The circle complete, she delicately placed her mate's tusks in the center. Taking her staff again, Kana began to draw another circle, this one linked into the first one. In this one she inscribed the same symbols as in the first, except along the sides.

Setting the staff down, Kana took out the knife she had brought for cutting away leaves and vines. Bringing it up to her face, she examined the blade. Calmly she checked the edge to see that it was sharp and then the handle to make sure the blade wouldn't come loose. Talking a deep breath and then another, she closed her eyes and gritted her teeth before bringing the knife down on her left tusk.

It felt like she beat her head against a solid wall as the knife came down again and again on the ivory shaft. Tears came to her eyes as the pain continued to build. It was almost maddening as the fire in her nerves built until, finally, it abated into a hard, dull throbbing.

Looking down she saw the tusk lying in her left hand, stained pink from the blood of the skin she'd had to cut through near its base. It looked like some foreign object to her. Kana would have doubted it was her own if not for her own name symbol carved into its length, two trunks wrapped around each other, supporting a circle. The pain was almost more than she could stand, but she had to remove the second tusk as well. She could hear the hunting party making its way toward her. With a determination of which she wasn't even aware she worked at her right tusk.

Kana was ready for the pain this time, but that didn't lessen it any. She had trouble telling if the knife was coming down on the tusk or on her head itself. The dull thwack of the blade announced a new burst of white-hot agony. Soon the pain became constant, and the only thing that told Kana she still hit the tusk was the sound that filtered into her head under the pain and the vibration of the tusk with each blow.

Finally it came free in her hand, but Kana continued to bring the knife down on where it used to be. Only when the pain began to lessen did she stop.

Quickly, and with hands that now shook nearly uncontrollably, she placed her own tusks in the second circle and stepped back. It was hard to think through the pain, but she couldn't wait. She began what she hoped would do for a prayer.

"Great Mother
Leader of us all
Please accept these two humble souls
Into your fold."

Kana heard the hyenas again.

"In your hands are we entrusted
and in your service these two lived.
Protect them now in death
as you did in life."

She could hear the hyenas constantly now. There was no time to complete the prayer. She had only one hope now. She prayed the Matriarch wouldn't be offended.

"I have not given proper reverence to the spirits of the deceased, Great Mother, but I do what I do to save . . . Anara . . . my mate from the death that lasts forever. If I have sinned in this ritual, then let the blame fall on me, but not on him. I . . . he never left me . . . and I had to do the same for him. Please let his spirit leave the earth for the Herd. I . . ." Kana trailed off, collapsing to the ground from the strain. She was too tired to go on.

The hyenas were just outside the clearing. Kana saw the bushes moving as they finally came into sight of her. Looking down before her, she saw the circles suddenly burst into flame. Growing brightest in the center, the flames sprang from the symbols themselves, hotter than the sun which cooked the lands in the dry seasons. First, the flames errupted from the symbol of the Matriarch, then spread to those of the sides, and then the air and earth symbols. The fire lighted the circles next, the flames turning blue at the junction where Kana and Anara's name symbols were joined and held in both rings. The name symbols looked white hot and continued to grow brighter, gaining power from the flames circling them. When she could barely stand to look at them fire leaped out from each symbol to the tusks in each circle, searing them where the name symbols were carved on the ivory, and then consuming their entire length.

As quickly as the fire had begun, it extinguished itself, sending white smoke billowing into the air, joining with the white fluffy clouds above, almost in the shape of an elephant. In the middle of each circle was left nothing but a slight burn mark, each of which were smoldering.

Kana thanked the Goddess with all her soul, which would now be joining her mate's. As she did so, a new reserve of strength built in her body as she grabbed her staff and slowly got to her feet, casually regarding the hyenas that had now arrived. She could feel the weakness begin to overtake her limbs, but she didn't care.

"You cannot run any more, elephant. You will pay for desecrating the Holy Temple!" the largest hyena shouted, obviously the leader. Kana looked at her.

Kana said nothing, and did nothing but stare at her vacantly. Somewhere in the back of her mind she recognized the hyena. She was the same one who had taunted her while they butchered Anara.

"I'll see to it that Localass makes your soul suffer forever in pain!" the hyena shouted again, this time to the point of making her own voice crack. The stare of the elephant was maddening.

Kana waited.

"You idiot! You shall pay for this!" the hyena ranted, her anger rising to the point that she had to kill. Anything to stop that quiet, persistent stare. Whooping for the attack, she charged in, her spear waving wildly in rage.

Kana waited for them. Elephants fought only to defend. They could not hurt her now anyway. She waited for the first of her attackers to meet her and her staff.

Five hyenas, including the party's leader, fell to the ground before Kana's body joined them.



TERRIE SMITH
BASED ON
©DISNEY


"STRICTLY 'TALL-ROOM"
A life lived in fear is a terrible thing to waste.
T. Knight 1996
Good evening! Welcome to tonights dancing class.
Now, our first lesson. Step forward left...
Ah, excuse me!
Then...
Which foot?
The left.
Yes, but which left?
TK 9/96


LORIS
©Brock Hoagland
S.D.C. 7/96

The Bandits

A Hanno and Loris story

by Brock Hoagland

illustrated by Steve Corbett

"Hold or die!" The cry came from the trees lining the road along which the pair of adventurers rode.

Hanno pulled his riding bird to a halt. Ahead, Loris did the same with her war bird, a snarl on her face as she reached for her sword.

"Think again, cat!"

They stepped from the trees then, seven assorted furs in rough clothing, weapons in hand. Ahead, two more stepped out and behind another two. The bandits had laid their ambush well; besides the pairs ahead and behind, they had positioned themselves with the wind in their faces. Not even the leopardess's keen nose had been able to detect them. Hanno counted eight bows leveled at them; not good odds until something could change them.

"Let it be, Loris!" the mouse called urgently to his partner.

"Aye, cat, let it be," a black bear said. It was the same voice that had addressed them before. He was clearly the leader, his ring mail setting him apart from the other bandits with their leather armor set with metal studs. "We're not such bad sorts. We'll leave you your lives and your weapons. We'll even leave you your birds, though I'm afriad we'll have to have your fine mail shirt, cat. Apart from that, we'll have your silver and gold. From the look of things, you can spare it."

While neither Loris nor Hanno flaunted their modest wealth, their tunics were of embroidered linen and their vests, trousers and boots of fine leather. And both wore a modicum of jewelry.

"We don't want anyone hurt, least of all us, so let's all be sensible about this and get it done without any trouble. Now dismount and drop your weapons," the bear ordered, his voice hardening. The bandits from the front and the rear had meanwhile closed with their fellows.

Having no choice for the present, Hanno and Loris dismounted. He dropped his long dagger while she unbuckled her sword belt and let it fall. She started back toward him anxiously.

"Hold, cat! No one said you could move," the bear said sharply. "Do it again and you'll have an arrow through you."

"It's all right, kitten," Hanno assured her. "Just do as they say and they'll come to no harm."

The bear appeared puzzled by the mouse's choice of words, then shrugged it off. "Hriloc, Nige, get their money. Feya, check the baggage on their pack bird. And all of you make sure you don't overlook anything."

Hanno handed his jewlery and money pouch to the rat that approached him. Despite his leader's orders, the bandit ignored the mouse's other pouches and instead went to check out one of the large wicker baskets hanging on either side of Hanno's riding bird.

"I'm warning you, don't look in there," Hanno said.

Loris growled menacingly low in her throat, her tail twitching. The goat who had relieved her of her jewelry and money pouch nervously took a step back.

"Easy, cat!" the bear said. "Remember, we've got arrows aimed at you. Nige, see what's so valuable in that basket."

His confidence restored, the goat stepped up to the leopardess and arrogantly ordered her to remove her mail shirt. The rat sneered at the mouse and lifted the lid on the basket. A tiny furry face rose from its curled body and regarded him sleepily. He regarded it in horror.

"Shit! She has cubs!"

All mothers would fight to protect their young, but few as ferociously as a cat. The bandits had made a terrible mistake.

The rat's cry had distracted his fellows, drawing their attention towards him. Loris screamed in rage as only a cat could scream. She seized the goat by his throat and twisted to hold him in front of her. He jerked, then hung limply as three arrows thudded into him, others missing their mark entirely. Stooping, she grabbed her sword, drawing it from its sheath.

With the bandits' attention elsewhere, Hanno made his move. He slammed his shoulder into the rat's back, knocking the other off-balance, and drew a parchment packet from a pouch. Speaking a few words, he hurled it at the bandits. The Fire Blast exploded in their midst. They were spread out enough that not all were caught in its center. The survivors shrieked from the pain of their burns. Loris threw the goat at them, then a second later was amongst them. Her sword was a silvery blur as its enscorcelled blade cut through armor and flesh with equal ease. In seconds, they lay at her feet.

Hanno turned back to deal with the rat, only to find him and the female jackal who had been rifling their baggage on the pack bird disappearing into the surrounding woods. Well, let them go. They weren't likely to waylay any other travelers after this robbery had turned out so badly for them.

Loris was back beside his bird, frantically tearing the lid off the basket. A mew, querulous from interrupted sleep, greeted her. She relaxed, a soft expression coming over the face that had been so fierce seconds before. Hanno, meanwhile, had gone around to the other side to check its basket.

"How's Neres?"

"Still sleeping," he replied.

Loris appeared with her son in curled in her arm, his blanket draped over her shoulder. Her bloody sword was still in her hand. "Better get her out. Looks like we're going to be here a while."

Hanno lifted the tiny body from its basket, followed by its blanket. They spread the blankets out, one atop the other, on the sunny side of a tree, then lay the leopard cubs down next to each other. Neres had remained asleep the whole time and Keres quickly rejoined his sister.

Loris rubbed her face against Hanno's cheek, purring.

"Now?" he asked.

"You know how I get after a fight, runt. The bandits will wait."

"Let's at least picket our birds first."

"All right, but not a moment more."

Hanno was pleased to discover his jewelry and money pouch lying beside his bird. The rat had dropped them either when he'd knocked him off balance or in order to speed his flight. The birds taken care of, mouse and leopardess went behind the tree the leopard cubs lay under.

• • •

Afterward, they lay companionably in one another's arms.

"Kitten, do you really think we should have taken up adventuring again so soon?" Hanno inquired. "We could have waited a year until the cubs weren't so very young."

"I won't have them grow up soft like you civilized furs. Lots of fresh air and healthy exercise right from the start and even danger. That's how the gods intend carnis to grow up — weeds out the weak and makes the rest strong, fast, and tough. The day after we were born, my mother took my sister and me on a hunt for a giant snake that had been preying on her flock. She'd have been disgusted I waited a month before hitting the road again."

"I suppose you know what's best for them. Now we'd better finish taking care of the bandits."

"Aye." She sprang to her feet and stretched thoroughly before dressing.

After checking on Keres and Neres, they went to the bandits. To their surprise, one was still alive. A boar in his early teens, he lay there horribly burned. "Please," he whimpered.

"Aye, we'll give you mercy." Loris drew her sword.

"Nay, not just yet," he replied. "It's strange, but I hardly feel a thing."

Hanno knew from his wide-ranging studies that truly bad burn victims often felt very little pain — their nerve receptors were burned away and their bodies were flooded with natural pain-killers. "Then what is it you want?" he asked.

"My mother. She warned me to stay away from Domric or I'd come to a bad end, but I wouldn't listen."

"You should have," Loris remarked bluntly.

"Aye. But my father's dead and my mother's poor with so many mouths to feed. Domric promised that with just a few robberies I'd have money to buy enough land that we wouldn't be poor ever again."

"Instead you robbed her of her son."

"Aye. Please take word to her of my fate so she won't be plagued with not knowing. Her name is Elanna and she lives outside a village near here. Please, you must promise me!"

"We promise," Hanno said.

"Aye, we'll tell her," Loris added. "Now close your eyes."

The young boar closed his eyes. A quick slash with her sword opened his throat and released him.

"Is word all we're going to take her?" Hanno inquired.

She looked down at the boar's body a moment before replying. "Nay; we'll take him to her. At least she'll be able to take what small comfort she may from giving him proper burial."

The leopardess shook herself from her reverie and, going to the other bandits, cut off their heads. The nearest authorities would want them, and if Domric and his band had been plying their trade hereabouts very long, there'd probably be a reward for them.

Keres and Neres were awake now and mewling for their mother. She grinned, saying, "Motherhood calls, runt! Looks like you get to dig the grave!"

Muttering about how feeding time always came when there was work to be done, Hanno fetched their shovel. When he returned from digging the shallow trench, he found Loris sitting beneath the tree, her tunic off and her cubs in her arms. Their faces were at her breasts, though

it was obvious that they were more interested in sleep now than in milk. She had her face bent down and was purring as she licked their heads.

Hanno dropped the shovel at her feet. "At least you can tumble them in and cover them up."

"Your trouble, runt, is that you've no regard for motherhood."

"I've plenty of regard for it, kitten. What I have no regard for is a partner who uses it as an excuse to get out of her share of the work."

Loris stuck her tongue out at him, then handed him the cubs. Pulling on her tunic, she picked up the shovel. By the time she returned, the cubs were fast asleep. The burial of the bandits had been rather perfunctory; outlaws didn't deserve the same consideration as honest furs. They had been returned to Mother Earth and that was what was important.

"Looks like we spend the night here, runt; too late to go anywhere else."

"Aye. And since the cubs are fed, you can't beg off helping me set up camp this time."

• • •

It was afternoon the next day before they located the small farm and hut belonging to the Widow Elanna. A ragged, wide-eyed child had run inside at their approach. They dismounted and waited. While neither of the adventuring furs came from farming stock, they could tell the soil was poor and life would be very hard here.

A middle-aged sow appeared in the doorway. She gave a quick bob of her head. "Lady, sir, how may I serve you?"

"Goodwidow Elanna?" Hanno inquired.

"Aye, sir." Her eyes had been roaming over them and their birds. They stopped at the blanket-wrapped shape draped over the pack bird. Her face went numb and she took a step forward. "Nay," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, goodwidow; your son is dead. We were attacked by bandits yesterday and he was one of those we slew."

Loris had taken the body off the bird and now held it in her arms. "Where would you like him?"

"Put him down!" the sow screamed. *"Don't you dare touch him, you murdering bitch!"*

Loris laid him on the ground. The sow flung herself upon the leopardess, beating at her with her fists as she wailed in agony. Loris grabbed her arms and gently pushed her away. The bereft mother fell to her knees, hugging her lost son to her as she rocked him, tears pouring onto his makeshift shroud. A number of children had gathered in the doorway to stare out, crying in fright. Rags was the best that could be said about their clothes. The oldest had not yet reached his teens.

"Get out of here! Get out of here, you murderers!"

Hanno and Loris mounted up. The leopardess dug in her money pouch, pulling out several suns. She tossed the large gold coins to his mother. "Here."

The sow snatched them up and threw them at Loris. One struck her and fell to the ground. "I don't want your blood money! You can't salve your consciences so easily!"

"You misunderstand; our consciences are clear," Loris informed her coldly. "Your son chose to be a bandit and he chose to attack us."

"Take the gold, goodwidow, and buy a decent plot of land to raise your children on so none of the rest will be tempted to follow him," Hanno told her gently.

Loris kicked her war bird into motion and Hanno followed her.

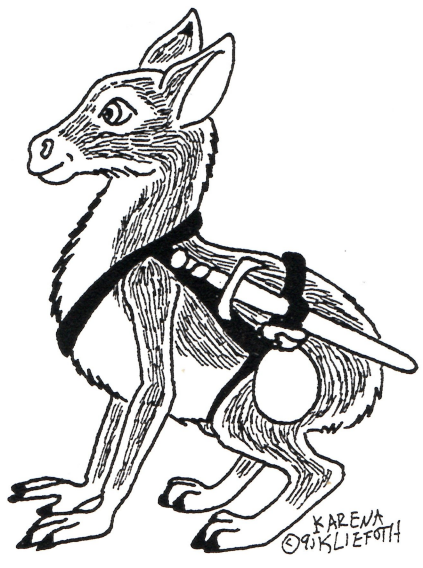
"I pray the gods that someday someone steals your children from you as you have stolen mine, bitch!"

Hanno saw Loris stiffen, but she gave no other sign of having heard the curse flung after her.

As soon as they were out of sight of the farm, Loris pulled her war bird to a halt. Hanno did not have to be told what she wanted; after long enough, partners knew without having to be told. He stopped beside her and handed her her cubs. She hugged them fiercely to her. They mewed protest at her rough treatment.

Loris turned a tear-streaked face towards him. "Oh, Hanno! Her son deserved his fate, but I imagine one of my cubs slain and I feel so sorry for her!"

He leaned over in his saddle, putting an arm around her. "I know, kitten, I know."



ULPINE BROADCASTING
proudly presents

MP The Most Pretentious Postcode in the World!

Waterbedumm Warehousemm

Mirror, Mirror

Oh, no! I have a zit!

She didn't have AT&T.

Aki tries valiantly to call her dermatologist. "Drat Pac Bell!"

But I've gotta go to the drugstore!

Tom tries to hurry our ounce. Silly ounce.

As our heroes (Santa) Cruz down Highway 17...

Jerque du jour!*

* See www.got.net/~egallant /the_road.html for more details.

Wmaterbed Warehouse

HELP WANTED

WATERBEDS FOR SALE, CHEAP!

WELCOME

WILLKOMMEN

We're here.

Oh, my!

Yours for only £5999 (US$7000, Cdn$8500).

Too expensive.

Looks too much like *Love, American Style.*

Und how may I helpen you?

Story and Pictures by

Illegal, immoral, and fat-free support by Dave Bryant.

Who are you?

I think she works here.

Cheaper bed.

Sabena Vlaanderen, beautiful bitchin' biker babe from Belgium!

Newlywed Game grand prize chosen just for you!

Thaddeus

by Joe Ekaitis

DO YOU GUYS WANT SOME LEMONADE?

MONOTONY

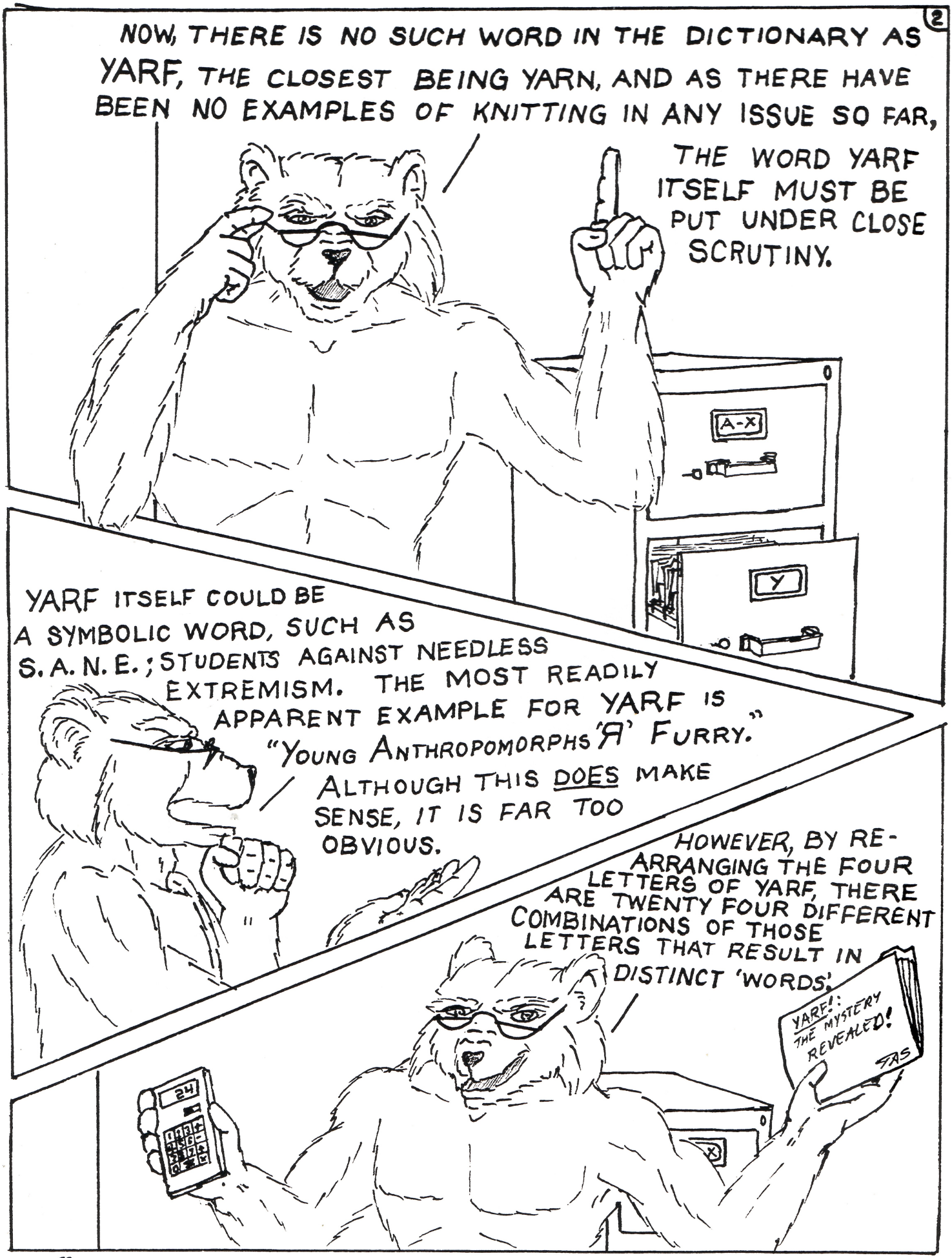
YOU MEAN, LEMONADE Flavored (with Lemon and other Natural and Artificial Flavors) Sugar-Sweetened Powdered BEVERAGE MIX.

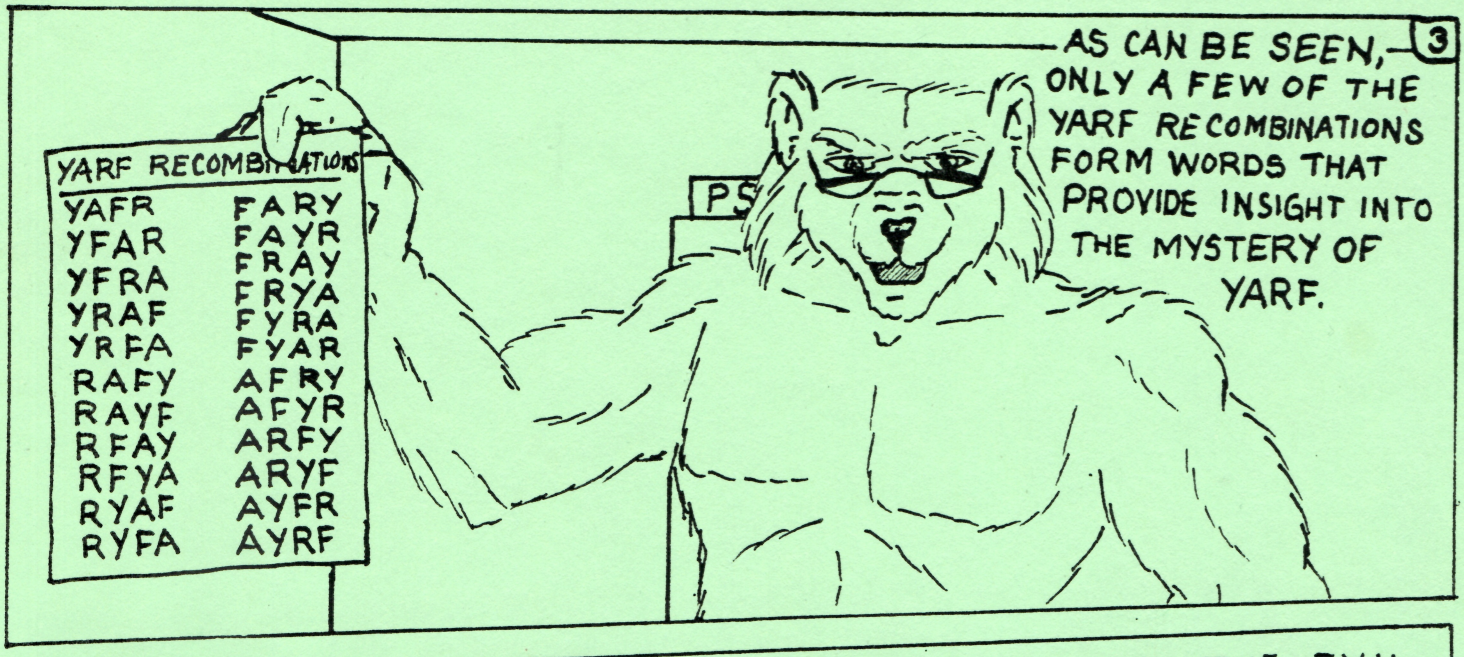
MONOTONY

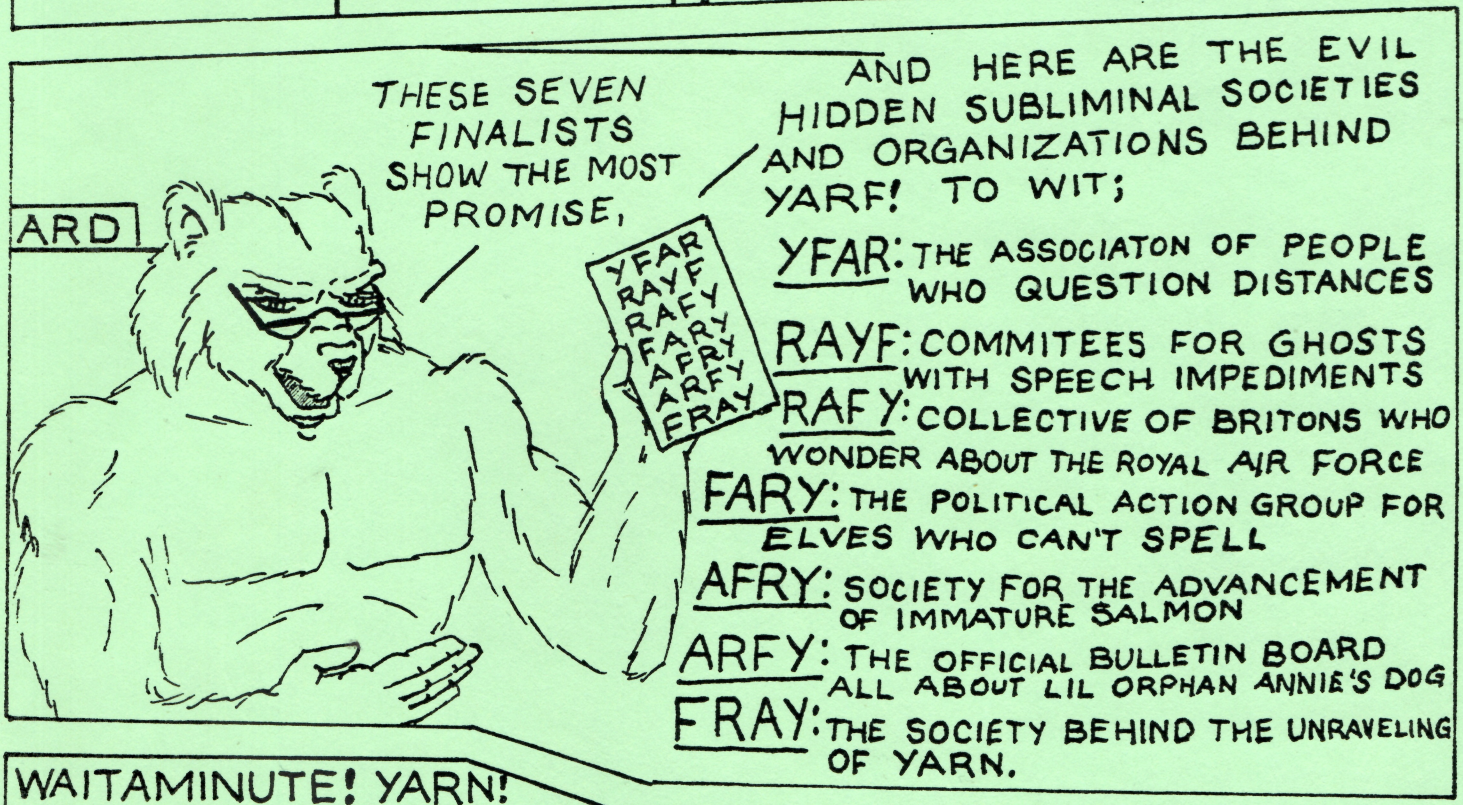
WHY EXACTLY DID WE GIVE THEM THOSE GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS TO "CONSUMER REPORTS FOR KIDS"?

Joe Ekaitis

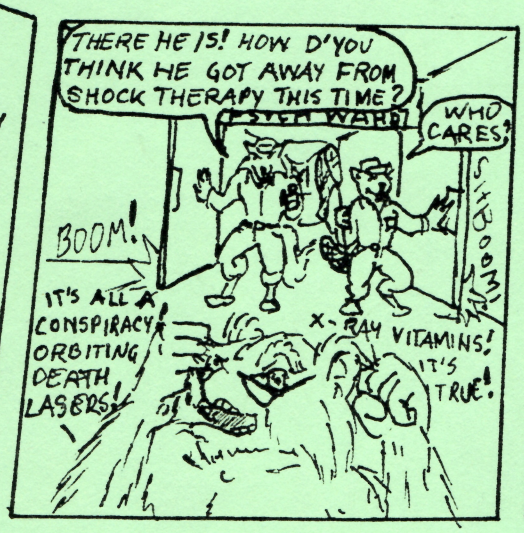

1
RECENTLY, THE QUESTION WAS RAISED...
...WHAT DOES YARF MEAN ANY ☆$@!Ø*ϟ WAY?
A DEEPLY RESEARCHED THEORY TO FOLLOW.
A-X
Y
Z
?AS
ART + STORY © 1990 BY TODD A. SMITH
INSANE RAMBLINGS c/o THE ILL
CENSORED


2
NOW, THERE IS NO SUCH WORD IN THE DICTIONARY AS YARF, THE CLOSEST BEING YARN, AND AS THERE HAVE BEEN NO EXAMPLES OF KNITTING IN ANY ISSUE SO FAR,
THE WORD YARF ITSELF MUST BE PUT UNDER CLOSE SCRUTINY.
A-X
Y
YARF ITSELF COULD BE A SYMBOLIC WORD, SUCH AS S.A.N.E.; STUDENTS AGAINST NEEDLESS EXTREMISM. THE MOST READILY APPARENT EXAMPLE FOR YARF IS "YOUNG ANTHROPOMORPHS 'Я' FURRY."
ALTHOUGH THIS DOES MAKE SENSE, IT IS FAR TOO OBVIOUS.
HOWEVER, BY RE-ARRANGING THE FOUR LETTERS OF YARF, THERE ARE TWENTY FOUR DIFFERENT COMBINATIONS OF THOSE LETTERS THAT RESULT IN DISTINCT 'WORDS.'
YARF!: THE MYSTERY REVEALED!
TAS
24


YARF RECOMBINATIONS
YAFR FARY
YFAR FAYR
YFRA FRAY
YRAF FRYA
YRFA FYRA
RAFY FYAR
RAYF AFRY
RFAY AFYR
RFYA ARFY
RYAF ARYF
RYFA AYFR
AYRF
PS
AS CAN BE SEEN, ONLY A FEW OF THE YARF RECOMBINATIONS FORM WORDS THAT PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO THE MYSTERY OF YARF.


ARD
THESE SEVEN FINALISTS SHOW THE MOST PROMISE,
YFAR
RAYF
RAFY
FARY
AFRY
ARFY
FRAY
AND HERE ARE THE EVIL HIDDEN SUBLIMINAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS BEHIND YARF! TO WIT;
YFAR: THE ASSOCIATON OF PEOPLE WHO QUESTION DISTANCES
RAYF: COMMITEES FOR GHOSTS WITH SPEECH IMPEDIMENTS
RAFY: COLLECTIVE OF BRITONS WHO WONDER ABOUT THE ROYAL AIR FORCE
FARY: THE POLITICAL ACTION GROUP FOR ELVES WHO CAN'T SPELL
AFRY: SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF IMMATURE SALMON
ARFY: THE OFFICIAL BULLETIN BOARD ALL ABOUT LIL ORPHAN ANNIE'S DOG
FRAY: THE SOCIETY BEHIND THE UNRAVELING OF YARN.


WAITAMINUTE! YARN!
OF COURSE! IT ALL FITS INTO PLACE! IT'S ALL A COVER-UP BY CROCHETING OLD LADIES! IT'S GOTTA BE! YEAH! IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE! TOTALLY! F'SHURE!
SNAP!


THERE HE IS! HOW D'YOU THINK HE GOT AWAY FROM SHOCK THERAPY THIS TIME?
PSYCH WARD
WHO CARES!
BOOM!
IT'S ALL A CONSPIRACY! ORBITING DEATH LASERS!
X-RAY VITAMINS! IT'S TRUE!


REMEMBER, SOME THINGS SHOULD JUST REMAIN MYSTERIES.
PSYCH WARD
SO KNOCK IT OFF!
TRUST BIG BROTHER



YARF!

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